

A Vested Interest

Immortality Gene

By John and Shelia Chapman

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Hexham

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Our grateful thanks go to Connie Deavers, Brenda Swiger and our son Adam for all their help and patience.

The Earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the Earth.
This we know.

All things are connected like the blood which unites one
family. All things are connected.

Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons of the Earth.

Man did not weave the web of life: he is merely a strand in it.

Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

Words by Ted Perry, attributed to Chief Seattle

Chapter 1

Donna picked up the two steaming mugs of coffee, one with milk, one with Coffee-mate and sat them in coasters on her coffee table. She glanced at her watch and grinned. Richard was late, but he was often late. She was quite fond of Richard, but Gary was right. Richard had a problem with punctuality.

Sitting cross-legged on her sofa, Donna reached for the remote and switched on her smart TV. Selecting the blue icon, she started Skype and waited for Gary. Since she and Jared had parted ways, Donna had moved back into her apartment, at Shreve City Towers.

She, Richard, and Gary had formed a habit of visiting and sharing a morning cup of coffee together. Early morning for Richard and Donna turned out to be early afternoon for Gary. No matter how many times he reminded them; neither Richard nor Donna seemed to understand Gary needed something called sleep. The six hour time difference between the US and the UK always caught him out. They called him at all hours of the night.

Donna was in deep concentration, thumbing through her stack of mail. She didn't notice when Gary came online. She took a sip of her coffee and yawned.

“Wake up!” Gary shouted.

Startled, Donna jerked the hand holding her coffee mug. “That was mean!” she grumbled. “Now see what you made me do? I've been waiting for this letter for the last three days, and now I've spilt coffee all over it!”

“Sorry baby. What is it?”

Donna's face beamed. “Probably a letter telling me I've got the job.”

“What job?” Gary frowned. “I thought you were coming over here.”

“Not if I get this job in New York,” she smiled.

There was a knock on her door. “Hang on a second,” she said. “That’s probably my breakfast.” She unlocked the door and narrowed her eyes. “You’re late!” she teased.

Richard grinned. “I wasn’t aware I was on the clock. You’re in a better mood today.”

Donna took the brown paper bag from him. “Yes I am. My letter came. Looks like I’m headed for the big apple.”

“Still going to let me fly you there if you get the job?”

“No, she won’t!” Gary spoke up. “She’ll chicken out like she always does.”

Richard closed the door and followed Donna to the living room. “Nobody asked for your two cents, Mr. Nosey,” Donna said as she headed for the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” Gary asked. “I don’t have all day for this. Some of us poor folks have to work for a living.”

“To get some saucers and paper towels,” she replied.

Richard sat on the sofa and grabbed his coffee mug. “Good morning, Richard,” Gary said. “Are you enjoying your time off?”

“Good *afternoon*, Gary,” Richard smirked and sipped his coffee. “I certainly am. I have something much better to look at now than your ugly face.”

Gary laughed.

Donna handed Richard his breakfast, sat next to him and picked up her coffee stained-letter. “Well, go on...” Richard prompted, “...tell us what it says.”

“Dear Dr. Rigden,” she began. “Thank you for your application in seeking a position as head of our cardiac research centre. Blah – blah – blah...” she quickly scanned through the rest. She tightened her jaw; her eyes danced with fury. “The sorry son of a bitch.”

“What’s wrong, D?”

“How *dare* he!”

Richard slid closer. “What is it pet?”

She shoved the letter at Richard.

“We were unable to obtain references from your current employer, G.W. Forrest of Forrest Enterprises, who stated that they would not release you from your current contract...” pausing briefly, Richard’s voice fell as he continued. “We are sorry to inform you, but the position... has now been filled.” He exhaled and tossed the letter on the coffee table. “Dad could probably fix this for you if you want the job that bad.”

Donna shook her head. “No, I don’t want you getting involved with Forrest.”

Richard chuckled. “Pet, I’ve been involved with G.W. Forrest forever – it seems.”

“According to my calculations, I had less than a month to go on my contract. Because Kim Gentry decided to blow up the new building - herself in the process – I have no facility to work in, no hope of having one, for who knows how long. Forrest is *still* waiting for the insurance company to complete their investigation before they’ll give him Jared’s investment money,” she paused and swallowed the lump in her throat. “Does Forrest plan on building another one? Who knows? Does he need Jared’s money to do this – no! That’s it – I’m done! I can’t take it anymore.” Donna bolted off the sofa.

“*Now*, where are you going?” Gary asked.

“To change. I’m going to see the bastard. I’ve had my resignation typed out for months. All it needs is a date and my signature,” she threw over her shoulder and turned the corner to her bedroom.

Gary and Richard shared a worried look. “If she goes in his office with her gung-ho attitude...” Gary broke off.

“I think you’d better talk to Dad. We may have to make a hasty escape.”

Donna switched her cell phone to silent mode. She took a deep breath and opened the door. She knew this was a waste of time from the moment she stepped into the room. Forrest had done another U-turn on her. A thick, hazy cloud of cigar smoke

hovered over her head. “When did you pick up the habit again? Those things will kill you – and everybody else around you.”

“Old habits die hard, Donna. We all die, sooner or later.” He motioned her to a seat. “I’m a little disappointed in you. Despite all I’ve done for you...”

Donna held up a hand. “...All you’ve done for me?”

“I changed your work schedule, gave you fewer hours. I increased your salary. I built you a brand new, state-of-the-art research facility. While it was under construction, I gave you and Dr. Walton time off with pay. You were ill, and I gave you extra time off to recover from your appendectomy – when you really didn’t need it. How did you manage to heal so quickly, Donna, especially since you’re dying?”

Donna’s mouth dropped open. “Dying?” she gasped. “What makes you think I’m dying?”

Forrest arched an eyebrow. “My doctor took a blood sample, to see if he could figure out why you collapsed. Your white blood cell count is way above normal, Donna. You have a rare blood disease. According to his findings, you’ve got six months – a year at the most – if you’re lucky and can get a bone marrow transplant. Unfortunately, since you’re an only child...”

“...You took blood from me that day?”

“Yes, Donna. With you being a doctor and your leukaemia being far into the final stage, I figured you knew.”

“Mr. Forrest... I’m not dying. I don’t care what your doctor told you. He’s either one hell of a quack or has his wires seriously crossed. I am *not* dying, and even if I were, I didn’t come here to discuss my health.”

Forrest put his cigar in the corner of his mouth and examined his fingernails. “Then what did you come to discuss, Donna? How you applied for another job while you were still under contract with us? How you and Jared planned to cheat me out of my money for the building that Kim Gentry blew up? Or how you secretly tried to get rid of me?”

Donna was dumbfounded. She stared at Forrest as if he were crazy. She cocked her head to the side. “Mr. Forrest... how would Jared and I cheat you out of your insurance money? We had nothing to do with the construction of that building.”

Forrest sneered, pulled hard on his cigar and rested it in the crystal ashtray, exhaling directly in front of Donna. He pushed an investment contract across the desk to her. “Pick it up and read it, Donna. Pay close attention to the signature.”

Donna sighed and quickly scanned through the information. A lump formed in her throat. She blinked a few times and pushed it back to him.

“From the shocked expression on your face, I’ll take it that you didn’t know Jared had bought stock into your research and was responsible for all construction that went into the building?”

Donna slowly shook her head. “No... I didn’t.”

“Kim Gentry and Jared Thundercloud were as thick as thieves. I wouldn’t be surprised if Jared hadn’t killed Kim himself because she planned to tell you about their affair.”

Donna tightened her jaw and clenched her fist. “You’re lying! Jared didn’t murder Kim, and he wasn’t having an affair with her and he sure as hell didn’t blow up your fucking building.”

Forrest picked up his cigar, flicked the ashes with his little finger and lodged it in the corner of his mouth. “Be that as it may, things are going back the way they were, Donna.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “You mean you’re going back to being the arrogant prick we all love?” she scoffed.

Forrest attempted to stare her down. Donna held his gaze. “That’s it! I’m through being reasonable. I’m through trying to help you. I will expect you back at work in the morning. You will do as you’re told regardless of how you may feel about your assignments.”

Donna furrowed her brow and pursed her lips. “And just what equipment do you expect me to use? Everything I’ve done since I came here is gone. I have nothing to show. You

never explained to me why you changed my research in the first place, despite the fact I sent proof that my research was more important to the world. After all the time I've devoted to this company, don't you think you at least owe me some kind of explanation?"

"I owe you nothing, Donna! I own this company. You are an employee. Are we clear?"

Donna stood. "Oh, we're clear all right!" She threw an envelope in front of Forrest and smirked. "Is that clear enough for you?"

Without opening it, Forrest picked up the envelope and sent it straight through the shredder. He rose from his chair and leaned across the desk. He narrowed his eyes to a tiny slit. "Donna, I will destroy you if you attempt to leave this company!"

Donna's eyebrows rose in disbelief. "And just how do you hope to achieve that Mr. Forrest?"

"Easy! For the duration of your contract, you and your research are the property of Forrest Enterprises!"

Donna laughed. "I guess you didn't know about my contract then. You see, it expired last month, and I don't plan on signing a new one. What a shame you overlooked this. You might have had me over a barrel. You've been buried so deep in Kim Gentry you didn't even think about renewing my contract. Oh well. I'm sure you'll find somebody out there that's willing to kiss your ass, but it won't be me."

"Money is not the only resource at my disposal Donna. If you leave this company now, you leave with nothing, and I will see you in court for breach of contract. In fact, I'm thinking of charging both you and Jared with murder and destruction of property."

Donna laughed. "You arrogant SOB! I'm leaving, and I'm leaving now. For your information, I expected you to do something like this. That's why I mailed your head of personnel copies of the letter you just shredded. You think you can take me to court? Fine – bring it on."

“Donna!” Forrest snapped. “Accidents happen all the time. It would be tragic if any of those ‘accidents’ should befall someone *else* close to you.”

“What in the hell do you mean by that?”

“I’m sure you can figure it out if you try hard enough.”

Donna leaned across the desk and stared daggers at Forrest. “I’m not scared of your money. I’m not scared of your resources, and most of all... I’m not scared of you. You’re just a wrinkly old bag of hot air Forrest.” She jerked the cigar from Forrest’s mouth and stubbed it out in his ashtray. “Furthermore, I asked you not to smoke around me. Now, I’m leaving before I say something I might regret.” Donna turned to leave.

“You’ve already said something you’re going to regret!” Forrest shouted.

She paused briefly. The only response Forrest got from Donna was a turned-up middle finger behind her back, and a slammed door.

Chapter 2

John Sherriff drove while Richard sat in the back seat with Donna holding her, trying to comfort her. Donna wasn't thinking clearly. She was still in shock that Jared had left her because she'd kept things from him, but, in fact, he'd kept things from her, as well. She felt sick, every time she thought about Kim and Jared together. She didn't want to believe Forrest.

Richard and John talked and discussed what they planned to do when they got back to Shreveport, but Donna had said precious little, on the two hour journey to Hornbeck. When she came to her senses, the three of them were parked in front of the two-story brick house.

Floods of memories hit Donna like a tidal wave. She swallowed hard, pushing the threatening pain back, trying to remember what Nadine, Jared's mother, had taught her about blocking things out. Donna had been doing that for years, but that was old pain. This was fresh, and despite how things looked on the surface, Donna still felt its sting.

She rested her head against Richard's shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her, resting his cheek on the top of her head. "Pet," he whispered. "Are you going to be OK?" For a few seconds, Donna's eyes glossed, and it looked as if the dam might burst; then like a light, she just shut it off.

She smiled softly and nodded. "I'm fine," she said and walked away from him.

"Donna, wait!" John said. "Stay here with Ricky, until I make sure the house is safe."

"John," she groaned. "Why wouldn't it be safe?"

"That depends on whether or not Forrest was making empty threats."

"John is quick, pet. It doesn't hurt to be safe."

"Fine – here – you'll need this," she said, handing him the front door key.

John made his way through the mass of weeds and bull nettles that had overtaken the front yard. He remembered their sting from years ago; vicious but not as unforgiving as the nettles in the UK. His alert eyes noted that some of the downstairs windows had been broken. He was careful to avoid the shards as he crossed the creaky front porch.

Donna's eyes glossed, again. "I should have come back sooner, but the memories... are too painful," she choked.

"It's remarkable how much a house can go down in – how long has it been?"

"Too long," Donna sighed.

John held the handle and lined the key up with the lock. He froze. With one hand, he cautiously drew his gun from the shoulder holster under his jacket. He turned his head, held his finger to his lips and pointed to the car. Richard took Donna's hand and started pulling her toward the open gate. "What is it?"

"We're getting in the car."

Donna's eyes widened. Her mouth went dry. The memory of her and Jared being chased flashed through her mind. Richard opened the passenger door, put her in and then got behind the wheel. The door locks snapped. He put in his Bluetooth ear bud and tapped it. "What is it John?"

John examined the cracks and imprint of what he guessed to be a pry bar. "The door has been forced open."

Richard and Donna watched him disappear into the old house.

She held her finger to her lips and pointed. While John was in the front part of the house, they hurried down the attic stairs. Easing the back door to, they ran across the yard to the treeline and crouched behind a thick briar patch. She bit her lip as the woody talons tore into her forearm. "You're bleeding!" he winced.

She frowned. "I'm fine," she forced through her teeth, ignoring the sting as she freed her arm. "I've had far worse

than this.” She jerked her head. They cautiously crawled between the three strands of barbed wire and hopped in the waiting jeep. She reached in the glove box. Keeping an eye on the back of the house, she ripped open the packet with her teeth and wiped the scratch. “Put this over it,” she said.

Pulling a face, he covered the scratch with a Band-Aid and swallowed hard. She softly smiled. He frowned. “What?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. As soon as they’re gone, we’re leaving. We can’t do this again. It’s too risky.”

A few minutes later, John ducked his head and stepped out from under the porch, beckoning toward the car. “It’s OK,” Richard said. “We can get out now.” He rested a palm at the small of Donna’s back and guided her back through the opened gate. “You didn’t find anything?”

“Nothing but a few mice and some black widows,” John responded.

Donna shivered and rubbed her arm. Avoiding some rotten boards, they cautiously crossed the porch. “This won’t take long,” she said as they stepped through the doorway and approached the stairs. Dust particles danced in the beam of sunlight as she touched the handrail.

Richard squinted his eyes, jerking his folded handkerchief from his shirt pocket. “Achoo!” The sound reverberated through the empty house.

“Gesundheit,” Donna softly smiled. “Dust?”

Richard furrowed his brow and nodded. “Why aren’t you sneezing?” he asked, wiping his twitching nose. “I thought you were allergic to breathing.”

Donna grinned. “My bedroom was at the end of the hall,” she said, motioning with her head as they stepped onto the top floor and approached another door. “I need to go in here first. This was my grandparent’s room.”

She opened the closet door, squealed and jumped back into Richard’s arms. “Guess we still have to work on that phobia,” he grinned.

“I can think of someone who could help with that.”

Richard glared at John. “Get rid of that thing.”

John’s eyebrows shot up. “Me?” He coaxed the brown recluse into an empty jar and closed the lid. “You know... sometimes you abuse your authority, around me.”

Donna suppressed a grin. “Afraid of spiders, John?”

“No – but I don’t keep them as pets. I’ll take this outside and wait for you in the car,” he said, examining the trapped arachnid, through the cloudy pint jar. “Ricky, we need to finish this and get back to Shreveport.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “I’m not leaving until I’ve been to the cemetery!”

“What do you need out of the closet?” Richard asked. “Incy Wincy might have had a family.”

“The three boxes on the floor.”

“The sealed ones?”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I don’t know which one, though. After Granny’s funeral, I started boxing things away. I was going to label them and give them to the Salvation Army, but I couldn’t finish. It was too, soon. I never came back to the house.”

Richard peeled off the silver duct tape. “This one looks as if it’s filled with clothes.” He started laying the folded clothes on the bed. “Start going through that one. I’ve already checked for pests. John is right. We need to hurry. What are you looking for?”

“Old photo albums and a tin cracker box my grandmother used to store important documents in.”

“There’s something solid in the bottom of this one.”

“I found the pictures,” Donna commented, thumbing through one of the albums. She came across some pictures of her and Gary, taken when they were children. Her eyes blurred. “I’m looking forward to seeing Gary again,” she mused.

Richard pulled out a tall metal box. “Alpine Cracers?” he prompted.

Donna glanced up. “*Saltine Crackers*,” she smiled. “That’s the one.” She thumbed through a few more pages and frowned, raising an eyebrow. “Some of the pictures are missing,” she murmured.

There was a pop in the loft. Richard started, examining the half-lit room with wary eyes. Donna grinned. “It’s just the house, Richard,” she chuckled. “Haven’t you ever heard wood popping when it cools down?”

“Houses in the UK are made of stone or brick. Apart from a creaking radiator, they don’t make noises. Are we done?”

“Bring those two boxes. If you’re afraid of spirits...” she shook her head, “... go wait in the car with John,” she chuckled.

“No, I’m fine, but I can’t shake the feeling we’re being watched.”

Donna rolled her eyes. “It’s probably just bats, Richard.”

Richard’s eyes widened. “Bats?”

Chapter 3

John parked in front of the main gate to Prewitt Chapel Cemetery. They visited the graves of Donna's parents and grandparents. Feeling rather helpless, they watched and listened as she said goodbye to them. Donna still hadn't decided to stay in the UK, but she didn't expect to be back in Louisiana, for a very long time.

Richard and John watched as she walked away from them and stood under a tall magnolia tree at the entrance. "She reminds me of Jared the night he left," John commented.

Richard folded his arms across his chest and watched as she mindlessly tapped a spent blossom with her toe. "Yeah," he sighed. "Strong on the surface, but soft in the centre, like she's totally lost."

"Do you think she'll change?"

"Who knows?" Richard responded. "Maybe she'll be better when we get back to the UK."

Donna pushed away from the tree and wandered through some of the other grave sites, close to the fence. She couldn't help thinking, how much less she would hurt to lie among the dead. The final solace of the cold ground was an enticing solution. She thought about Sarabeth, Jared's daughter.

Hugging herself, Donna closed her eyes. She could almost feel the little girl's warmth in her arms. She thought about Myra, Jared's sister, and Tom and Nadine, his parents. Lastly, she thought about Jared. It hurt so badly she could barely breathe. Donna could easily have called Arizona home, but not now. She couldn't face Jared, not after what Forrest had told her. And, even if it had all been lies, Jared didn't want her anymore. He'd left her. She had to live with that fact.

John's cell phone rang. He unlocked it, glanced at the name and then at Richard. "It's your Dad. Hello, Sir."

"John, where are you?"

"At Prewitt Chapel, in Hornbeck."

"What in the hell are you doing there?"

"Donna. She wanted some things from the old house, and then she wouldn't leave without coming here first... to say goodbye."

"How is she? Has she said anything about Jared?"

"Not directly, but she's thinking about him. You can see it in her eyes."

"Damn that fucking bastard – I'll make Forrest pay for this!"

"I will enjoy carrying out that order. Would you like me to do it now?"

"No! I wouldn't be surprised if Jared took care of him."

"Hang on, a second, Sir." John popped in his Bluetooth ear bud and drew his gun. "Ricky, get Donna and head for the side gate. Get behind the tall monuments and stay low. I'm going to try and make it to the car. I knew this was a stupid idea! If anything happens to me, you and Donna head for the nearest house and call the police. Go – now!"

Sir Richard's voice was frantic. "*What is it John?*"

"Rifle barrel – behind the church."

Donna glanced up and saw John's gun. Richard grabbed her hand. "Come on! Keep your head down!"

A bullet ricocheted off the magnolia tree, inches from John's right shoulder as he ran past. He crouched behind one of the concrete gate posts. "Shit!"

"Get out of there John!"

"I will when I can, Sir. They're between me and the car!"

Another shot rang out and ricocheted off the edge of the monument Richard was crouched behind, missing his shoulder by microns, "Bastard!" Donna gasped and lurched toward him. He held his hand up. "No - stay there! I'm fine. He missed."

John dropped to one knee, leaned out and fired a few rounds in the vicinity where he saw the rifle barrel. A shot hit the ground in front of the monument Donna was hunkered behind. "Where's John?"

"I don't know. It would help if I could talk to him, but he's on his cell with Dad. Just stay there. I'm going to see if I can do something." He put in his ear bud and pressed a button on his cell phone. "Gary - it's Richard. Where's Dad?"

"He's in his office. You sound out of breath. Where are you? Where's Donna?"

"Hiding behind the monument across from me."

"Hiding behind - what's wrong?"

"Get in there, so you can relay a message to John. He's on the phone with Dad. Tell John when I give you the signal, I'm going to try and draw fire away from him so he can get to the car."

Gary ran down the hall. "What the fuck is going on Richard?"

"Just do what I said!"

"Sir Richard," Gary shouted as he banged on the door.

"Not now Gary!"

"Sir, please. Open the door. I've got Richard on my cell. He needs you to get a message to John."

The door flew open. "I'm here, Ricky. Are you and Donna OK?"

"We're hemmed behind some monuments, a few yards from the side gate of the cemetery. They're taking potshots at us, but so far, we haven't been hit. I don't know about John."

Sir Richard pressed the hands-free speaker on his and Gary's cell phones. "Can you both hear me, now?"

"Yeah, Dad."

"I hear you Sir. Are Ricky and Donna OK?"

"Yeah," Richard responded.

"I'm sorry, Sir. Every time I go for the car, they drive me back behind the gate post."

“Get ready John!” Richard said.

“Ricky, don’t do anything reckless.”

“I’ve got to do something, or one of us is going to get killed! Get ready!”

“I’m ready Ricky, but be careful. Just run to the next monument.”

Richard scanned over several possible barricades. “No, it’s not far enough. Now John!” Richard darted behind the first monument. A shot grazed the granite vase between the gravesite next to him. He ducked behind several other monuments, dodging the bullets.

John ran for the car and started the engine. “I’m here! Get back to Donna. I’ll be there in a second,” he said as he shoved it in drive. Loose gravel sprayed behind him as the tires hugged the road.

Richard made a run and ducked behind the monument beside Donna. “Are you OK?” she gasped.

“I’m fine. Either he’s a crap shot or he’s not actually trying to hit us.”

John shoved the car in park, flung the door open, jerked the gate and ducked behind the monument across from Richard and Donna. “I’m going to fire off some rounds! Ricky, you and Donna get to the car. If I’m not right behind you – get out of here!”

Donna’s mouth gaped. “No! We’re not leaving you behind!”

John clenched his teeth and sighed in exasperation. “Do as you’re told!” he forced through his teeth, enunciating each word. “Now!” he shouted and fired repeatedly toward the back corner of the church.

Richard and Donna took off. A shot rang out. Donna yelped, grabbed her upper right arm and dropped to her knees. “She’s hit!” Richard scooped her into his arms and ran for the car. He set her on the ground, yanked the door open and shoved her in the back seat.

“Get in!” John yelled as he jumped behind the wheel.

Richard jumped in the passenger seat and fastened his seat belt. “Pet! How bad is it? Are you buckled in?”

“Yeah,” she groaned. “I don’t know how bad it is, but it hurts like hell!” she winced, afraid to look at her arm.

John fishtailed as he hit the blacktop and put his foot down. “Donna – we need another way out.”

“When you hit Plainview Road, instead of turning left to go back to Hornbeck, go right. When you see the red brick church on your left, take the next blacktop to the left! Watch out – it’s full of potholes.”

“John, you need to find a place to stop, so I can check her arm.”

John swerved right, onto Plainview Road and put his foot down. Richard unbuckled his seat belt. John glanced at him out the corner of his eye. “What are you doing Ricky?”

“I’m getting back there with her!” Richard jumped in the space next to Donna and fastened his seat belt. He laid his hand over hers. “Here – let me see....”

Donna closed her eyes; her stomach flipped. She tasted sour at the back of her throat and moved her hand. “Ow!” she groaned as Richard checked the wound.

“Sorry pet. It went straight through. I don’t think it hit a bone, but I’m not the doctor,” he grinned. “Toss me your handkerchief, John.” Richard took John’s folded handkerchief and put it over the entry and his over the exit wound. “Hold this!” he said, ripped off a strip of his shirt and tied it around her arm. “There. That will do until we can get you to an emergency room.”

Donna was starting to shake. Richard wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to his body. “Pet... are you still with me? Are you going to be OK?”

“I’m cold Richard,” she said. “I think I’m going into shock.”

“John, turn off the air conditioner and turn on the heat.” Richard started rubbing up and down her arms. “Donna... stay with me. Are you awake?”

"I'm trying, Richard, but I'm so tired, and it hurts," she murmured, blinking rapidly. "I've never been shot before."

"If you'd listened to me, you wouldn't have this time, either," he growled.

"Ricky, look behind you and see if they're following us. I'm coming up on 171."

Richard glanced over his shoulder. "No - there's nothing behind us. Donna? Pet? Are you with me?" Richard's cell phone rang. He accepted the video call. Sam's image came on the screen. "*Richard, what in the hell is going on? Your Dad said Donna got shot!*"

"Yeah, Sam."

"Where?"

"In her upper right arm."

"Is the bullet still in her arm?"

"No. It looks as if it went straight through."

"Did it hit a bone or a main artery? How bad is it bleeding?"

"I can see blood on my make-shift tourniquet, but there's none running down her arm."

"How long ago did it happen?"

"About quarter of an hour."

"Is she conscious?"

Richard sighed. "No, Sam. I don't think so."

"Is she breathing all right? What about her pulse?"

"She's breathing all right. Her pulse is strong and steady, but her skin is cold and clammy."

"She's probably gone into shock. Are you keeping her warm?"

"Yeah, we've got the heat on."

"Hold the camera so I can see her face. Wow!"

"Sam!" Richard groaned.

"Sorry. She's a little pale. I want you to carefully untie the tourniquet, but do it slowly. If the wound starts seeping, put the tourniquet back on and get her to the nearest hospital. If you

don't see any fresh blood, hold the camera, so I can see the wound."

"Hang on. It's not bleeding. Is that at the right angle? Can you see it OK?"

"Yeah. Oddly enough, the wound doesn't look that bad. It's still seeping a little, though. Put the padding back on it, but don't tie the tourniquet as tight this time. Just enough to keep the padding in place."

"I'm coming into Many," John interjected. "The hospital is up ahead, on the right. What's the verdict, Sam?"

"If you can control the bleeding, she can probably make it. How far do you have to drive?"

"About eighty or eighty-five miles by the time we get to the airport."

"A gunshot wound won't be easy to explain," John spoke up.

"*No, it won't,*" Sir Richard said stepping into camera view. "*Sam? Can she make it?*"

Jared's eyes turned crimson. The head of the silver fork in his hand slowly bent forward as he pushed it with his thumb. "They let her... get shot!" he growled low in his throat.

"Easy, Jared," Nadine said, gently patting his hand.

"She'll be all right, Son," Tom added. "You can connect with her telepathically. No one would ever know."

Jared swallowed the lump in his throat. "Donna would. She's reaching for me now," he choked, tears pooling at the corners of his eyes. He blinked them away. "I want to reach out to her, but I can't!"

"No, but you *can* help her with her pain," Tom said.

Jared's head jerked up. "How?" he gasped. "Tell me! I want to know everything. Don't hold anything back."

Tom glanced at Nadine and nodded.

Chapter 4

An unexpected bouquet of flowers was delivered to Donna's neighbour. The 'deliveryman' then knocked on Donna's door. When there was no response, he looked around, picked the lock and entered Taser in hand. A quick check revealed Donna wasn't there. Had she been, his orders were to zap her and call the waiting 'ambulance'.

He planted bugs throughout the apartment and then replaced the hard drive in her desktop computer with the defective one he had brought. Anyone who tried to start the machine would think the hard drive had failed and wouldn't reboot. He then removed the phone outlet and replaced it with a remote controlled one.

Forrest stood on the balcony of his penthouse apartment above D'Netics, staring at the lake in the distance. His bags were packed and waiting by the door. His cell phone rang. He held it to his ear and listened. *"It's done. You were right. The apartment was empty. Dr. Rigden is gone, and so are most of her things."*

"Good," Forrest sighed and disconnected the call. He stepped back into the apartment, pulled the glass doors to and locked them. Pressing another button on his cell phone he waited.

"For your sake, I hope you have good news."

"Jared Thundercloud is in Arizona. Donna is on a plane headed to the UK, and she didn't refill her birth control prescription. I assume that's good news, enough."

"You've done well..."

"I've done my part. I'm leaving. They're your problem now." He ended the call and turned. "We're leaving."

Donna roused to the sound of a strong steady heartbeat. She nuzzled closer, deeply inhaling, expecting to pull the familiar scent of his cologne into her lungs. It wasn't Jared's smell. Then it all came back. Jared had left her. Her eyes glossed. Her throat ached from uncried tears. Since Jared had left her, despite Richard being there, and him and Gary doing everything they could to help her, Donna's life had been an internal living hell. An endless nightmare she couldn't seem to wake up from. She sighed deeply.

Richard brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers. Donna stiffened and moved her nose away from his neck. "How are you feeling?"

Donna swallowed hard and fought through layers of fog. "Groggy," she murmured, blinking to keep her eyes open. She glanced at her arm. It had been put in a sling. "Where am I?"

"On your way to the UK. The paramedics gave you something for the pain before we left Barksdale. You can have some more in a couple of hours. How's your arm?"

Donna flexed it. "It's still sore, but the throbbing has stopped," she winced. "Where are we?"

Richard checked his watch. "We should be getting close to St. John's. Are you hungry, or thirsty?"

"Thirsty – a little. Do you have any Dr Pepper?"

"No, pet..." Richard sighed, "...but, I can get you some when we land to refuel. I've got ginger ale and sparkling water. Will that do till then? Are you sure you don't want something stronger?"

"I'm sure. Ginger ale will be fine," she responded, moving off his shoulder. "Why aren't you helping John fly the plane?"

"I didn't want you to wake up alone."

"I'm fine," she sighed.

"I guess our helicopter rides helped," he smiled. "I'll be right back."

"I guess so," she exhaled and leaned back in her seat.

Richard came back with two cold ginger ales. He tipped his bottle to his lips. Donna took a sip of hers and closed the lid. "I thought you liked scotch?" she prompted.

"Not when I'm driving or flying a plane. If you're going to be OK, I'll go back to the cockpit, or I can stay back here with you."

"It doesn't matter. Where's my purse and laptop?"

"In the compartment, above our heads. Do you want them?"

"Yes, please. I might do some research or read."

Richard raised an eyebrow. "How are you going to use it?" He motioned to her sling. "Why don't I stay here, and we'll watch a movie, instead."

Donna softly smiled. "You have to fly the plane. I'll manage."

Richard sighed and stood. "Here, pet. I'll set your laptop on the table. If you need anything use the intercom." Richard caressed her face. "It's nice to have you here."

Donna smiled weakly. She looked across at her laptop and decided she wasn't ready to wrestle with it. She took her Kindle out and set her purse on the floor, next to her feet. She selected George Thundercloud's book and started reading. She might not be able to be with Jared, but at least she could learn as much about his ways of life, as possible. Now that she was alone, Donna's smile faded as she allowed her heartbreak to surface. Silent tears tangled in her dark lashes. She blinked to clear her vision. She fought to stay awake, but soon dozed off.

Without Jared there to protect her, the dream was back; the one about the man with the dancing aqua eyes. His face was clearer. The eyes were different - still aqua - but greener than before. His accent vaguely reminded Donna of Mel Gibson, but it didn't matter. If he was her future, she didn't care. All that mattered to her was who he wasn't - Jared.

A couple of hours later, Richard checked on Donna. He found her on her left side, legs slightly curled; Kindle resting on the seat next to her, loosely grasped in her hand. He put it away and

threw a blanket over her. Their one night together might not have meant anything to Donna, but Richard couldn't forget. He remembered the look of need in her dark eyes. The silky softness of her skin. The way she moved her body, hot and hungry, moist and sticky, against his. The smell of her perfume. The bite of her nails on his back as she reached her peak. He sighed deeply and softly swept the back of his finger over her face.

"Someday pet," he whispered, tenderly kissed her forehead and went back to the cockpit.

During the flight; Richard checked on her several more times. As they neared the airport, he sat next to her and fastened his seatbelt. He leaned closer, looking at her for a while, up close. She was still asleep, but restless.

"Donna? Wake up, pet. We're getting ready to land. Can you fasten your seatbelt, or do you need help?"

She tried, but with one arm, it was next to impossible. She snorted resignedly. "I guess I need a little help."

Richard softly smiled and leaned across her. He hesitated, studying her eyes, leaning in to kiss her. Donna stiffened. Her heart pounded; this still didn't feel right. At the last possible second, before his lips touched hers, Donna lowered her head. "I'm sorry..." she whispered. "What happened between us was a mistake. I shouldn't have let it happen."

Richard sighed and kissed her forehead. "It's OK..."

"Please, don't let this destroy our friendship. I desperately need that."

"It won't destroy our friendship, I promise, but you know how I feel."

"I know, but I just don't... feel... that way about you."

Richard smiled, leaned back in his seat and curled his fingers around hers. "The next bit might get a little bumpy."

"Aren't you going to help John land?"

"This plane is so automated, with a little help you could land it."

"I don't think so..."

Richard chuckled. "At least you're not afraid of flying."

“Yeah...” Donna scoffed and swallowed the lump in her throat. *Amazing what a broken heart will make you do.*

John landed the plane. Donna grabbed her purse and reached to close her laptop. “What do you think you’re doing?” Richard asked, closing the lid and slipping it into her case. “The handbag you can have, John and I will get the rest.”

Donna narrowed her eyes and groaned. “I’m not helpless.”

“You are right now. Sit tight. I’ll come and get you.”

Donna groaned, exasperated and sat back on the edge of her seat. She took out her Kindle and pretended to read. Focusing her eyes on the top edge of the device, Donna waited for a window of opportunity. As soon as Richard and John were gone, she slowly eased her arm out of the sling. Flexing her fingers, she tested for soreness. It barely hurt; she softly smiled.

Keeping an eye on the door, Donna rolled her shoulder and gently squeezed the bandage. She softly smiled again. By tomorrow, her arm would be completely healed. Her eyes widened. Richard would expect her to see a doctor; probably the one at the centre. “I have to do something,” she mused.

She hurried to the toilet at the back of the plane and unlocked her cell phone. “Gary, it’s me. I have a problem.”

“Donna?” He was relieved, but a little surprised to hear from her. “Have you landed yet? Where are you? Where are Richard and John?”

“I’m in the bathroom. Richard and John are unloading the plane. I have to talk fast. Gary, what am I going to do? Richard will expect me to see a doctor.”

“And what’s the problem with that? I think you should.”

“Gary – think! Trust me. By tomorrow, my arm will be completely healed.”

“Oh – forgot about that. I guess the antibody is still in your system, then.”

“Duh – you think! What am I gonna do?”

“Tell Richard?”

“No! I won’t betray Jared.”

“Even after what he did to you?”

“That doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change the way I feel about him. I don’t think anything could do that.”

“I thought you were warming up to Richard.”

“So did I, and I was - at least - I thought I was. I can’t explain. It’s just – well – it’s complicated, Gary. I need to figure out what to do about my arm. What about Sam? Can he be trusted?”

“Sam Kaliea? I suppose....”

“That’s it – yes – of course! If I saw Sam, as a patient, and I confided in him, he wouldn’t have a choice. He would be forced to keep it to himself – doctor patient confidentiality.”

Gary’s eyes widened. “Donna... I think we should talk to Sir Richard about this first.”

“Why?”

“There are other... *issues* to be considered.”

“Such as...?”

“Well, for one thing, Sam doesn’t work in the same department as we do. Our lab is – well - it’s secluded, you might say.”

“Gary! Don’t start with the secrecy thing. I got enough of that from Jared. Look. This is my body, so I think it should be my choice.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re already trying to put me in the middle of something I’m going to regret?”

“Gary, when I was in Arizona, I confided in you. As a result, I lost Jared. I told you what being with Jared had done to me. You asked me to trust you.”

“Well – yeah – I did, but...”

“You also asked me to trust Sir Richard, which I did.”

“Yes, but...”

“There are no buts about this. We are sitting on something that could change the world, assuming I can figure it out.”

“Ok – right. I’ll buy that, but....”

“Oops! Dammit!”

“What is it?”

“They’re coming back. We’ll have to finish this when I get to the Centre. Talk to Sam. I’ll see you soon.”

Gary took a deep breath, knocked on Sam’s office door and pushed it open. Sam was busy typing on his keyboard. He glanced up and continued working. “What can I do for you, Gary?”

“I need to speak to you in strictest confidence.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “This sounds serious.”

“It is, Sam. It’s very serious, and it concerns my cousin Donna. She needs your help, and she needs to be able to trust you. *I* need to be able to trust you.”

Sam leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers behind his head. “OK... does that mean Donna, and I will be working together?”

“No, Sam,” Gary narrowed his eyes. “It means you’ll be working with *me* and Donna.”

“But not Richard?” he hedged.

“Unless things change, no. Not on this particular research project.”

“Does Sir Richard know the nature of this *secret* project?”

“Yes, Sam,” Gary sighed in exasperation. “He does, but he doesn’t know Donna has asked for you to be included. I haven’t told him that part, yet.”

Sam grinned. “*Donna*... asked for me to be included?”

“Yes, Sam,” Gary responded with a touch sarcasm. “*Donna* asked for you to be included.”

A sly grin turned up the corners of Sam’s mouth. “What exactly do you need me to do?”

“Before I tell you, do I have your word this will go no further?”

“Yes.”

“Donna needs you to examine her gunshot wound.”

“*That’s* the big secret!” Sam’s eyebrows shot up. “Considering I treated her, via video call, technically that makes her my patient. I assumed she would.”

“Well, she is your patient, but, there’s something different about her... she’ll explain that to you. They’re on their way over here now. Sam... what Donna is going to share with you cannot be shared with Richard or anyone else. One other thing.”

“Man, she’s putting a lot of trust in someone she knows nothing about.”

“That’s not entirely true.”

“Donna knows more about me?”

“You and Donna have a few things in common.”

“Really – do tell?”

“Music, you’re both doctors, Donna has read your book, and she agrees with your methods.”

A slow smile spread across Sam’s mouth. “Donna likes music?”

“Not just likes Sam. Donna is – well – she’s kind of a star.”

“I’m into the music scene. If she’s a star, why haven’t I heard about her?”

“Because her career was short-lived. Not because she lacked talent, but because her band split up, for personal reasons.”

“Donna had her own band?”

“Not exactly. The band kind of had her. She was the female lead vocalist for *‘Raging Storm’*. The band split and Donna came over here.”

Sam leaned forward in his chair. “I guess I’d better see what this *‘Raging Storm’* is all about, then.”

“Just don’t say anything to Donna. I’m not sure she wanted anyone to know this, but, since you both like music, I thought you might need to know.”

“You haven’t told me anything. Did she know you were going to talk to me?”

“Yes – about examining her, but nothing else.”

Sam smiled smugly. “OK. I’ll *personally* handle Donna’s case.”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that.”

Sam chuckled. “I’m not all bad, Gary.”

Gary stood to leave. “I’ll soon find out, because if you’re working under me, you’ll do as *I* say.”

Chapter 5

Sir Richard stared at Gary in disbelief. “*Donna* wants to work on the project with Sam *instead* of Richard? Why? Sam doesn’t know anything about genetics.”

“He may not be a genetic specialist, Sir Richard, but Sam is a doctor. Because of the doctor patient confidentiality, Donna knows if he has any honour, what she tells him will stay between them. I’m sorry, but I have to agree with Donna. Sam might be an arrogant flirt, but he is an excellent doctor – the best – and we both know that. If he wasn’t he wouldn’t be working for Triplet International.”

Sir Richard studied his eyes. “I assume you’re talking about yours and Richard’s project?”

“No, Sir. I’m talking about Donna’s. She may refuse to help us on ours.”

“I don’t see that there’s any difference between the two.”

“I understand that, Sir, but Donna doesn’t see it that way. In the end, this is Donna’s research, and Donna’s call. We can’t force her to work on our project.”

Sir Richard exhaled. “Well – technically, I can, but I didn’t want to do that.”

“Yes, Sir, you could, but if you want to gain her favour, I wouldn’t suggest it. Donna will do just about anything if you ask her, but Forrest *forced* her to work on his CML project. If you do the same, she may fight you just as much. One thing I’ve learned about Donna is that you can’t force her into anything.”

“And what are you going to have Ricky working on while you three are doing that?”

“He’ll still work with us. He just won’t know the nature of the discovery, or that the antibodies are coming from Donna. He can’t. Donna made a promise to Jared, and she has every

intention of keeping that promise, whether they're together or not."

Sir Richard groaned. "There's something that bothers me about this whole situation with Jared and Donna. Listening to Jared, it's almost as if he believes she would leave anyone to be with him. Does he have that much of a hold on her?"

"Sir Richard, there's something you need to remember. Donna has as much of a hold on Jared as he has on her. I don't know all the details, but it has something to do with their Dine'é Kay-Yah lineage."

"As a genetic engineer, you can't figure that out?"

"No, but she should be able to."

"Your Aunt Marie didn't often speak about her Indian lineage, but it seems to be of interest to Donna. Do you suppose Jared had anything to do with that?"

Gary chuckled. "Probably, but Donna has always been interested in it. So..." Gary hedged. "Are you OK with this?"

Sir Richard leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "For the time being, we'll humour her."

"Hi Dr. Rigden. I'm Joyce Stephens, Sam's nurse." She offered her hand. "Sam had to go to the medical lab. He'll be here shortly. How is your arm? Sore as hell, I would imagine."

"It's... uncomfortable," Donna replied, which wasn't a lie. It was starting to itch.

Joyce reached to unfasten the sling. "Do you mind if I...?"

Donna pulled away. "I'd rather you didn't."

Joyce raised an eyebrow. "Do you mind if I take your vitals?"

Donna cleared her throat. "Um – I'll wait for Sam."

Joyce snorted and stepped back. "OK – if that's what you prefer."

"You're Australian – right?"

"Yes - I am."

"Is Sam Australian, too?"

"Yes, Dr. Rigden, he is."

“What colour are his eyes?”

Joyce frowned. “Greenish aqua – why?”

Donna’s eyes widened. She swallowed hard. “Just curious....”

There were a couple of taps and the door opened. Donna’s heart sank. *Oh God – he’s real*. She’d hoped it had only been a dream. That someday Jared would forgive her and take her back, but if the man was real, that meant the little girl was real, too. This changed everything.

“Hi sweetheart.” Sam smiled his crooked smile at Donna and turned. “You can leave now, Joyce,” he said with a dismissive hand.

Joyce furrowed her brow. “Donna... don’t you want a nurse present?”

“No.” Donna sighed.

Joyce glared at Sam and left the room. Sam locked the door and turned. “OK, sweetheart, what’s our big secret?” Donna pulled her arm out of the sling. Sam’s eyes widened. “Are you crazy? What are you doing?”

“Before you see this...” she said trying to peel the tape back, “... you might want to sit down.”

Sam reached for his surgical scissors. “Let’s do this the easy way.” Carefully, he cut a strip down the gauze dressing and peeled it back. His mouth gaped. He glared at Donna. “Is this some kind of a joke?”

“No...” Donna studied his eyes. “I warned you to sit down.”

“This is *not* the gunshot wound I saw on Richard’s cell phone!”

Donna grinned. “I assure you, it is. I’m not... *entirely*... normal.”

“I can see that.” Sam examined the wound more closely. “What explanation do you have, Donna?”

She sighed. “I don’t – at least not yet. That’s what I’m hoping to figure out.”

Sam danced his aqua eyes over hers. “So, you haven’t always healed this fast?”

“No,” she shook her head.

“How long?”

“About eight weeks - give or take.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up. He pulled up a stool and sat down. “And you’ve waited until now to try and figure this out?”

Donna’s eyes glossed. “It’s... complicated, Sam. I don’t want to talk about it, but I need your help.” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Richard doesn’t know about this. His father does. He helped me get samples of my blood and DNA over here so Gary could start working on it.”

“By himself... Richard isn’t helping him?”

“No, Sam.”

Sam hunched over, propped his elbow on his knee and rested his chin on his fist. He narrowed his eyes. “Let me guess. You want me to fake my report on your examination?”

“We both know how long it should have taken for a gunshot wound of this nature to heal. This can’t get out, Sam.”

“I don’t suppose you know if it’s viral or contagious?”

“At the moment, I don’t know anything about it.” Donna shrugged. “I don’t even know if it’s permanent.”

“And you can’t tell me what happened to bring about this... miraculous change?” Donna shook her head. “Will you... let me take your vitals? Maybe run a few tests?”

“Do you have lab tech’s you can trust?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Really trust?”

“They wouldn’t be working under me if I didn’t trust them. Newcastle Stem Cell Research Centre is not your average research facility. It’s not easy to get on here. If I hadn’t had some pull, I doubt I would be here. What do you know so far?”

“I know my leucocyte count is way above normal, and my metabolic rate is out the window.”

“Considering the implications, that’s not a lot to go on.”

“I know, but if I can isolate and analyse the antibodies in my blood, I might be able to figure out how to transcribe those, so they can be integrated into our DNA.”

Sam chuckled. "Talk about a universal Band-Aid. It could certainly put an end to the common cold!"

"And a lot of other medical problems, as well," Donna laughed.

Sam studied her eyes. "Well, I could put you in the hospital for a while."

Donna narrowed her eyes. "As if! I want to get started on this as soon as possible."

Sam laughed. "I had a feeling you would say that. You don't strike me as the type to sit around. Your other choice is to wear your arm decoration for at least another two to three weeks – even though you clearly don't need it - and do a lot of faking. From the looks of your wound, I would say, by tomorrow your arm will be healed. I doubt you'll even need antibiotics."

Donna thought about her Depro Juanita gave her – not that it mattered, now. "No, I *don't* need antibiotics. This isn't going to be easy – is it?"

"No, sweetheart, it's not, but I'm afraid those are your only choices, unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you want to move in with me."

Donna raised an eyebrow. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

Sam grinned. "Probably not."

"Then I guess I fake it."

"Can I just ask you one question?"

"Sure."

"Why did you tell Gary you wanted me to help you with your research and *not* Richard? We've chatted maybe once or twice on IM. You don't know me, sweetheart. Why are you so willing to put your trust in a total stranger? How do you know you can trust me?"

Donna grinned slightly and studied his eyes. "I just know...."

Sam scoffed and shook his head. "I don't guess there's a lot I can say to that – is there?"

"Not really," she smiled.

"When did you want to get started?"

"Well, unfortunately, as long as people think I'm helpless, there's not a lot I can do."

There was a knock on the door. "Excuse me a second." Sam unlocked the door.

"How is she?" Gary asked as he stepped into the room. "Have you two talked?" he asked, glancing at Donna.

Sam closed the door and winked at Donna. "Yes, we have. She's moving in with me."

"She's what?" Gary arched an eyebrow; he knew Sam liked to play practical jokes. "Donna... are you?"

Sam grinned and pressed his finger to his lips. Donna glanced at the floor, suppressing a grin. "It's either that or I go around with this damn sling for the next two weeks. We thought it was the logical thing to do."

His mouth gaped. "You don't even know the man, Donna!"

Donna snorted and shook her head. "Gary, you are so gullible. I'm not moving in with Sam. Where's Richard?"

"I've got him culturing stem cells, but he's getting restless. He's worried about you."

"Oh, she's fine," Sam interjected. "She's *more* than fine."

"I was hoping to start work, but unless we can figure out what to tell people about my injury...."

"Or, lack of," Sam chuckled.

"You could save everybody a lot of trouble by just telling Richard."

Donna glared at Gary. "You know why I won't tell him. I'm not going to discuss this with you."

"Look at it this way, D. It's not like it happened in public. You were shot in a secluded cemetery in a little hick town that most people don't even know exists. Only four people witnessed it - you, John, Richard and the shooter."

"Or shooters," Donna interjected.

“True,” Gary admitted. “But, even then, you’re on the other side of the Atlantic, D.”

Donna glared at Gary again. “Distance has *nothing* to do with it, and you *know* that!” she forced through her teeth.

One of Sam’s eyebrows shot up. “Feisty little thing, isn’t she?”

“You have no idea. She likes things her way,” Gary scoffed. Donna narrowed her eyes at Gary, arching one eyebrow.

Sam folded his arms across his chest and leaned his back against the wall, regarding Donna and Gary, mulling things over. Donna caught a glimpse of him out the corner of her eye.

“Look at it this way, sweetheart,” Sam spoke up. “You’ve known Richard for several years. Technically, you’ve known me for a few minutes. Gary’s right. There were no witnesses, no cameras or reporters to spread the news. No one here – barring Joyce – even knows you were shot.”

“Besides,” Gary added. “If Richard was in on the project, Sam wouldn’t have to be....”

Sam pushed away from the wall and held up a forestalling hand. “Oh no! You’re not excluding me. This is going to be big, and I want in.”

Donna locked her eyes with Sam’s. “As far as I’m concerned...” she said, shooting Gary a look of warning, “...you are in, Sam. Gary, this is my research project. Don’t start trying to hijack it.”

Gary frowned. “I’m not, but what are we doing about Richard?”

Donna glanced from Sam to Gary. “If you believe he can be trusted then tell him, but remember what I said. I haven’t changed my mind.”

Sam scratched the back of his neck and looked at his feet. In his opinion, Richard couldn’t be trusted. In Gary’s opinion, neither could Sam, but it wasn’t his call.

Gary stood to leave. "I'll talk to Sir Richard, and then I'll take you home. You're probably starving, and you'll no doubt want to get settled."

"I am a little hungry, but it's too close to lunch, for breakfast, now."

"Then how about I buy you a snack and a cup of coffee, in the cafeteria?" Sam suggested.

Donna studied his eyes for a couple of seconds; a slow smile spread across her mouth. "I think I'd like that."

"I'll come get you in the cafeteria when I'm done," Gary said and left.

Sam placed Donna's hand in the crook of his arm, switched out the light and led her down the corridor. They approached the lift; Donna stiffened. Sam turned to her, studying her wide eyes as they waited. "Is something wrong, sweetheart?"

Donna pushed the ache aside and swallowed the lump in her throat. "No. I'm fine, Sam," she said, giving him a placid smile.

"Gary tells me you're a musician," Sam said, making conversation as they waited in line at the buffet counter.

"I was lead female vocalist for a country band for a while."

"Doughnuts all right with you?"

"That's fine...."

Sam grinned and turned to the woman behind the counter. "Two ridiculously unhealthy high-cholesterol sugar-coated doughnuts and two cups of coffee please," he smiled.

Donna laughed. "I don't think I've ever heard anyone describe a doughnut, so accurately," she responded and picked up two packets of Coffee-mate.

"Grab a couple more, if you don't mind," Sam said and picked up the tray. He motioned with his head. "I usually sit over there in the corner next to the window."

Donna pulled out a chair. "I've read your book," she commented as she stirred her coffee. "Why didn't you include a picture of yourself in it?" She glanced up.

Sam smiled his crooked smile. "Cameras don't do me justice," he teased.

Sam's remark unarmed Donna; her cheeks showed some colour. She narrowed her eyes. "You're a little arrogant, aren't you?"

"Ouch!" Sam frowned and cleared his throat. That wasn't the response he was used to. Donna wasn't warming up to him as fast as he'd expected her to.

"I'm sorry, Sam," Donna groaned. "I didn't mean it to come out that way. I'm not good company right now."

"Then perhaps you'll be in a better mood when you have dinner with me tonight?"

Donna impassively stared at him. "Who said we were having dinner tonight? You haven't asked me out."

Sam lowered his head and chuckled. "OK. Let me try this again. Pretty Lady, will you have dinner with me tonight?"

"Where were you planning on taking me?"

"To my place."

Donna raised an eyebrow. "Your place?" she echoed.

"I'll fix you a meal. We can go for a walk along the beach, and we'll take it from there. If we feel like talking about the project we will. If we don't..." he broke off and finished the last of his coffee.

Donna sighed and looked down at her hands, laced around her cup. She thought about the dream, and the little girl. She swallowed hard and nodded. "OK, but the only address I have is Triplet Hall."

Sam looked up and grinned; Gary had just entered the cafeteria. "I think I can find it," he chuckled and stood. "I'll pick you up at six."

"Ready to go?" Gary asked as he approached.

Donna stood. "Yes. Thanks for the coffee and doughnut, Sam," she smiled. "I'll see you later." Sam grinned and left.

"What do you mean, you'll see him later?"

"He's taking me out to dinner tonight. Is that a problem?"

Gary opened his mouth to speak. “No,” he sighed. “I just kind of expected you to go out with Richard.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “Gary – don’t start.”

Chapter 6

Gary stood by the passenger door, a wide grin on his face. “What are you grinning at?” Donna asked. “Unlock the door – even!” she complained.

“Ah – D,” he laughed. “Unless you want to drive, you might want to get in on the *other* side.”

Donna rolled her eyes and groaned. “Not a word out of you. It’s a common mistake. Anybody could have made it.”

Gary shut her door and got behind the wheel. “You looked as if you were enjoying yourself in the cafeteria.”

Donna softly smiled. “I was. It’s the first time I’ve laughed since... well... you know.”

Gary pulled onto the main road. “Baby,” he sighed. “I’m sorry things turned out the way they did between you and Jared.”

“Yeah, well, I knew I was taking a risk when I sent you the samples. It’s my fault. Do you mind if we talk about something else?”

“Sorry, baby. It’s just I know you’re good at bottling things up.”

“What choice do I have, Gary? He left me without even giving me a chance to explain. He didn’t even *want* to try. Maybe it’s for the best.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Just, sometimes when you think you’ve got everything figured out, life throws you a curve. Now, please, Gary. Dealing with this is hard enough. Change the damn subject!” she snapped.

“OK – geez! We used to be able to talk about anything.”

Donna groaned in exasperation “I’m sorry – it’s just that...” she broke off, too choked up to go on. She looked at her watch. “I’m sorry, Gary,” she whispered. She took out her MP3 player and put in her ear buds. Jared started singing. Fighting bitter

tears, Donna closed her eyes. "I miss you," she whispered under her breath. *At least the next time you read your dream diary, you'll hear my side of the story.*

Gary stopped for a red light. Cautiously, he leaned over and read the artist she'd selected. "Poor baby," he whispered.

He glanced across at Donna a few times more. It was evident she wasn't as over Jared as she wanted him to believe. As much as he disliked Sam, maybe he could help. In many ways Sam and Jared were alike, there was no denying that. The difference; Jared was devoted to Donna. Sam was a womanizer and devoted to no one, but then Richard wasn't much better.

Gary pulled in the circle drive in front of Triplet Hall. "We're here," he said and shut off the engine.

"You're not gonna park your car in the garage?"

"I'll move it later. I thought you might want to see what the house looked like from the front. It's a bit bigger than you're used to."

Donna stepped out of the car and slung her purse over her shoulder, having already discarded the sling. Gary was right. Triplet Hall was massive. It reminded Donna more of a palace than a house, but to her it didn't matter if it *was* a palace. It wasn't where she wanted to be.

Gary and Donna climbed the steps and crossed the marble porch; entering the house through some tall double doors. She followed Gary through the foyer to the entrance room, where he opened another set of double doors. Alan, Sir Richard's butler met them. "Good morning Dr. Browne."

"Good morning. Alan, this is Donna Rigden, my cousin from America."

"Good morning, Miss Donna. I'll have your things taken to the Queen's room."

Donna furrowed her brow. "The Queen's room?"

"Yes, Miss Donna. It has been named as such, since Her Majesty Queen Alexandria stayed here in 1908."

Donna raised an eyebrow. "I'm staying in a room where a *real* queen slept?"

"I told you, living here would be a little different," Gary grinned.

While Gary and Alan talked, Donna took in her surroundings. The fragrance of flowers lingered in the air. The black and white marble tiled floor shone as glass. The heels of their shoes clicked as they walked across it. The room was bright with crystal chandeliers hanging from a decorated ceiling. Stretched out before them was a double grand staircase made of finely polished mahogany. It curved round to the first floor.

"Will there be anything else, Dr. Browne?" Alan asked.

"Yes, Alan, ask Alice to prepare a light lunch. Donna skipped breakfast."

"I'll attend to it at once," he smiled and disappeared.

"Where's my room? I'd like to shower and change."

"Come on. I'll show you."

Gary opened the door and stood to the side. "Your room, M'Lady," he teased. "Try not to drool on the carpet. You wouldn't believe how expensive it is."

Donna glared at Gary. "Smart Ass!" She walked past him into the lavishly decorated room. Across from the doorway stood an ornately carved four-poster bed, covered with a peach satin duvet, and matching pillows. Leading off from the main bedroom were two other rooms. One was a walk-in dressing closet. Donna laid her laptop on the bed.

"There's more," Gary said and opened the other door. "This is your sitting room, where you can entertain your guests, and through here..." he said opening another door on the other side of the sitting room, "... is your en-suite."

Donna stepped inside and looked around. The bathroom was bigger than her lounge had been in her apartment in Louisiana. It had a separate tub, and the shower stall was big enough for at least two people.

“Lela, the upstairs maid will see to your needs. To ring her just pick up the phone, hit the number key and press six. That alerts the staff you need assistance.”

Donna didn't say anything. She was still looking around her room.

Gary cleared his throat. “So do you think you can manage?” Donna softly chuckled. “You've been living here since you moved to the UK?”

Gary grinned. “If you think this is impressive, wait until you see the outside. There's a duck pond below the back garden.”

Donna smiled. “Richard mentioned something about a horse stable.”

“There's a lot more to Triplet Hall, but I thought I'd let Richard give you the rest of the tour when he gets here.”

“That would depend on what time he gets here. I'm going out – remember? Sam is picking me up at six.”

“Oh, he'll be here before then.”

“Did you tell him Sam was taking me out?”

“Yes....”

“How did he react?”

“He seemed a little disappointed, but he was OK with it. He knows you're going through a rough time, D. We all do.”

“I might not be going through such a rough time if everybody would just stop reminding me!” she snapped. “I am capable of dealing with disappointment. I've been blocking out painful memories all my life. Stop treating me like I'm a little girl!”

A helicopter flew over and landed on the other side of the grounds. “Sounds like Richard and his father are home. Why don't you go ahead and get in the shower? By the time you get out, your things will be in your room.”

There was a tap on the door. “Excuse me, Dr. Browne. I have Miss Donna's things.”

“Dad, why are you so nervous?” Richard asked as they stepped onto the back portico and headed for the conservatory.

“Because, I haven’t seen Donna since she was a little girl.”

“What about her grandmother’s funeral? We were there then.”

“We saw her, but she didn’t see us. Even still, that’s been almost ten years ago.”

“You were the one who decided we should keep our distance.”

“It was for the best, Ricky, and you know that. If Forrest had known Donna had any connection to me...” he broke off.

“It was the only way I could protect her.”

Gary met them in the entrance hall. “Where’s Donna?” Richard asked.

“Taking a shower and changing,” Gary replied.

“How is she?” Sir Richard asked.

“She’s doing what I told you she would do if this happened. On the surface, she seems OK, but, she’s not. She’s bottling it all up.”

Sir Richard sighed. “Then maybe Sam’s happy-go-lucky attitude is what she needs, right now.”

“I’m just not so sure he’ll be good for her,” Richard scoffed. “Let’s face it. Sam thinks he’s God’s gift to women.”

Gary softly chuckled. “Well, there’s the pot calling the kettle black. You don’t?”

Richard glared at Gary. “I’m going to shower and change.”

“Richard!” Gary called out. “I told Donna you would give her the rest of the tour. You might want to show her where the kitchen is. Alice is making us a light lunch.”

“It’s a nice day. Tell her to set it up on the portico. We’ll eat outside,” Sir Richard said. “I’ll see you in a few minutes, Gary. After lunch, we need to get Donna’s contract sorted.”

“I’m curious how she’s going to react when she finds out she’s been working for Triplet International, for the last year.”

“Yeah,” Sir Richard scoffed. “Me too.”

“Where’s John?”

“He’s taking care of something for me.”

Richard took a quick shower and changed. He waited for Donna on the landing in the sitting area. A few minutes later, she came out of the room. “Richard,” she gasped. “I didn’t know you were out here waiting for me.”

He locked his cell phone and put it away. He offered her his arm. “Gary thought you might need some help getting to the kitchen.”

Donna chuckled. “He’s probably right.”

“What do you think of the place, so far?” he asked, leading her down the grand staircase.

“It’s... elaborate, and a little overwhelming,” she responded. “It’s going to take some getting used to, that’s for sure.”

“I assume Gary has showed you the music room and library?”

“No. He hasn’t shown me anything but the front of the house and my bedroom.”

Richard chuckled as they approached the doorway to the kitchen. “I’ll show you around if you have time. When was Sam picking you up?”

“Six. I hope you don’t mind.”

The corners of Richard’s mouth turned up. “Why would I mind?” he chuckled as he led her out onto the portico. “I was a little shocked that you didn’t tell me about your...” he motioned to her arm.

Donna instinctively looked at her arm and sighed. “I’m sorry, Richard. I promised Jared I wouldn’t tell anyone about it. I guess it doesn’t make that much difference now, does it?”

Alice set the last of the food on the table. Gary and Sir Richard stood. “Donna, this is my father, Sir Richard Triplet. Dad... this is Donna.”

Donna furrowed her brow and held out her hand. “Pleased to meet you, Sir Richard,” she murmured.

Sir Richard swallowed the lump in his throat. “Likewise, petal,” he said, firmly shaking her hand. “Sit down and get something to eat.”

Richard pulled out a chair for Donna. “I hope you’re hungry?” he said. “As you can see, Alice has prepared us a *small* snack.”

Donna looked across the table at the mass of food. There were several different finger sandwiches, pâtés and cheeses, as well as some sliced vegetable sticks, homemade crackers and three types of caviar canapés.

“I wanted to make sure there were some things Miss Donna might enjoy,” Alice interjected.

Richard picked up a plate. “What would you like?”

“Anything but the caviar canapés,” Donna replied.”

“Figured that,” Gary chuckled. “She doesn’t like raw fish eggs.”

“Not everybody does,” Richard frowned and filled his and Donna’s plates.

Sir Richard poured drinks. “To new beginnings,” he said, holding up his glass.

“To new beginnings,” Gary echoed.

Donna smiled and touched her glass to theirs, “To new beginnings,” she chimed in and sipped her drink. She turned up her nose. “Is it alcoholic?”

“Only slightly,” Sir Richard responded. “It’s cider - why?”

Donna took another sip and let it linger in her mouth. “I have an extremely low tolerance to alcohol. Gary knows that,” she said and glared at him.

Sir Richard smiled, “There’s not enough alcohol in this glass to make a midgie tipsy.”

“Maybe not to you...” Donna scoffed, “...but when you’re alcohol intolerant, it can make a huge difference!”

Chapter 7

They finished their lunch and retired to Sir Richard's study. He opened a manila folder and handed her a document and an ink pen. "Donna, I need you to read over this, and if you're happy with it, sign it."

Donna rolled her eyes as she read the title. She glanced over the first few paragraphs and picked up the pen. "It's just a standard non-disclosure contract. I've been signing these for years with D'Netics." She flipped through the rest of the document until she found the familiar markers. "Missy usually put little red flags for me," she grinned, signing with a flourish. "I see your secretary does the same." She slid the document back to Sir Richard.

"So you're agreeing with everything on it, even though you haven't read it?"

"They all say the same thing," she sighed and sat back in her chair.

Sir Richard's eyebrows arched. "And you're sure you don't want to read the rest of the contract?"

Donna folded her arms across her chest and locked her eyes with his. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't trust you, Sir Richard," she responded. The look in her eyes reminded Sir Richard of an event that happened years ago. A slow smile spread across his mouth.

Richard covered his mouth, suppressing a grin. "I told you she wouldn't notice," Gary softly chuckled.

Sir Richard glanced at Gary and Richard, turned and dropped the contract in the paper shredder. Donna's mouth gaped. "What are you doing?"

Sir Richard slid another contract across the desk. "Pick it up, and this time read it – all of it – we're in no rush." He stood and walked to the window, motioning to Gary and Richard.

They talked quietly while Donna finished reading through the contract.

Donna turned in her chair. “What’s going on? I can’t sign this! My signature is already on it, and it’s dated for a year ago. It’s even been witnessed by Melissa Hart – Forrest’s secretary. How did you...?”

Sir Richard turned. “You really should learn to read the fine print, petal.”

“You can bet I will from now on! Is this some kind of joke? This can’t be legal!”

“Oh, it’s legal. The fact that you didn’t read the contract before you signed it doesn’t make it any less binding. You’ve been working for Triplet International for a year.”

Donna frowned. “There were no signatures on the contract I signed. That much I would have noticed!”

“Mine was,” Sir Richard grinned. “Missy works for me.”

“Jared suspected, as much,” Donna scoffed. “He thought it was odd how she showed up, not long after Gary left.”

“D, you didn’t think I would leave you over there all alone, did you?”

“So, you’ve been spying on me all this time? Were you responsible for the bugs in my apartment?”

“No, Donna. Those weren’t down to me,” Sir Richard spoke up.

“Then how did you pull this off?”

“A couple of years ago, Missy noticed you didn’t read through the contract before you signed it. About a year or so ago, when Forrest changed your research, Missy took a huge risk, but it paid off. She’d been keeping tabs on you and she could tell you were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with your job. As you can see, my signature is smaller than Forrest’s,” he said, pointing.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I can see that.”

“Let me show you how she did it,” Sir Richard said, reaching for the contract.

“Be my guest,” Donna said, holding her hands up dismissively. She watched as Sir Richard peeled off the red markers and turned them around, completely covering his signature. He then stacked some other papers on top, covering the company name.

“Does this look familiar?” he asked, a sly grin turning up the corners of his mouth.

Donna blushed at her lack of caution. “I can only imagine what Forrest would have done to Missy if he’d seen this.”

“He did, but Forrest signed a photo copy. He already knew what was on the contract. When he saw your signature, he scribbled his without question. You didn’t know it, but the contract he intended you to sign was a little different from this one.”

“What do you mean? Different, in what way?”

“You would have agreed to abandon your research and put all your time and effort into finding a cure for Forrest.”

“A cure for what? Forrest is ill?”

“Not just ill, pet,” Richard spoke up, “...dying. Forrest is in the final stage of CML.”

Donna’s mouth gaped. “That explains why he changed my research.”

“He was hoping you would find a cure in time.”

Donna glanced at Gary. “Did you know about this when you were at D’Netics?”

“No. He wouldn’t have had any symptoms, when I was there. We only found out about a year ago. He’s tried drugs and different kinds of alternative treatments, but nothing was working. He’s been in remission for the last couple of months. We think he might have received a bone marrow transplant from somewhere, but we can’t be sure. He’s been very secretive about his condition.”

“Why in the hell didn’t he just ask me? I would have helped him.”

“Helping Forrest might not have been the best thing for the world,” Richard muttered.

“Petal, you don’t know George Forrest, as well as I do,” Sir Richard interjected. “There is *no way* he would have ever allowed himself to become indebted to anyone, much less, a woman.”

“If he thought he was in remission that would have explained his odd behaviour,” Donna mused. “Almost overnight, he went from an arrogant prick, to trying to be my best friend. I didn’t buy the new George Forrest, but I wasn’t going to turn down all he was offering, either,” she chuckled. “For all the hell he’d put me through, I figured I deserved it. It doesn’t matter, he won in the end. Everything I’ve worked for was destroyed when Kim blew up the building.”

Gary cleared his throat. “Not exactly.”

Donna glared at Gary. “What do you mean?”

“Baby, after you signed that contract, I downloaded everything to our database. None of your research was lost.”

“What about the stuff on D’Netics mainframe? I can’t imagine Forrest just gave you access to that.”

“Up until a little while ago, I could access anything in the building, including Forrest’s office and penthouse apartment.”

“What do you mean until a while ago? What happened?”

Gary glanced at Sir Richard. “We don’t know, Donna,” Sir Richard interjected.

“What parts can’t you access?”

“Your department. The floor where Forrest’s office is. His private parking lot and lift, the top floor and his penthouse apartment – oh – and the new building that got blown up.”

Donna looked confused. “I can understand his office and penthouse apartment, but why my department and the new building? What was he trying to hide?”

Gary’s cell phone rang. He glanced at the name and accepted the call. “I’ll call you right back, Babe.”

“How long are you going to be? I’m headed to the cafeteria for a short break.”

“Not much longer. I’ll call you back.” Gary disconnected the call.

“Was that Tina?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“As far as I’m concerned, we’re done,” Sir Richard said.

“Donna, was there anything you wanted to talk about?”

“Not right now. I assume I’ll start work on Monday?”

“If you’re up to it – yes,” Sir Richard said. “Sometimes, Gary and Ricky like to work at home, so I had a high speed fibre-optic network installed. You can access your research from here if you want to.”

Donna smiled. “Gary did something similar for me at D’Netics.”

Sir Richard softly smiled. “Gary has *many* useful talents.”

“Especially with computers and nanotechnology,” Donna agreed.

“We’re done, Gary,” Sir Richard said. “Ricky, why don’t you give Donna a quick tour? I’ve got a few things to finish up here. I think she’d especially like to see the horses, and since she’ll be living here, introduce her to the dogs, as well.”

Donna furrowed her brow. “I didn’t see or hear any dogs, when we got out of the car.”

“They’re trained not to bark,” Sir Richard responded. “We let them out at night, and when we’re away.”

“They know us...” Richard added, “...and they’ve learned to tolerate Gary because he gives them treats.”

“It beats trying to outrun the buggers!” Gary grumbled. “I’ll see you later. Just don’t forget about the dogs tonight when you and Sam get back.”

Richard frowned. “Did you have to tell her that? Come on, pet. Time for some fun.”

After showing her the house, Richard took Donna riding. The tour along the riverside took about an hour. There were lots of trees and flowers in bloom. They tethered the horses to a bush, took off their shoes and went for a paddle in the edge of the water. Donna sat on a flat rock, with her knees pulled up and her arms wrapped around them. She turned her head toward Richard

and rested her cheek on her knees. "It's not so bad over here," she smiled. "The water is a little cold, though."

"I enjoyed our water balloon fights, back in Louisiana, but I wouldn't want to repeat them here."

"No kidding," she laughed. "It would be more like throwing ice water on each other." She glanced at her watch and started putting her socks and cowgirl boots on. "If you're going to show me the rest of the grounds, we'd better go. It's getting late. I have to start thinking about getting ready."

"Right... your date with Sam," he murmured as he finished putting on his shoes. He stood and helped Donna to her feet. "We'll make one more stop," he said helping her onto her horse. "Then we'll tour the rest of the grounds, unless you'd rather skip the duck pond."

Donna's eyes lit. "I'd love to see it!"

Richard took some stale bread from his saddlebag. "Where did that come from?" Donna asked.

"The house," he smiled, reached up and grabbed the sides of her waist, helping her off her horse. He locked his eyes with hers for a few seconds. Donna cleared her throat and stepped back. Richard softly smiled. *Sooner or later you'll give in, again.* He led Donna to the bench and tethered their horses to the back of it.

They talked for a while, tossing stale bread to the ducks and swans swimming around the edge of the water. "Some say swans mate for life," Richard commented.

Donna snorted. "They say the same thing about wolves, but like a lot of other pretty lies, it's just a myth." Her eyes glossed. She swallowed hard. "Nothing is forever," she sighed. "Not even love."

"Why do you say that?"

"Come on - in our day and age! Can you imagine spending your entire life... with *one*..." she broke off and shook her head. "I'm sorry."

“Donna... it’s OK. I know how you felt about Jared. I know you’re hurting. You don’t have to be strong around me.”

“Yes I do!” she snapped and stood. “I don’t have a choice. I have to move on,” she said, untethered her horse and took off toward the stables.

Richard fantasised. “I could imagine spending my life with one person. Jared, I’m sorry. She’s just too easy to fall in love with,” he mused, mounted his horse and took off at full gallop. Despite her broken heart and unpredictable moods, Donna was full of life and wonder. Everything about her made him smile, especially her laugh. Richard wouldn’t give up.

Sam and Joyce were in the lab with Tina and Mary. Sam as usual was playfully flirting with all three women. Ian was over on the other side of the room, pretending to work. Sam glanced at his watch and swallowed the last of his coffee. “Well, it’s been fun, ladies...” he said standing to leave, “...but I have to go.”

“Where are you off to?” Mary asked. “Hot date with Jasmine?”

“No,” Sam grinned. “Donna Rigden.”

Tina cut her eyes at Ian. Joyce frowned. “What about her arm?”

Ian stepped closer. “What’s wrong with her arm?”

“She had a bandage on it when she got here,” Joyce offered. “I heard it was a gunshot wound.”

“Oh, she’s fine,” Sam responded. “It wasn’t as bad as it looked. I put a couple of stitches in it and gave her a shot.”

Joyce raised an eyebrow. “That wasn’t what I heard.”

Sam glared at Joyce. “Then I guess you heard wrong – *didn’t* you,” he said and left.

Mary patted Joyce’s hand. “Don’t worry. Sam will never get his hooks into that one. Richard has already marked her as his next conquest.”

“What do you mean?” Tina asked.

“He dumped me for her right before he left for America.”

Tina and Ian shared a glance. “I see I wasn’t the only one. Wonder how long it’ll be before he gets bored with her?”

Joyce’s mouth gaped. “Richard has been in America? All this time, I thought he was in Ecuador.”

Mary laughed. “Goes to show how much information he shares with his *friends*,” she taunted. “Ian... any plans for tonight?”

“Sorry, Mary. I’m busy.”

Tina reached for her purse. “I’ve gotta run!” Joyce stood to leave.

Ian laid his hand on her wrist. “Joyce, can you hang on a second?”

Joyce softly smiled. “Sure... what’s up?”

Chapter 8

After Sam had gone home and changed, he made a quick stop and then went to pick up Donna. As he turned off the main road, he glanced in his rear view mirror. The white van that had been following him since he left Newcastle pulled to the verge.

Keeping an eye on the white van, Sam got out and fiddled with something in the boot of his car. The driver and passenger of the white van got out, also. The driver lifted the bonnet. The passenger walked around the van, carrying a clipboard, as though he were going through an inspection list. He checked the tires, and then looked at the front and back of the van. "Hmm," Sam commented, shrugged and got back in his car.

He waited while the guards opened the gates, and then drove through. His cell phone rang. Sam pressed a button on his steering wheel and started talking. "Hi Jazz."

"Sam, I won't be able to make our big weekend in the Highlands. A good friend of mine's mother died, so I'll be in Cornwall all weekend."

"That's all right, Babe. I meant to call you before I left work. I'm tied up all weekend, too."

"Awe, poor baby. Boss got you working overtime, again?"

Sam grinned. "Something like that. Be careful and have a safe trip. I'll see you when you get back." He ended the call.

Sam stood outside the double doors. It wasn't his first trip to the Hall, but he'd forgotten how big and elaborate it was. He felt out of place.

Alan opened the door and stepped to the side. "Good evening, Dr. Kaliea. Miss Donna is in the music room. If you'll follow me please."

"Is that her playing?"

"Yes Sir, I believe it is."

"She's good – isn't she?"

Alan smiled. "Yes Sir, she is."

Alan led Sam through the entrance hall to the music room. He opened his mouth to speak. Sam held up his hand. "No, don't disturb her."

Alan nodded. "Would you like something to drink?"

Sam sighed. "No – not tonight. Thank you Alan."

Alan nodded and left. Sam listened to Donna for a while longer before entering the room. He stopped a few paces behind her, admiring her passion.

"You know, I've heard that song a thousand times, but never quite like that," Sam said as she finished the piece.

Donna whirled. "Geez Sam! How long have you been back there?"

"Oh, about two songs ago. I'll join you, when we get back to my apartment. Are you ready to go? I planned for us to take a walk along the beach, before it gets too late."

Donna stood. "Yes, I'm ready," she smiled. Sam rested his hand at the small of her back and guided her to the front door. Richard was standing at the bottom of the stairs. "Richard, could you let Gary know I've left? And please, don't forget. Wait until I get home to let the dogs out."

"I will," Richard responded and kissed her cheek. He grinned at Sam. "Have a nice time, Sam."

"Thank you Richard," he said, the corners of his mouth turning up. "I intend to."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Richard groaned as the door closed behind them.

Sam held the door open for Donna and got behind the wheel. "So," he said, making conversation. "Have you had the big tour?"

"Yes, I have," she smiled. "I especially enjoyed the library. It reminded me of the one in Beauty and the Beast. I can certainly make use of the stables and the tennis court. Oh – and as you might have guessed – the music room. The white grand piano is pretty impressive."

Sam drove through the security gates and pulled up to the dual carriageway. "Beauty and the Beast, eh?" he asked as he stroked Donna's cheek with the back of his fingers. "I can certainly see the beauty, and as for the beast, I think Richard could play that part."

Donna laughed. "Why do you say that?"

"Richard has the reputation of being the spoilt rich brat."

"Whereas you're just the brat, huh?"

Sam groaned. "If I'm a brat, I'm the sweetest one you'll ever know," he grinned and pulled onto the road.

"You're not gonna put the top up?"

"Why? It's warm, and it doesn't look like rain."

"There have been several cases of WNV, where I came from."

Sam glanced at her and grinned again. "We don't have that problem in England."

"No, but according to Richard you have gnats from hell."

"You must mean midgies. They won't be able to keep up when we get going. Besides, I'll be happy to scratch any itch you might get."

"Are you going to brush the knots out of my hair, too? I wish you'd told me. I would have put my hair up," she complained, trying to keep it out of her eyes.

Sam chuckled. "Look in the glove box. There should be a black tie in there you can use."

Donna opened the glove box and several things fell out. Among them was a pair of handcuffs, several packets of condoms and the black tie. She held up the handcuffs and packets of condoms. "Moonlighting for the kinky police," she teased, raising an eyebrow.

Sam coughed and cleared his throat. "Always pays to be prepared," he softly smiled.

Donna's cheeks showed some colour. "Of course it does," she grinned.

Richard checked the time on his watch. Sam and Donna had been gone about a quarter of an hour. He waited until Gary went upstairs to get ready for his date with Tina. Not telling anyone, he grabbed his car keys and left. Pulling onto the dual carriageway, he popped his cell phone in the car cradle and pushed a button on the steering wheel. He put his foot down and waited. "Hello Joyce. Do you have plans for tonight?"

"Yes, I do. I have a date with a frozen pizza and Hugh Grant, but I can put it off if you make me a better offer," she laughed.

Richard grinned and changed lanes. "I can definitely make you a better offer. Put Hugh Grant away and throw out the cardboard pizza. I'll get some fish and chips on my way through Whitley Bay. See you in a bit."

Joyce smiled and headed for the shower. "Maybe this is not going to be such a boring weekend after all," she mused as she laid some clothes on the foot of her bed.

Sam parked his red BMW convertible in the Eastbourne/Bournemouth Gardens car park. Flipping a switch, he waited until the top was up and got out. He took Donna's hand and helped her out of the car. "The wind is a little chilly," she commented, rubbing her upper arms. "I should have brought a light jacket."

Sam held out his jacket. "Here, you can use mine until we get back to my apartment. I'll loan you one before we go down to the beach. The wind will be even cooler down there. How's your arm? I noticed you were still wearing a bandage."

"It's just to keep it clean while it finishes healing. I don't really need it."

"If I hold you, I just wanted to make sure I wasn't going to hurt you."

Donna softly smiled and took his proffered hand. Sam curled his fingers around her hand and pulled her closer to his side, so their bodies touched as they walked to the corner of the street. They went inside Pantrini's and got in the queue. Donna

turned up her nose. Sam chuckled. "It tastes a lot better than it smells – trust me."

"I don't remember reading about fish and chips in your book."

Sam studied her eyes and smiled. "I live on the wild side from time to time."

"Well, hello stranger," the woman behind the counter said. "Haven't seen you in a while. What can I get you?"

"Fish and chips times two and one mushy peas. What would you like to drink, sweetheart?"

"Dr Pepper, please," Donna responded.

"Two Dr Peppers, as well, and make that to go, Becky."

While Gary was taking a shower, Tina left a message on his voicemail, telling him she had to cancel their date and would be busy the rest of the weekend. Gary decided, since Richard was home, he would challenge him to a game of bowling at the four-lane alley in the games room, but he couldn't find him. Sir Richard was sitting in the lounge drinking a cup of tea and reading something on his Kindle. "Where's Richard?"

Sir Richard looked up. "I thought he was upstairs taking a shower."

"No, he's not. I just came from there."

"What did you need him for?"

"Tina called and cancelled our date. I didn't have anything to do, so I thought I would see if Richard wanted to do something."

Sir Richard picked up the house phone. "Alan, have you seen Ricky?" He listened. "About what time? I see. Thank you." He put the phone down. "Alan said Ricky left about quarter of an hour after Sam and Donna."

Gary groaned. "I'll bet he's gone to spy on them."

Sir Richard grinned. "Do you blame him?"

"Well, no, but, if Donna sees him...."

Sir Richard pressed Richard's speed button. "Ricky, where are you?"

“Going to spend some time with Joyce. I didn’t have anything else to do, and she was home alone, so I thought I’d spend it with her. I haven’t seen her for over a month. Is that all right with you, Dad?” he asked sarcastically.

“Yeah, sure, Ricky. We just wondered where you were. Gary was looking for you. See you when you get back – or in the morning – whichever.” Sir Richard ended the call and pressed another button. “He decided to spend the evening with Joyce in Cullercoats.” Gary opened his mouth to speak. Sir Richard held up an imperious hand. “John, it’s me. Keep an eye out for Ricky. He’s at Joyce’s.”

“Coincidental?”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. What are Sam and Donna up to?”

“They just picked up fish and chips at Pantrini’s and have gone back to his apartment.”

“Was Sam behaving himself?”

“Actually, he’s behaving quite civilly. Believe it or not, all he’s done is hold her hand.”

“Does Donna seem OK with that?”

“She seems to be enjoying herself. I think you were right about him getting her mind off Jared for a while. I don’t know what will happen when they get behind closed doors, but I’m here if Donna needs a way out.”

“I have a feeling that’s what Ricky’s there for, as well. Swing round by Joyce’s and make sure that’s where he is. Send somebody to keep an eye on him, too. I think it’s fairly obvious who the shooters were after, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“I’ll take care of it, Sir.”

Sir Richard locked his cell phone and put it away.

“You’re spying on them, too?” Gary asked.

“No. I’m not. I’ve just got John watching out for trouble. You didn’t think, after what happened at the cemetery in Louisiana that I was going to let her go out like this unprotected. Did you?”

Gary grinned. "Actually, I'm glad you've got John watching them. I agree Donna needs an escape from Jared's memory. I don't think she's over him, yet."

"Neither do I," Sir Richard sighed.

"I don't suppose *you* would like to do some bowling?"

Sir Richard laid his Kindle on the coffee table and stood. "Come on then. Did Tina give you a reason for cancelling...?"

Richard and Joyce sat down to the table and started eating their meal. "Richard," Joyce said as she salted her chips. "I love spending time with you, but I know this isn't a social call."

Richard grinned. "You know me too well, Joyce."

"Does this visit have anything to do with Newcastle's most eligible taking an interest in your girl?"

Richard frowned. "Maybe I just decided to spend my Friday night with a beautiful woman," he responded, brushing the back of his fingers down her cheek.

Joyce shyly smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. She'd played the mouse between Richard and Sam before, and she knew Richard was a good actor. He could cry on command but then so could Sam. "Yeah – right and maybe Sam Kaliea will propose to me tomorrow. Fat chance."

"OK, you win. I confess, but I do think you're a beautiful woman. I always have. I think Sam needs his head examining if he can't see that."

Joyce smiled; her cheeks showing some colour. "Just stop with all the flattery and tell me what's on your mind before I start taking you seriously."

Richard glanced down at his chips and then back into Joyce's eyes. "Well, let's face it. You don't want Donna with Sam and neither do I."

"At least we agree on that much," Joyce chuckled.

"If you're willing to help me, I think I can solve both our problems."

"What do you need me to do?"

Chapter 9

Sam rolled up the left over fish batter and chips and put them in his rubbish bin. “I’m going to put this outside, so it doesn’t stink up the place.”

Donna twisted her nose. “At least you were right. They taste better than they smell. I don’t care for the batter – too greasy. The haddock was delicious, though.”

“Look in the cupboard, under the stairs. I think there’s a can of air freshener in there. Spray some around the room. That way by the time we get back from our walk, the smell should be gone.”

Donna read the fragrance and softly smiled. She sprayed some around the room and breathed deeply. The memory of Jared’s magic potion swirled through her mind. She felt sad, but oddly her eyes didn’t gloss, as usual. “You may just survive this after all, Donna,” she mused and sat down to the piano. “Maybe it is him,” she softly smiled. “Yeah – sure – and maybe diamonds will fall from the sky.”

“They already have...” Sam said as he draped a light jacket over her shoulders and gently massaged the nape of her neck. Tingles of guilt crept down her spine. He sat beside her on the stool and pushed some loose hair behind her ears. Donna looked down at her hands. Sam tilted her chin up so their eyes met, again. “The diamonds landed in your eyes.”

“You’re full of it,” she snorted. “I’ve heard rumours about you.”

“I’ve heard some about you, too,” he whispered, dancing his aqua eyes over her face, drinking in her features. This wasn’t supposed to happen. I wanted to prove a point to Richard, but Donna’s touching something deep inside me. It’s like I’m being pulled into the depth of her eyes. As if she’s staring into my soul.

Donna sighed and turned; blankly staring at the inside of Sam's black grand piano, randomly skimming her long fingers over the ivory keys. "This isn't a standard piano, is it?"

"No, it's not," he sighed and picked up one of her hands, standing and bringing her with him. "I'll show you what it can do, when we get back."

Donna softly smiled. "OK."

Donna watched Sam take what looked to her to be a sleeping bag from a closet by the door. He grinned at her and slung it over his shoulder. She arched an eyebrow. "Are you planning on us camping out on the beach?"

Sam chuckled and led Donna out into the evening air. "It's not a sleeping bag, sweetheart. It's called a beach hugger. I thought we might sit on the sand, for a while, and maybe cuddle," he said, resting an arm across her shoulders.

"I like to cuddle," Donna sighed.

"Good," Sam grinned. "So do I."

The beach still had a few tourists, desperately seeking the final rays of the sun that sparkled off the waves of the North Sea. Donna watched Sam out the corner of her eye as he admired the sights on the sand. She softly smiled. Jared had been popular. There was nothing wrong with being popular, she told herself. She was popular, although she didn't try to be.

Finding a suitable spot, Sam unzipped the hugger and tossed it on the sand. It looked like an over-sized terrycloth beach towel to Donna. It was the two attached pillows that unnerved her. Sam sat cross-legged and propped his elbows on his legs regarding Donna. She stared back at him. The corners of Sam's mouth turned up slightly. Donna's pupils widened; her face showed some colour. "The sea is that way," she pointed.

"I like what I see. I see the ocean every time I walk out my front door, Donna. It's not often I get to stare into the eyes of Aphrodite."

“Mr. Kaliea, I think you’re suffering from a severe case of verbal diarrhoea,” she chuckled. “I may have some pink stuff in my purse.”

Sam grinned, tucked his chin and shook his head, exhaling in exasperation. “You’re not going to make this easy for me, are you, sweetheart? I’m trying to affect you in the same way you’ve affected me.”

Donna sighed and impassively studied his eyes. “How have I affected you, Sam?”

One side of Sam’s mouth turned up. He traced the underside of her jaw with the knuckle of his index finger. “I’m still trying to figure that out. Trying to figure *you* out.”

“Don’t look too closely. You might not like what you see. I’m complicated.”

Sam smiled his crooked smile. “I like challenges.”

Donna frowned and rolled up the legs of her jeans. “I don’t.” She stepped out of her sandals and walked out onto the damp sand.

Sam started rolling up the legs of his jeans. “I wouldn’t do that!” he called out, tossing his shoes aside. It was too late. The approaching wave splashed into her.

“Oh that’s cold!” Donna squealed. “That’s even colder than the Tyne!”

Sam waded out to her. Wrapping his arms around her, he buried his face in her hair; his hot breath tickled the side of her neck. Donna stiffened; her heart started pounding. She fought to control her rapid breathing. “Relax, sweetheart,” he whispered against the base of her shoulder. “I’m not going to bite you. Not unless you want me to.” His lips brushed up the side of her neck, following the line of her pulse. Donna drew in a short breath. She tried to fight what Sam’s lips and hard body pressed against hers was doing to her, but he reminded her so much of something she’d lost. Something she longed for, ached for and would never have again. Slowly she turned in his arms and looked up into his aqua eyes.

“Sam...” she whispered, tucking her head.

Sam lifted her chin. He could see the want in her eyes, but he sensed if he made a move now, she would pull away. Normally, that wouldn't have bothered him. He knew what to do to get what he wanted, and if he pushed, Donna would give in, he sensed that. What was holding him back? What was different about her than all the other women he'd sent to the stars? He lifted her into his arms and waded out of the cold water, standing her on the beach hugger. He wrapped his arms around her waist. Donna rested her head against his shoulder, feeling warm and secure, but she wouldn't lift her head. "Who are you running from, sweetheart?" he asked as he rested his cheek on top of her head.

"You'll stop at nothing to get what you want. Will you?"

Richard chuckled and kissed Joyce's forehead. "I'm a Triplet. I have a reputation to uphold."

"And you think Sam is any different? You know him. If he wants Donna, one way or the other, he'll get her. Mind you, he may not keep her, but sooner or later he'll get what he wants."

"Oh, I'm counting on it."

"What if Donna falls in love with Sam the way she did this other man – what was his name?"

"Jared. The difference between Sam and Jared is simple. Sam is for now and now – nothing more. Jared is in for the long haul. Dad offered him a job. Jared turned him down. He wouldn't take the risk of losing Donna or his daughter."

"Sir Richard couldn't protect them?"

"I don't know, Joyce. I didn't see the video, but whatever was on it, shook Dad to the core."

Joyce lifted her head off his shoulder and looked into his blue eyes. "Richard, do you love Donna, or are you just competing with Sam, as always?"

"I don't know Joyce. I have this connection with Donna, and I can't explain what it is. It's like she's a part of me, and always has been. I'm just not sure it's love. I've only been in love once, and that was a long time ago. When it didn't work

out, I vowed I would never let anyone get that close to me again, but somehow, Donna has. I know, if I can make her see, what a flirt Sam is and how wrong he is for her, with Jared out of the way, I might stand a chance with her.”

Joyce smiled and rested her head on his shoulder again. “I guess we’re just two hopeless romantics wishing on a star,” she sighed.

“Does that mean you’ll do it?”

Joyce leaned over Richard and picked up her cell phone. “Gail, this is Joyce. I need a favour.”

Sam rolled up the beach hugger and walked Donna back to his apartment. He lifted her wrist to his lips and pressed a kiss over her pulse. “Go play the piano. I’ll be there in a couple of minutes. I’m going to get us something to drink.”

Donna softly smiled and nodded. Sam approached, carrying a silver tray with a domed lid, and two flutes of sparkling liquid. He set the tray on the edge of the piano and handed her a flute. Donna sniffed the liquid and frowned. *Here we go again. More alcohol.* “Sam, I’m alcohol intolerant.”

Sam grinned. “I have to drive you home, sweetheart. This is sparkling apple juice. It’s like non-alcoholic Champagne. You get the taste and the bubbles, but not the kick. What shall we toast to?”

Donna locked her eyes with his. “How about choice and change?”

Sam furrowed his brow. “That’s an odd combination, but OK.” He touched his glass to hers. “I choose to be with you and I hope... to change your life.”

Donna sipped her drink and motioned to the tray. “What’s under there?”

“I’ll show you later. First, I want to play something for you.” Donna slid down and made room for him on the stool, next to her. Sam took a deep breath, closed his eyes and rested his fingers on the keys. For a few seconds, he hesitated and then started playing.

Donna closed her eyes and concentrated on the music. Sam finished playing. “What’s the name of that piece?”

Sam smiled. “I don’t know. I made it for you.”

“You just *now* composed that for me? It’s beautiful Sam.”

“If it’s beautiful, it’s because the inspiration *for* it was beautiful. Close your eyes.”

“As long as you promise not to use the handcuffs on me.”

“Hmm... that’s an interesting thought,” he teased. “Maybe another time.”

Sam stood behind her and pushed her long brown hair to the side. He kissed along her shoulder and up the side of her neck. “I don’t often do this, but you inspire me in more than one way. I’d like to give you something. If you don’t like it, you don’t have to keep it. It’s just a token, to commemorate our first date, which I hope will be one of many,” he whispered against her ear.

Donna took a deep breath, nodded and waited. She felt something light brush against the sides and back of her neck, and then something cold touched her sternum. Sam sat backward on the stool, facing her. “You can open your eyes now.”

Donna rubbed the pendant between her fingers; a feeling of dread knotting in the pit of her stomach. She swallowed hard. “I want to see,” she whispered.

Sam took her hand and led her to the downstairs toilet. Standing behind her, he rested his palms over her shoulders and pulled her against him. Donna’s stomach roiled. She could feel his hard body pressing against her firm bottom.

Donna held her breath, slowly lifted her eyes and stared at her reflection. Unimaginable pain gripped her heart, threatening to choke the life from her. It was a replica of the necklace she had given to Sarabeth, when Jared first took her to meet his daughter. Silent tears filled her eyes. She blinked; one escaped trailing down her cheek. She quickly brushed it away, as she fought to breathe.

Sam frowned. “If you don’t like it....”

Donna turned to face him. She sniffed and swallowed; her throat aching from uncried tears. "It's not that Sam. It's... it's..." she broke off and sighed. "It's beautiful - thank you," she whispered, kissed his cheek and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Sam wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face in her hair. "Would you like to dance with me?"

"Yes," she choked. "I would like that very much."

Sam took her hand and led her back to the piano. He pressed a button and led her to an open space, pulling her into his arms. The music he'd composed for Donna started playing. "This really is a pretty piece of music," she said as she gently swayed her body against his. "I think you should give it a name."

"OK," he said, leaning in. "I'll name it Donna." Sam was just about to kiss her when his cell phone rang. He groaned and put it to his ear, unable to take his eyes off Donna's. "This is Sam."

"Sam, it's Jasmine."

Sam's eyes widened. "Ah - hang on a second. I'm just going to step over there and..."

Donna started to sit back down.

Sam held her wrist. "Don't, I'll only be a minute. Just wait here." Sam stepped near the window. "Hi Jazz, what's up?" he said, glancing back at Donna.

Donna tried not to eavesdrop, but when she heard the endearment 'cupcake' a pang of something went through her. *Must be a woman....*

A couple of minutes later, Sam ended the call and walked back to Donna. "Where were we?" he said, taking her into his arms again.

Donna grinned. "You were about to tell me who Jazz was," she teased.

Sam's eyes twinkled with mischief. "She's a friend Donna. You don't need to worry about her." They danced a few more

minutes and Sam's cell phone rang, again. "I'm sorry sweetheart, but I've got to..."

Donna smiled softly. "You're obviously very popular with the ladies."

Sam sighed, stepped away and answered the call. After the next two interruptions, Sam's emergency service called. *Something's going on here.* He accepted the call. "Hi Gail, what's up sugar?"

Even his answering service is female. Donna heaved a heavy sigh and sat on the sofa, listening.

Sam carried on with his conversation. "What do you mean you didn't ring me? Of course you – never mind Love, I must have hit the button." Sam switched off his cell phone and placed the silver tray on the coffee table, along with the rest of their drinks.

Donna jutted her chin and stolidly stared into his dancing eyes. "Did you get your lady friends satisfied?"

Sam inhaled deeply, held it for a few seconds and then forced it out between his lips. "Close your eyes again," he grinned.

"No more gifts, Sam."

"Not a gift – an offering."

Donna groaned and closed her eyes.

"Open your mouth – wider." Sam took one of the strawberries from the bowl, raked it through the whipped topping and pressed it to her lips. "Now, bite," he whispered, his lips almost touching hers.

A slow smile spread across her mouth as she chewed. "So that was what was under the..."

Before she could finish the phrase, Sam's lips pressed against hers; warm soft and inviting. His kiss was full of passion but soft and gentle as a butterfly's wing. It made her dizzy and yearning for more. Donna couldn't help it. Despite her reservations, there was something about Sam that pulled her in. Before she realised it, she was kissing him back.

Sam slid his hand under her shirt. The image of a white wolf flashed through her memory, and the pain was back. Donna felt like she couldn't breathe. She pushed him away and stood. "I have to go, Sam."

"Why? What happened? I'm sorry. I thought you wanted me to."

"I did," she choked, "...but then you pushed too far. I'm not ready for that Sam. I don't know if I'll ever be again. I'm sorry." She unlocked her cell phone. "Richard, would you please come get me? I'm at Sam's apartment at Whitley Bay."

"I'll be there in five minutes."

"I'll wait for you outside." Donna locked her cell phone, put it in her purse and headed for the door.

Richard locked his cell phone and grinned. "Mission accomplished," he said and kissed Joyce's cheek. "I have to go."

Chapter 10

“Donna, you didn’t have to call Richard. It will take him at least forty-five minutes to get here. Call him back. I’ll take you home. Let’s talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about Sam. Richard will be here in a couple of minutes.”

“What’s he going to do, fly the helicopter?”

“No. He said he was down the road, visiting with a friend.”

Sam sighed in exasperation. “I should have known.”

“What do you mean?”

“Joyce lives at Cullercoats – about two miles away.”

“What does Joyce have to do with it?”

“If you give me a chance, I’ll explain. Call him back. Please, sweetheart. You wanted me to kiss you. I know you did. I stepped over the line. I’m sorry. I don’t understand. I was just following your lead.”

Donna turned to face him. “Sam, I don’t have a lead. I’m stumbling in the dark. I’m broken – don’t you understand. I’m hollow inside. I can’t feel. I can’t even cry. You don’t want that. You don’t deserve that.” She hung her head and swallowed to ease her burning throat. “Nobody does,” she whispered.

Sam cradled her face in his palms. “Call him...”

Donna’s cell phone rang. “It’s him. Hi Richard.”

“Pet, I’m sorry. I’m going to be a few minutes longer. I’m...”

“I overreacted. I’m fine, Richard.” She ended the call.

Sam pulled her into his arms. “Now,” he sighed deeply. “Tell me about the monster who broke your heart.”

John read the number plate on the black Mercedes speeding toward them down Promontory Terrace. He watched as it

reversed in Windsor Avenue, and zoomed past them. “That’s Ricky,” he groaned.

“Why is he in such a hurry?” Danny Greene asked.

John grinned. “I don’t know, but either there’s been some kind of emergency or he’s a bit peeved.”

“Think we should follow him?”

“No...” John sighed and unlocked his cell phone.

Sir Richard’s last frame ended in a double, with ultimate victory in sight. Taking his time, hunched over in deep concentration, Gary sighted his ball, aiming slightly to the right of the first pin; a sure strike. If Gary could double on his last two frames, the score would be tied; the best he could hope for. Sir Richard seldom lost in anything.

Leaning back in his chair, Sir Richard dabbed his forehead with the end of his towel and regarded his opponent. He tipped his pint to his lips and gulped his lager, waiting.

Satisfied with his aim, Gary backed up a few steps, trotted forward and released the ball. One-by-one the pins tipped over. “Yes!” Gary cheered and waited for his return ball. He picked it up, turned and grinned at Sir Richard. “I’ve got you this time,” he bragged.

Sir Richard laughed and finished his lager.

Repeating his moves, Gary lined up his final frame. Eyes glued on his intended target, he trotted forward and pulled his arm back. Sir Richard’s cell phone rang just as Gary released his ball. “*Sir, it’s John....*”

Gary shook his fists in the air and groaned as the ball curved slightly, leaving pin 7 and 10 – a split. “Foul!” he shouted. “That’s a foul. I get another shot.”

Sir Richard chuckled, “We’re not playing baseball Gary. What’s up John? Oh – by the way – perfect timing.”

“Is everything all right at the Hall?”

“Yes – thanks to you. Gary just got a split. The little bugger damned near beat me this time.”

“Ricky just sped past us like a bat out of hell, heading that way. I wanted to make sure nothing was wrong.”

“Everything is fine here. How about there?”

Looking through his binoculars, John noted the last light go off in Sam’s penthouse. “From the way things are going, I don’t think Donna will be coming home tonight. Looks like Ricky is going to lose out on this one. I guess me and Danny will take turns napping, assuming you want us to keep watch.”

“Sam’s apartment is not as secure as the Hall. I don’t see that we’ve got a choice. If Ricky has found a way to spy on him and Donna, that might explain why he was in such a hurry. He’s probably seen something he shouldn’t have.”

“This is going to create more friction between Ricky and Sam, and in turn between Donna and Ricky. Should we think about nipping this thing in the bud? One call to Arizona would end it all. He could be here by morning.”

“Yeah, John, I know, and under these circumstances, Jared wouldn’t hesitate, but we can’t risk it. Until I’m sure I can protect his daughter and family, I’m not getting him involved. Just stay where you are and let’s see how things go in the morning.”

John groaned, pushed his seat back and stretched his legs. “Get some sleep, Danny. I’ll take the first watch.”

Jared stared across the Sonoran Desert, watching heat waves rising off the scorching sands. He glanced up at the clear Wickenburg sky. Tom Thundercloud quietly approached. “You can’t do this, Jared,” he softly said as he rested a hand on his son’s shoulder. “You’re only supposed to *help* Donna, not take on all the pain.”

“I’m the reason she’s hurting Dad,” he growled low in his throat.

Nadine’s eyes glossed as she stood beside her husband. “Your father is right, Jared.” So much her son had been forced to bear, and she’d seen it all. When he was hurting, Jared never

let anyone help. Like Donna, he bottled it up and suffered in silence.

“Donna thinks it’s her fault, Mother. I let her believe that.”

“You had no choice, Jared. You couldn’t risk Sarabeth’s life as well as Donna’s. Remember what Sir Richard told you. Forrest would have killed them both.”

“Not if I’d killed him first!”

“You’re not a murderer, Son. You’re a protector, and that’s what you’re doing. Protecting someone you love is not always easy, Jared.”

The steel fence pipe creaked and groaned under Jared’s vice grip. “You don’t know that Mother. In my dreams, I saw her face as she wrote the words in my diary. When I held the rings I’d given her in the palm of my hand, my heart all but stopped beating. Donna was in such agony. I thought of a million ways I could torture George Forrest. I wanted to slowly slice his throat and watch the life ebbing from his body. I wanted to shove my fist into his chest and yank out his dark heart. Feel its last beat in the palm of my hand. That’s how bad it hurts, Mother!”

“Jared,” Tom interjected, “...being part of a perfect match is sharing each other’s pain, as well as each other’s joy. You have to let her bear some of the load, or it will all be in vain. She has to choose, Son. Donna can’t do that if you take her guilt as well as her heartache. She’s strong, Jared. In the end, she’ll pull through this and so will you. Keeping all this from her will destroy you. Unless fate sees fit to cross your paths again, you have to let her go.”

Jared turned glowing crimson eyes on his father. “No, I don’t!” he forced through his teeth. “Donna needs to heal. Donna won’t heal as long as she feels guilty. I won’t see her go through this any longer. It is my right and my decision. Until I can be with her again – in this life or the next – I will live half a life. I will bear the load. I’ve done it before, and I will do it again.”

Tom opened his mouth to speak. Nadine touched his wrist and shook her head. "We'll be here if you need us, Jared." She tugged on Tom's wrist urging him to follow her.

Jared leapt the cyclone fence, looked toward Mother's Mountain and disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Sir Richard locked his cell phone, sighed deeply and looked at Gary. "What is it?" Gary asked. "Has something happened to Donna?"

"John doesn't think Donna is coming home tonight."

"What?" Gary's mouth gaped. "Why?"

Sir Richard narrowed his eyes. "Use your imagination, Gary."

"On their first date? He must have done something to her! Got her drunk, drugged her maybe? The Donna we know wouldn't do something this careless."

Sir Richard raised an eyebrow. "Wouldn't she? What about Jared? She had one date with him and then moved into Wisteria Hall."

"But that was different! Donna was in love with Jared. She barely knows Sam."

"She's not a child, Gary. I think we'll just have to trust her judgement. Whatever happens between them is none of our business. Our problem will be dealing with the standoff between Ricky and Sam."

"Or, between *me* and Sam, if I find out he took advantage of her on the rebound!"

Gary went upstairs, but before he could go to sleep, he had to make sure Donna was OK. He pushed her speed number. Several rings later, her voicemail picked up. Gary left a message and waited for a reply. When it didn't come, he took a shower and got ready for bed. He picked up his Kindle and read for a while. Still no answer. It had been about half an hour since he left a message on Donna's voicemail. He tried her number again, but all he got was her voicemail. That was it. Gary pushed Sam's

speed number and waited. He'd made up his mind. If he didn't get an answer; he was going to Whitley Bay himself.

Sam's cell phone flashed and then vibrated. With as little movement as possible, he picked it up off the bedside table and put it to his ear. Donna lifted her head, studying his eyes. "Hello, Gary," he grinned and softly kissed Donna's lips. "What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me where Donna is!" Gary snapped.

"Hold on a second." Sam palmed the microphone. Donna's eyes widened. Sam pressed his lips to a thin line and arched his eyebrows. "I think we're in trouble, sweetheart," he whispered against Donna's lips, kissing her again. "He wants to know where you are. Do I tell him, or...."

"Give me the phone," Donna groaned and cleared her throat. "Hi Gary."

"Donna... do you know what you're doing?"

Donna locked her eyes with Sam's; a soft smile spread across her mouth. "Yes, Gary...."

"Did Sam drug you, or get you drunk? Is this because of what happened in America?"

"No, Gary – to all three questions. Why are you calling me?"

"It's late. You're obviously not planning on coming home tonight. I just wanted to make sure you were... OK."

"I'm fine. I'm not a little girl. You don't need to check up on me. I'll be home tomorrow. Goodnight Gary." Donna ended the call.

Richard stamped on his brakes, coming to a screeching halt, stopping just shy of the back bumper of his father's car. He grabbed the offensive piece of paper from off the passenger seat, got out and slammed the door shut. Storming through the kitchens, Richard hooked his car keys on the rack and headed for the lounge.

Sir Richard watched him walk past and straight to the bar, pouring himself a double shot of scotch. He unlocked his cell phone. "John, it's me. Ricky is home. Any changes there?"

"No, Sir. A couple of minutes ago, there was a dim light in Sam's bedroom, but the house is completely dark now. It was probably a bedside lamp."

"Still no sign of threats?"

"No, Sir. It's all quiet."

"OK, John. I'll see you sometime in the morning. I'm going to see if I can find out what happened from Ricky." Sir Richard locked his cell phone.

Richard turned. "Checking up on Donna, Dad?"

Sir Richard raised an eyebrow. "No more than you."

"What makes you think that's what I was doing? I told you, I was spending the evening with Joyce."

"If that's the case, why were you in such a hurry when you left? Don't try that with me, Richard Triplet. You timed yourself, so Sam and Donna wouldn't know you were following them. I don't know what arrangements you made with Joyce, but it wasn't a social call."

Richard tossed back the last of his scotch and set his empty tumbler on the bar. "Dad," he said, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. "For your information, right before I left Whitley Bay, Donna rang and asked me to come and pick her up. In five minutes, I would have had her in the car with me, but I got held up. There was a stream of cars at the church on Mandale Road. Then there was high traffic on Broadway and to top it all off, about fifty people wanted to use the zebra crossing at the station - all one at a time. When I rang Donna back to let her know, she'd changed her mind."

"What do you mean? What did she say?"

"She said she had overreacted and that she was fine. Oh, and on the way home I got a fucking speeding ticket on the coast road just past North Shields. What's worse, I couldn't talk my way out of it, so I have to either pay the bloody thing or fight it."

Sir Richard stifled a laugh. “Are you going to fight it?”

“I was about twenty miles over the speed limit – what do you think? I’m going to pay the bloody thing!”

Sir Richard laughed.

“It’s not funny, Dad,” Richard growled. “Bloody unmarked police cars!”

“Sounds like we’ve all had an interesting night.”

“You might have,” Richard scoffed. “I’ve had a bloody awful night – most of it anyway. I knew this was going to happen the minute he got her alone. If it hadn’t been for the fucking traffic...” he broke off.

“Ricky... leave Donna and Sam alone. If she wants to be with Sam, that’s none of our business. Whatever she decides, I don’t want this to interfere with the project. Now that Donna’s here, I expect to see some real progress in finding a vector. That’s the last step. That’s all we’re waiting for. We can’t afford setbacks!”

Chapter 11

Donna woke to the smell of frying onions and garlic. She looked at the space on the other side of the bed. A slow smile turned up the corners of her mouth. Remembering her clothes were downstairs in the lounge, she picked up Sam's over-sized T-shirt and slipped it over her head. After attending to her morning duties, she examined her reflection in the vanity mirror and reached for her brush. After a few strokes, her tousled mane was tamed and secured in a high ponytail on top of her head. A quick swish of minty mouthwash and she scampered downstairs, letting her nose be her guide. She retrieved her discarded panties from off the floor in front of the sofa. "Something smells delicious," she said as she pulled them up.

Sam was in the kitchen in front of the cooker, wearing nothing but his pyjama bottoms; wire whisk in one hand, a small bowl of chopped peppers in the other. He glanced over his shoulder. "Morning, sweetheart," he grinned, turning back to his cooking. "You're not supposed to be up yet."

Donna perched on one of the bar stools, propping her elbows on the snack bar and resting her chin on the heels of her hands as she regarded the red marks on Sam's back and shoulders. "I guess things got a little... wild last night. Sorry about that."

"Oh, you've seen my stripes," Sam chuckled. "Guess that's what I get for grabbing a tiger by the tail. They were worth it – trust me. Grab that oven-mitt and take the plates out of the microwave, if you don't mind."

"What do you want me to do with them?"

"Sit them on the bamboo mats. Be careful. Don't burn yourself."

Donna grinned as she slipped her hands in the mitts. "I'm sure if I burn my fingers that you'll kiss them for me," she teased.

“Them and any other bits you need kissing,” he softly chuckled as he slid the omelettes onto their heated plates.

Donna cupped the nape of Sam’s neck in her hands and turned her face up. She rose on her tiptoes. Sam softly smiled and lowered to meet her moist lips, circling her waist and pressing his body against hers. Donna thoroughly kissed him, swathing her hot velvet tongue over his. Ending the kiss, she studied his eyes. Sam licked his lips. “Mmm – minty.”

“I borrowed some of your mouthwash.”

“I see you borrowed one of my T-shirts, as well. It looks good on you.”

“Well, I had to put on something since you stripped my clothes off me in the lounge and swept me upstairs.”

Sam grinned. “You’re lucky we made it that far. I considered the landing, but I didn’t want you to hurt your back.”

Donna softly smiled. “I don’t think I would have noticed.” She motioned to the plates and picked up her fork. “So, what’s this?”

Sam sat on the bar stool next to her. “A western omelette outback style - minus the kangaroo meat - of course.”

“From the smell, I’ll need to borrow some more of your mouthwash before you take me home, or I’ll kill the guard dogs.”

“Who said I was taking you home?” he chuckled. “We don’t have to be at work until Monday. We have all weekend.”

Donna winced. “Sam... let’s don’t make this... awkward. I told you I’m not ready for anything permanent. Last night was wild and fun, and I needed that, but...”

Sam frowned. “So you’re just going to walk away? One wild night of incredible sex, and I don’t see you again?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Sam kissed the end of her nose. “So I *did* get to you last night.”

Donna straddled his lap and cocked her head to one side, impassively regarding him. “The question is... did I get to you?”

Sam groaned and rested his hands on her hips. “Sweetheart, let me explain it like this. A lot of women have walked through my bedroom door. You’re the first one I’ve asked to stay.”

Donna grinned. “That’s supposed to convince me?”

Sam slid his hands under her shirt and up her back, dancing his aqua eyes over hers as he leaned in to kiss her. Donna met him halfway. There was an explosive attraction between them; she couldn’t deny that. “Come on, sweetheart. You know you want to.”

“I have to admit, it is a tempting offer, and I could certainly use the distraction. There’s just one problem.”

“Nothing we can’t work around,” Sam persisted. “Tell me what it is.”

“I can’t go around all weekend wearing nothing but your T-shirt and this same pair of underwear. I have to have clothes, Sam.”

“I’ll take you shopping and buy you enough clothes for this weekend, and you’re wrong. You look *extremely* sexy in my T-shirt and *no* underwear.”

“Sam, I don’t need you to buy my clothes. I have my own money, plus, I have a black Triplet International credit card. I do need to buy some new clothes, though. Richard tells me the winters are cooler here than I’m used to.”

“See... there’s a perfectly good reason for you to stay here for the weekend.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “You are a very persistent person, Dr. Kaliea.”

“Only because I know what I want and what I want is sitting on my knee desperately making me want to take her back upstairs and see how many more stripes my little tiger can give me.”

“I am not your little tiger!”

“Yes you are. You just don’t know it yet.”

“You’re a charmer, Mr. Kaliea, but I’m on to you.”

Sam grinned and kissed the side of her neck. “You’re definitely *on to* me right now.”

Donna laughed at his play on words. “Before we go out, I need to take a shower. Do I take one alone, or are you going to come and keep me company?”

John’s seat was leant back. His eyes were closed; not so gentle snoring sounds escaping his half-open mouth. Greene shook John awake. “Sir, they’re on the move, again. Do we follow them?”

John yawned and put his seat in an upright position. He quickly scooted his seat forward. He rubbed his eyes and started the engine. “Thank goodness for that. I don’t know how much more of this bloody van seat my back could take. I’m getting too old for stakeouts.”

He watched Sam’s car on the tracker screen until it was a short distance down the coast road, and then pulled out onto Promontory Terrace behind him. It didn’t take long before John realised they were not going back to Triplet Hall, at least not yet.

Sam pulled into the red car park at the Metrocentre. Walking around, he took Donna’s hand, brought it to his lips and kissed the back of it. Donna softly smiled. “Now, what do you need, sweetheart?”

“I would like to buy some new dresses, but I have a particular taste. I’m not easy to please.”

“I’ll say,” Sam chuckled. “The word insatiable comes to mind.”

The corners of Donna’s mouth turned up in a wry grin. “Are you complaining?”

Sam cupped her chin in his palm. “Not in the slightest,” he said and softly kissed her.

It unnerved Donna a little. She wasn’t used to being kissed in public. She found Sam refreshing. It didn’t seem to matter

where they were if Sam felt like kissing her, he did. Unless he was warding off competition, or laying his claim on her, Jared had been more reserved and private with his affections.

“So tell me, Pretty Lady, what kind of dress are you looking for?”

“I like silks and satins. Something a little sparkly, with sequins, rhinestones or pearls. The kind of thing you would wear to an important event.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “So we want a shop that sells eveningwear, then. I’m assuming this is your first visit to the Metrocentre?”

“Yes.”

“Then put yourself in my capable hands.”

Donna grinned. “I thought I had done that already.”

Sam smiled, shook his head and wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her close to his side. They stopped in front of Dreams and Wishes. The gown in the display window immediately caught Donna’s eye. “This looks like my kind of dress shop,” she commented.

“We can get your dresses in Dreams and Wishes. When we’re done there, Debenhams...” he pointed, “...should have everything else you need – apart from the lacy undies,” he grinned wryly. “Do you want shoes, as well?”

Donna gave that some thought. Jared had bought her some beautiful clothes, but she wanted to put that behind her. “I wouldn’t mind buying a few new pairs of shoes,” she finally responded.

While Sam took some of their purchases back to the car, Donna browsed through a cosmetic and perfume shop. Toward the entrance of the shop, was an intelligent looking woman sitting behind a samples table. It was the name ‘Euphoria’ in elegantly scribed gold letters that caught Donna’s attention. She picked up one of the tear-shaped lead crystal vials of shimmering pale blue liquid, no bigger around than a pencil, and about three

centimetres tall. Her eyes widened. *Jared's magic potion shimmered like this. Was it a trick?*

"Would you like to try some?" the woman pleasantly asked, interrupting Donna's thoughts.

Donna softly smiled. "I have a weakness for anything crystal. Does the full-size bottle come in lead crystal, as well?"

"This is the full-size bottle," the woman responded. "The sample only contains enough Euphoria for one application. The actual product will contain more."

"So, it's not available for sale yet?"

"Oh – no Madam. This product is so exclusive, the store owner is testing it to see if there's enough demand."

"There's no price. How much is it?"

"Euphoria comes in three sizes. One application for £19.99, five applications for £75.99, and seven applications for £105.99."

Donna's mouth gaped. "Is it manufactured abroad?"

"Yes. The actual product comes from the US."

"Then that would mean seven applications of this would cost – what - about \$170.00 USD?"

"Yes, Madam."

Donna raised an incredulous eyebrow. "What's so special about it?"

"Well, for one thing Euphoria can be used on either sex. The perfume is intelligent. It somehow works with a person's chemistry. It knows whether the wearer is male or female and enhances those qualities. It's supposed to make you ooze sex appeal and desire."

"She already does that," Sam said, slipping an arm around Donna's waist.

Donna rested her arm over Sam's, tucked her chin and softly grinned. "I guess we're wasting the lady's time, then," she said, studying his eyes. "I'm interested in the science behind this, though," she continued, turning her attention back to the woman. "I'm going to buy a sample, so I can analyse it."

“That sounds like a good idea,” Richard said, handing over his black Triplet International credit card.

“Richard!” Donna started. “What are you doing here?”

Sam lifted an eyebrow. “What I want to know is how you knew we would be *here*.”

“Strictly coincidence,” Richard innocently replied, holding up an HMV shopping bag. “I ordered Raging Storm’s new limited edition music DVD. They notified me by email. What are you guys up to?” he asked as he put his credit card back in his wallet.

“Donna wanted to buy some new clothes. I must say, she has excellent taste.” Sam hugged her and kissed her temple.

“Yes, she does,” Richard grinned. “You should see her strut her stuff on stage. Too bad the band busted up.”

Donna furrowed her brow. “Raging Storm released the album in the UK?”

“With a little help from Triplet International,” Richard condescendingly smiled at Sam.

“I guess we’d better make a stop by HMV because I’ve got to have one of those.”

“Well, you’d better hurry. They’re flying off the shelf like hot cakes.”

“I thought I recognised you. They’ve been playing that video ever since it arrived last night. You’re her, aren’t you? The woman singing with that sexy American Indian.”

Donna swallowed the lump in her throat. “Yes, I was,” she responded with a plastic smile. “I’m afraid my musical career was short-lived.”

“In that case, when my shift is over I’m going to buy another copy. With just one album going out, your stuff will be worth a fortune in a few years. Would you autograph mine?”

Donna softly smiled. “Sure.”

Richard’s eyes twinkled. “I have a brilliant idea, pet. While you’re at HMV, why don’t you sign a few autographs? It would help boost your sales tremendously.”

“They’re not my sales, Richard. They’re Jared’s. I was just lead female vocalist. Jared was the star.”

“It doesn’t make any difference. I’ll bet we could get you a band together over here.”

Donna’s eyebrows shot up. “Who is going to sing with me? I love you dearly, Richard, but let’s face it. You can’t sing.”

Sam’s eyes filled with mischief. “No, but I can.”

Richard swallowed hard and smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Unfortunately,” he muttered under his breath.

Chapter 12

By the time Donna finished signing autographs and talking with some of her fans, it was lunch, so Richard treated her and Sam to a meal at Romanos.

“I told you signing autographs would boost your sales,” Richard grinned. “Now all we’ve got to do is start auditioning musicians.”

Donna furrowed her brow and smiled incredulously. “You’re serious?”

“Of course I’m serious, pet. I’ve seen you on stage. I know how much you love performing – even if you didn’t get to tour with the band, like you’d planned.”

“How am I going to find time to do that, plus work on our project, which incidentally I want to get started on Monday?”

“If you move in with me, we could work on your music after hours,” Sam suggested.

Richard frowned. “You’re going to move in with Sam?”

Donna snorted. “I didn’t say that. I told you I would stay for the weekend.”

“You’re spending the weekend with Sam? Donna is that a good idea? Have you forgotten what happened to you at the cemetery in Louisiana?”

Donna frowned. “No, Richard, surprisingly, despite my... enhance healing abilities, I haven’t forgotten being shot.”

“I won’t let anything happen to her Richard.”

Richard smirked. “How are you going to protect her, Sam? Your apartment complex is nowhere near as secure as the Hall.”

Donna held up her hands. “Ah – hello – excuse me! Where I spend the weekend, or where I live, for that fact, is *my* decision. Richard, your father helped me out, and I’m grateful for that. He gave me a job with a decent salary and a chance to continue my research, and I’m grateful for that too, but Triplet

International doesn't own me any more than Forrest Enterprises did."

Sam glanced at her out the corner of his eye and grinned. "I was right. She's a feisty one."

Donna frowned. "I am *not* feisty, Sam. I'm just tired of people telling me what to do. Richard, I know you don't want to hear this, but I *enjoy* being with Sam. He makes me laugh, and I haven't done that in a long time."

One corner of Sam's mouth turned up in a sexy grin. "That's not all I made you do," he whispered as he kissed her wrist.

Donna smiled slightly and turned her attention back to Richard, who was getting irritated. "Donna, your safety is paramount. You're a huge asset for Triplet International. If one of our competitors tries to get at you, you will not be safe at Sam's apartment. John and Danny Greene, two of our top security have been sitting outside Sam's apartment all night, making sure nothing happened."

Donna tightened her jaw and narrowed her eyes. "You've had someone *watching* us? The whole time?"

"It's a typical Triplet tactic, sweetheart," Sam mocked.

Donna turned on Sam. "Did you know about this too?"

"No! I didn't, but it wouldn't have mattered to me anyway. I don't have anything to hide. We didn't do anything wrong."

"You might not mind, but I don't like prying eyes, Sam. A very close... friend taught me that only leads to trouble. What you did for me at the music store was sweet, Richard, but it was also risky. Forrest doesn't know where I am. If he watches BBC, he will now."

"Why do you think he did it, Donna?" Sam asked. "He's leaving you little choice but to go back to the Hall. It was probably his plan all along."

"That's enough Sam!" Donna snapped. "Bad mouthing Richard will not win extra brownie points for you. I've been down this road already, and I'm the one who lost. I won't go

through that again,” she said cutting her eyes at Richard. “For either one of you, so stop beating your chests.”

The waiter brought their food, and the three ate in silence.

Richard couldn't argue with Donna, and neither could Sam. They *were* clearly fighting for her attention. Richard knew what Donna meant and why she was upset with him and Sam. Richard and Jared had done the same thing, but Sam didn't know about Jared.

Sam knew someone had hurt Donna very deeply, and she'd said it had been her fault, but she hadn't said why. From her reaction to what the salesperson talking about the sexy American Indian, Sam suspected Jared might have been the one Donna had been talking about, but that really didn't bother Sam. Even if Jared was the one who hurt her, the chances of him showing up in the UK were slim, unless, of course, Richard brought Triplet International in as he had with the album promotion.

Again, this really didn't bother Sam either. He was extremely arrogant and confident that he made a lasting impression on Donna. What bothered him was the fact that Donna was clearly upset with him. For once, having a woman upset with him disarmed Sam and made him feel uncomfortable. He didn't understand why it should. Women were often upset with him, especially when they found out he was playing them for his own purposes. He usually brushed it off and went on to the next one, but there was something different about Donna. He didn't like her being upset with him. Finally, he spoke up.

“There's a solution if Donna is willing,” he added quickly, when she turned her cold eyes on him.

“What's that?” she asked.

“John can stay in one of my VIP apartments downstairs for the weekend. The one next to the lift is vacant at the moment. That way, he could keep an eye on things, and Donna and I would still have the privacy we needed. That is,” he said,

reaching for her hand. “If she still wants to spend the weekend with me. It’s her decision.”

Donna intently studied Sam’s eyes. “I’ve had Sir Richard’s men following me around before,” she said. “As long as I know they’re there, it doesn’t bother me. I understand your father’s reasoning,” she added, turning her attention back to Richard. “The question is will he go along with this?”

“Putting all the ‘chest beating’ aside – as you call it - you would be safer at the Hall, and Sam knows that, as well...”

Sam rolled his eyes. “...And you would be able to watch every move we made.”

Donna held up an imperious hand and groaned as she pushed her empty plate aside. “I’ll tell you what. You two sit here and work this out. For the time being, I’m going home. John, it’s Donna. Where are you?”

John’s eyes widened. “Um – I’m – ah...”

“I know you’ve been following me and Sam, so don’t try to deny it. I don’t know whether you’re watching us or not, but I’m sitting at a place called Romanos. Do you know where that is?”

John shared a worried look with Greene. “Yes, Donna, I do. What’s wrong?”

“I’d like to go back to the Hall, and right now, I don’t want to be alone in a car with either one of these testosterone-heightened Alphas. You can come get me here, or I’ll meet you out front.”

“Ah, stay there. I’ll come get you.”

“Thank you John.” Donna ended the call. “Now...” she said, turning to Sam. “...I would appreciate it if you would move my things from your car to John’s.”

Richard glanced at Sam and slightly grinned. “John is in a van, pet. Unless you want to ride in the back...”

“Don’t call me pet. I am *not* your pet, and honestly, I don’t care if I have to ride on somebody’s lap.”

Sam pressed his lips together to suppress a grin. Donna was fuming, and she was extremely sexy when she was upset. It was almost as if you could see the fire dancing in her dark eyes. He'd seen something similar in them last night, but it certainly hadn't been anger. It was raw passion, more than he'd ever dealt with.

John and Greene approached. "Are you ready to go, Donna?"

Donna stood, and slung her purse strap over her shoulder. "Sam, you have my number if you decide to call later. I may or may not accept the call. It just depends on how I feel. Right now, I'm pretty pissed, so I'd wait a while if I were you. Richard, I suppose I'll see you later." She turned to John. "I'm ready now."

John sighed, glanced at Richard and walked away.

"John!" Richard called out.

"Wait for me out front," he said to Greene. "What is it, Ricky?"

Richard stood and handed John the keys to his black Mercedes S-class. "Take my car. It will be more comfortable for Donna than the van. I'll ride home with Danny." He turned to Sam. "You need to move Donna's things to my boot."

"Are Richard and Sam always this competitive?"

"They are when it comes to women," Greene softly chuckled.

"Great!" Donna groaned and leaned her back against the wall as they waited. The doors swung open.

Richard, Sam, and John approached. Donna pushed away from the wall and stepped between John and Greene. Sam and Richard shared a knowing glance and trailed behind them.

John pressed the key control in his hand and the boot of Richard's car popped open. Sam unlocked his boot. Quietly, he and Richard started moving Donna's bags and boxes. Donna turned, narrowing her eyes at John. "I'm not riding with him!"

John led Donna to the passenger side of Richard's car. "You're not. We're taking Ricky's car. He's riding home with Danny."

Richard crawled in the passenger seat of the van. Sam tapped on Donna's side glass. She locked her eyes on his and put the window down. Sam glanced across at John and cautiously leaned in. He studied Donna's eyes for a few seconds, grinned slightly and tenderly kissed her. "I'll call you later," he said and stepped back.

Donna nodded. She licked her lips and put up her window as John backed out and headed for the exit. "Did you get all your shopping done, or do you need to stop somewhere?"

"No, I'm done." She unlocked her cell phone. "Gary, it's Donna. Do you have any plans for today?"

Gary glanced across at Sir Richard, who was finishing the last of his ham sandwich and soup. "What did you have in mind?"

"I felt like going for a horseback ride. I thought maybe you might like to go with me, but if you've got plans, I can go alone."

"You're not going with Sam or Richard?"

"No, Gary. I need some time away from both of them. They are getting on my nerves."

"Is Sam bringing you back now?"

"No, John is, in Richard's car."

"In Richard's car?"

Sir Richard wiped his mouth and studied Gary's eyes, his attention peaked.

"I'll explain when I get there."

"OK, D, I'll get the horses ready. Which horse did you want to ride?"

"The white mare. She was full of fight and reminded me of Ghost. I miss her. Bye Gary."

"OK, D," Gary said and locked his cell phone.

"What's going on Gary?"

"John is bringing Donna home in Richard's car."

“How did she get from Sam’s car to Richard’s, and how did she know to call John?”

“I don’t know, Sir Richard. Donna said she would explain when she got here. I need to saddle up a couple of horses. Donna wants me and her to go riding.”

Sir Richard raised an eyebrow. “Curious,” he mused as he rubbed the stubble on his chin, reminding himself he needed to shave. “Something must have happened between Donna and Sam.”

“Yeah,” Gary said, pushing his chair under the table. “Alice, could you make some peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwiches and a thermos of tea, please? I have a feeling Donna, and I will be out for a while.”

Chapter 13

Gary was circling the paddock when Donna approached the gate. She opened it and mounted her horse. Gary stopped his horse beside hers. "Ready to chase the sunset, partner? I got us some vittles' in my saddlebag."

Donna laughed. "Where are we riding?"

"Along the riverside, unless you'd rather ride somewhere else."

"No, that's fine with me. Richard took me there yesterday. Care for a bit of friendly competition?"

"Sure, but I need to warn you." Gary leaned down and swung the gate open. "I've been riding since I came to the UK."

Donna latched the gate when she went through. They lined up. Donna took a deep breath and swallowed hard. "I was taught how to ride by a *real* cowboy." She grabbed the reins and leaned forward, whispering something in her horse's ear. She patted the horse's neck and straightened in the saddle. She positioned her feet in the stirrups, and prepared to flank her horse.

"Ready?"

Donna nodded.

"One...."

"Three!" Donna shouted and kicked her horse hard. The Appaloosas reared slightly and took off at full gallop.

Gary shook his head and laughed. "That's cheating!" he shouted and chased after her.

"No..." she shouted over her shoulder and laughed. "...it's called winning."

After she'd thoroughly proven her point, Donna slowed down, allowing Gary to catch up with her. They stopped, looking down at the water while their horses drank. Gary

patted his horse and straightened in his saddle. "So, D, are you going to tell me what happened?"

"You want the truth?"

"Yes, I do."

Donna's eyes glossed. "I miss Jared, Gary. Every breath I take is like a stabbing knife. I feel like part of me has been ripped out."

"Then why in the hell did you spend the night with Sam?"

"Because he reminds me of Jared. His eyes are a different colour, and he certainly doesn't have Jared's deep southern drawl, but they do have some things in common. I like Sam, Gary. He makes me laugh. He's taught me how to feel again, at least with my body. I'm not sure my heart will ever feel again, and I'm prepared to live with that." She laughed sarcastically. "I mean, what choice have I got?"

Gary frowned and nodded. "None, I guess. Are you ready to go on? I think the horses have had their fill."

"Yeah, sure," Donna responded, pulling on the reins. "Oh, I almost forgot. Richard bought me a sample of some really interesting perfume while we were at the Metrocentre," she said as they cantered alongside the Tyne.

"What were you and Sam doing at the Metrocentre, anyway?"

"It's kind of a long story. I had actually planned on spending the weekend with him, but I needed some clothes to wear. I had wanted to buy some new clothes anyway."

"What's wrong with the ones you have – just curious – not that it's any of my business. Wait a minute. You were going to spend the weekend with Sam? At his apartment?"

Donna grinned and tucked her head. "Yes, Gary. I had... fun. I was actually enjoying myself."

"OK," he chuckled. "So, first tell me what happened and then tell me about this interesting perfume. What's so interesting about it?"

"The claims the salesperson was making and how expensive it was."

“How expensive was it?”

“For a single application – about a microlitre of Euphoria, which is what it’s called, it cost him twenty pounds,” she smiled. “He didn’t bat an eye. I only wanted it so I could analyse it.”

Gary frowned. “Well, you still haven’t told me what’s so special about it, other than its exorbitant price tag.”

“The way the salesperson was talking, it’s supposed to be something like liquid pheromones. The part that bothered me is that it sparkled like the stuff I told you Jared used in my bathwater. The stuff that changed me.”

Gary sighed. “I’m sure it was just coincidental.”

“She also said it was manufactured in the US. When I passed out, I woke up in Forrest’s bed in his penthouse apartment, Gary. Jared got there before he did it, but Forrest’s doctor was fixing to take a blood sample so he could find out what made me faint.”

Gary’s eyes widened. “You’re not pregnant, are you?”

“No! I started taking birth control pills the day Jared, and I went to Arizona. We didn’t do anything until they took effect. I had Juanita give me a shot not long before Jared and I... not long before he left me. So, unless the shot she gave me was ineffective, there is no way I could be pregnant. My shot will last at least until the end of September.”

Gary breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness for that. I had horrible visions of you having to deal with that on top of everything else that’s been going on.”

“Well, Big Brother, that’s one thing you don’t need to worry about. There is one thing I’ve decided about the project.”

“What’s that?”

“I don’t think it would be a good idea for Sam and Richard to be around each other for any length of time. One of them is eventually going to put the other’s lights out, and I don’t want to be in the middle of that.”

Gary laughed. "You're probably right, but Sam is going to be disappointed. He was looking forward to working on this project. He knows how big it could be if we figure this out."

"Tough!" she snorted. "I'm sick of him, and Richard growling over me like I'm a piece of meat." She urged her horse along the narrow footpath.

They continued the rest of the five mile ride. Donna explained more about what happened to her when she went with Forrest to see her new department. She also explained a little more about what Jared had told her about her enhanced healing abilities. Gary was shocked at how fast the unknown substance had integrated itself into her DNA structure. He also showed some concern, since they knew nothing about the side effects.

"And Jared said you were the first person that mother's milk has affected this way?"

"Yes. Jared said it was supposed to work like a balm and heal on the outside. He was just as surprised as I was that it had affected me internally, as well. Have you been able to isolate the antibodies?"

Gary exhaled. "We've found something odd about the shape of your chromosomes, and if I didn't know better, I would swear you were dying from some rare form of leukaemia. Your leucocyte count is multiplying so fast, you shouldn't have any red blood cells in your body, but yet, you do. I know you don't want Sam on the project, but D, I think we need him, at this stage. At least until we can figure out exactly how this substance has become part of you. Another thing I'm curious about is whether or not it's transmittable. Could you be some kind of carrier?"

Donna grinned slightly. "Then the person we would need to test would be Jared. Since that's impossible, I guess Sam would be our next option. He's the only one who's had intimate contact with me." *No way am I telling him what happened between me and Richard.*

Gary frowned and swallowed hard. "TMI – D – TMI."

Donna chuckled. “Well, it’s true. There’s no use denying it, and I can tell you something else, it was....”

Gary held up his hand, forestalling her. “I don’t need to know any more about what happened between you and Sam. You’re a big girl, and I’m not going to try and tell you what to do. All I will say as far as Sam and Richard are concerned is be on your guard.”

Donna grinned. “Perhaps you should be warning them, then. I’m going on instincts. I’m trying to survive, what to me, is a living hell. As far as real emotion is concerned, I’m numb, Gary. Part of who and what I am, or was, is shut down. It’s the only way I can deal with what’s inside my head.”

Gary swallowed the lump in his throat. “Time will heal, D.”

Donna snorted. “Sure it will, but by then, how much of me will be left? Already so much of me is boxed up and sealed away; time will come when I’ll be little more than a walking zombie!”

Gary chuckled. “Now that would probably put Richard *and* Sam off you!”

“Smart Ass!” Her cell phone rang. She unlocked it and grinned. “Speak of the devil. Whoa, girl,” she said, pulling on the reins to stop her horse. “Hi Sam.”

“Hi, sweetheart. It’s been almost two hours. Have you cooled down enough to talk to me, or should I ring you back in a year or two?”

“I’m still pissed...” Donna softly laughed, “...but I’ll listen. If I feel like responding I will. If I don’t....”

“Where are you?”

“Not far from the Hall. Gary and I have been horseback riding. I needed to cool off and Gary’s been my sounding board.”

“I miss you.”

Donna sighed. “Oddly enough, I miss you too, but I’ve had enough of the heartstrings tug-o-war. If you and Richard don’t stop trying to mark me as your territory, I’m going to neuter you both.” Donna actually found it exciting to have two alpha

males fighting over her. Jared had led her over to the wild side, and she liked it.

Sam drew a short breath through his pursed lips. “Ouch! I think I’ll pass on that experience, but you can neuter Richard if you want to. What are we doing tonight?”

“Who said ‘we’ were doing anything?”

Sam picked up a throw pillow from off his sofa and breathed deeply. The smell of Donna’s perfume still lingered there. “Aw – come on sweetheart. I need the rest of my stripes.”

“Is that all I am to you Sam, a cheap thrill? Have you put a red check mark beside my name in your little black book?”

Donna’s cold words cut like a knife of ice. “No, sweetheart,” he answered truthfully. “You’re much more than that. There is a red mark by your name, but it’s not a check. I was just being cute.”

“Sam, I can imagine you being a lot of things, but cute is not a word that comes to mind.”

Sam thought about her hot sweat slicked skin next to his and groaned. “All kidding aside, I’d like to see you.”

“I was thinking about torturing myself tonight.”

“I can help with that? Should I bring the handcuffs?”

“Only if you want to wear them. I’m not into the kinky stuff, Sam. I’ve already told you that.”

“Sweetheart, with what you did to me last night, we don’t need kinky. What kind of torture did you have in mind?”

“As you know, Triplet Hall has a full-size movie theatre. I was thinking about watching my music video tonight.”

“I was about to watch it on my 60-inch smart screen.”

“Oh well, I guess you’re not interested, then.”

“I didn’t say that. I’d love to see your hot sexy body squirming on a movie-size screen.”

“We won’t be alone. I was thinking of inviting everyone to see it. Gary and Sir Richard haven’t seen it yet. Let me talk to

Sir Richard and see what he thinks. I'll call you back and let you know if it's on."

"And if it's not?"

"We'll think of something else to do. I gotta run." Donna ended the call.

Gary grinned. "So, do I finally get to see you in action?"

Donna softly smiled. "Maybe...."

"Are you going to be able to handle this?"

"I guess we'll find out," Donna sighed, leaned down and opened the paddock gate.

Chapter 14

“Joyce, it’s Richard. Feel like watching a film with me?”

“Sure! Should I order pizza? What film are we watching?”

“Donna’s first music video – well – with Raging Storm, anyway.”

“What do you mean her first... music video? Are you thinking about trying my suggestion?”

“I mentioned something about it, but Donna reminded me of my tin ear. Sam of course, took advantage and volunteered to sing with her, so I don’t know how it’s going to go. I thought we might try a little of the old ‘green-eyed monster’ method.”

Joyce sighed. “You mean you want to use me to make Donna jealous.”

Richard grinned. “I think it could work both ways. Donna wouldn’t be the only one who would be jealous.”

“Yeah, like Sam Kaliea’s going to be jealous because another man is coming on to me.”

“He might not if it was just any man, but if it was me, and we made it look real...?”

“You may have a point, but I mean, really Richard, how far are you willing to go to get Donna?”

“As far as I need to go, apart from murder, that is.”

“You’re really in to her?”

Richard grinned wryly. “I’d like to be.”

“You’re horrible. If Donna knew your true nature, she’d crawl back to Jared on her hands and knees.”

“Careful, Joyce,” Richard chuckled. “You’re starting to sound like you’re getting in to me.”

“Yeah – right – don’t flatter yourself! What time are you picking me up?”

Richard talked a while longer with Joyce as they made their plans and discussed their game play. He tossed the contents of his pockets on the foot of his bed and chose some clothes. His cell phone vibrated against the pound coins and car keys it was laying on top of. Richard read the name, groaned and unlocked it. "Talk fast. I'm getting ready for a date."

"With Donna?"

"No, with Joyce."

"Why are you still toying with your string of harlots when what you want is under your own roof?"

"I've run into a slight... distraction."

"What sort of distraction?"

"Sam..."

"That gigolo needs neutering. He's never been a threat for you before."

"No, and he's not now. I just have to make Donna see Sam's true colours. You know if he has enough rope he always hangs himself."

"So... how are things between you and Donna?"

"Not... good... at the moment. Joyce is going to help me change that."

"Just don't lose sight of our goal."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist. I haven't."

"Reinforcements are lined up. Just make sure your father makes the right choice. She's been handpicked – the best – she's a renowned cosmologist."

"You must mean the astronomer from New Zealand. Wait a minute! How did you know about her? You're not supposed to know about the project! I thought you weren't concerned about it," he mocked.

There was laughter. "And what makes you think that?"

"Right..." Richard scoffed.

"Once this new girl gets here, you won't have to worry about Sam Kaliea."

"I know what you mean. I've seen her application. She's cute," Richard grinned wryly.

“Yeah – well –don’t worry about her. She’s none of your concern. You worry about Donna. Have you tried the drug?”

“No, I haven’t!” Richard snapped.

“Well, you need to. It may not be compatible with her.”

“I told you I would use it as a last resort. I’m counting on my Triplet charm to win Donna over. I didn’t want to drug her.” *It already worked once.*

“Well, you still need to test it, in case you have to use it. There is nothing wrong with a little aphrodisiac encouragement.”

“I am flattered at your confidence in me as a man.”

Laughter again. “I’m more worried about Donna’s control as a woman. She’s already slept with Sam once. Don’t let it happen again. You run the risk of losing out every time this happens. Donna is too honour bound. If she gets pregnant with Sam, we’ll have no choice but to take this to a higher level. You don’t want that. Either way, it doesn’t matter to me.”

“Well – it does to me!” Richard ended the call and tossed his cell phone on the bed. It vibrated and flashed again. Richard sneered, ignored it and went to the bathroom to get ready.

Joyce stepped out of the shower, dried off and walked into her bedroom. She caught a glimpse of herself as she past the full-length mirror hanging on the door of her opened wardrobe. She paused to admire the reflection. A slow, sultry smile spread across her mouth. Releasing her hairclip, she shook her head. Waist-length golden hair cascaded down and caressed her supple cleavage. She brought her hands to her breasts. Closing her eyes, she imagined her hands were Sam’s. That he was standing behind her, his hard body buried deep in her liquid heat, moving his hips, pressing and grinding his groin against her firm bottom with tantalizing slowness, taking her from behind as he explored her curves, driving them both to near madness, the way she remembered it.

Joyce continued her masochistic fantasy; teasing her oversensitive pink peaks as she rubbed her palms over them, creating a delicious aching sensation in her throbbing womb. She imagined how it felt when Sam reached his peak, filling her with jets of scorching heat as he thrust even harder, determined to wring every ounce of gratification from her that she could give him, rewarding her with multiple orgasms as she panted and fought for breath. Her heart pounded with the anticipated release that would never come.

Joyce's self-indulged foreplay was shattered when her vibrating cell phone yanked her back to reality. It was a voicemail. She smiled, half expecting it to be from Richard, but the caller was unknown. Her mouth gaped as she listened to the strange mechanical threat:

'Interesting performance, but you'll get more gratification with the real thing. Cooperation will get what you want. Drive the wedge deep - make tonight convincing. Sam's life and your future depends on you driving him away from her. With Donna, Sam has no future; neither do you if you mention this to anyone. Make no mistake. I have eyes and ears everywhere! By the way, you have an interesting tattoo on the right side of your bottom - a phoenix - I approve. Let's see if you'll rise from Sam's ashes or stand over his grave. I'll be in touch.'

Joyce's eyes glossed. Her heart pounded. Her body shivered. Acid fear burned the back of her throat. She instinctively covered herself, hunkering over as she grabbed at the drapes, tightly yanking them to. Her chest rapidly rose and fell with her heaving breath. Hesitantly, Joyce slightly parted the curtains. She could see into the apartment in the building across from hers. Two sets of step ladders, buckets and rollers lay on a paint splattered drop cloth. The apartment was still being renovated. She glanced below. There was no one on the ground beneath her apartment window, either.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Joyce reached for her panties and bra. It could have been a prank call, or even a wrong number, she told herself. But she and Sam were the only ones who

knew about her tattoo. Joyce's body shook as she considered her apartment might be bugged.

Nervously she glanced around the room, searching for a hidden camera. Who was she kidding? With technology as it was today, the camera could be no bigger than a push pin. If it was here, it could be anywhere. Joyce didn't even know what to look for. She thought about asking Richard, but then that robotic voice resounded through her head.

'Sam's life and your future depends on you driving him away from her. With Donna, Sam has no future; neither do you if you mention this to anyone. Make no mistake. I have eyes and ears everywhere!'

"My God Sam," Joyce gasped. "What have you got me in to this time?" She finished dressing and reached for her black pearl earrings. Her doorbell rang. She glanced at her watch. "He's early," she grinned.

Opening the door, she stared into the eyes of a strange man in a navy uniform. "Are you Miss Joyce Stephens?"

Joyce blinked her wide eyes and nodded. "Yes," she answered her voice sounding small.

"I have a delivery for you. Just slide your finger over this."

It must be from Richard. She smiled as she peeled off the tan tape and opened the small cardboard box. She lifted the black polystyrene lid. Nestled inside was a tear shaped lead crystal vial with a tiny amount of shimmering bluish liquid. She held it to the light, marvelling at its pearlescent properties as she read the printed note on the card in the box under the vial.

'This will help loosen your inhibitions. You know where it goes. Use it sparingly. You have three applications – three chances to get this right. Remember the voicemail. I'll be watching you.'

Joyce pressed her palm to her forehead and sank to the foot of her bed. Nausea rose fast; she covered her mouth and ran for the toilet.

Sam had arrived early so he could spend some time alone with Donna. He knew with Richard there, despite the promises he'd made, one way or the other, Richard would find a way to spy on them. Sir Richard and John were not looking forward to the evening. Not because they didn't want to see Raging Storm's DVD, but because of the guests list.

Tina, one of Richard's many formers, managed to clear her evening and accepted Gary's invitation without question. Richard had asked Joyce to be his date, and of course there was Sam and Donna. John was certain it would be an explosive evening with a possible brawl before the night was over. Sir Richard made certain there were spirited refreshments to help ease some of the tension.

To everyone's surprise, the three couples seemed to be getting along fine. Richard was paying more attention to Joyce than normal. What disturbed Sir Richard was even Gary was a little too friendly toward her from time to time. For some reason, Joyce seemed to be the light of the party. Sam and Donna sat toward the back of the theatre when they watched the video. His behaviour had surprised Sir Richard. Whereas Sam usually came on to any female within breathing distance, his attention seemed to be centred around Donna alone, tonight. After the video was over, they walked out onto the portico.

Donna braced her hand and hoisted herself on the rail. Sam walked between her parted legs and wrapped his arms around her back, grasping the sides of her waist. With her at this height, it put her eye level to Sam. Donna locked her legs around Sam's waist. Framing his face, she pulled his lips to hers and kissed him, opening her mouth and welcoming the invasion of his wandering tongue. He groaned in her mouth. "You know..." he whispered, "...this could be a lot more interesting if we were alone."

Donna grinned and glanced behind her. "Yes it could, except I would probably end up falling off the rail."

“Not with the lock you got on my waist and the strength in those sexy legs, sweetheart. You’d take us both over first. We could always go back to my place. You know how much fun we had there.”

She studied his eyes. “Can you ride horses?”

“Since I was old enough to stay in the saddle. My mother owns a vineyard back in Tasmania. I’ll take you there sometime.”

“I’m not particularly fond of flying, Sam.”

He grinned and nuzzled the side of her neck. “You were certainly flying last night.”

“That’s not the flying I was talking about.”

“I’ll bet I could take your mind off it.”

“I’ll bet you could too,” she said, kissing him again.

Sir Richard approached and cleared his throat. “Ahem!”

“Oops! Sorry, Sir Richard,” Donna said, her cheeks showing some colour. She released Sam, jumped off the rail and stood next to him.

“Alice is making tea. I came out to see if you and Sam wanted some.”

Donna twisted her face. “No offense, Sir Richard, but I don’t see what all the hype is about drinking hot tea. I prefer mine over ice with a slice of lemon.”

“Would you like some coffee, or something else?”

“No,” Sam said, glancing into Donna’s eyes. “I’ve got everything I want right here.”

Donna softly smiled. “Actually, Sam and I were thinking about going for a ride.”

“You mean on the horses?”

“If that’s all right with you.”

“It’s fine with me Donna. This is your home. Feel free to treat it as such. You really enjoy riding, don’t you?”

“Yes, Sir Richard, I do.”

“Maybe we’ll have to think about getting you your own horse, then.”

“I’m kind of partial to the Appaloosa mare. She reminds me of my white mustang, Ghost, back in…” she broke off. “… well, it really doesn’t matter now,” she scoffed and quickly changed the subject. “Do you ride?”

“On occasion. I used to ride a lot more when I was younger. Ricky likes to ride though, and so does Gary.”

“Where are they, by the way?”

“Ricky and Joyce left a few minutes ago. I have no idea where they’ve gone, but I assume he’s taking her home. Not long after that Gary left with Tina. He’ll probably be home around midnight. I don’t expect to see Ricky until the wee hours of the morning.”

“Sir Richard, I understand why you had me followed, and I’m OK with that. I just wish you had told me first. I don’t like being kept in the dark about these things. Gary treats me like I’m a little girl, but I’m stronger than you think. I’ve been through a lot, and I’ve learned to deal with a lot, too.”

Sir Richard softly smiled. “I’ll remember that in the future.”

“Sam, could you do me a favour? I need to talk to Sir Richard, alone. Would you go in the music room and play the piano, or something? If that’s OK with you?” she asked, turning her attention back to Sir Richard.

“Sure. Sam can play the piano here anytime he wants to. I quite enjoy his playing. My late wife used to play. I paid for a private piano teacher for Ricky, but he never got into it. He’s not that musical as you might have noticed.”

Donna laughed. “Oh, yes. I’ve noticed.”

Sir Richard laughed. “Anyone who’s ever heard him sing has, as well.”

Sam frowned. “I thought we were going riding.”

“We still can. This won’t take long. I just have a few things I need to discuss with Sir Richard.”

“OK…” Sam kissed her and walked through the conservatory.

Sir Richard waited until Sam was in the house. “Do you want to talk here, or would you prefer the privacy of my study?”

“I was hoping you might take a walk with me to the duck pond.”

“Of course,” Sir Richard smiled, offering his arm. “It’s been a while since I took a stroll with a beautiful woman on my arm.”

Donna softly chuckled. “Richard definitely gets his charm from you.”

They sat on the bench in front of the duck pond. Despite the hour, the mallards left the water and gathered around their feet.

“Go on – shoo!” Sir Richard grumbled, waving his hands at the quacking nuisance. “I *don’t* have anything for you.”

Donna chuckled. “Richard warned me about coming down here without some stale bread.”

“He’s spoilt them. They think everybody is supposed to bring something for them to eat. Go on – shoo!” he shouted, waving his hands again. “What did you want to talk to me about, petal?”

“I hate to ask, but I don’t have anyone else to turn to. I was going to ask Jared to help me, but, well, that’s kind of out of the question now.”

“You really loved him, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Sir, I did – I still do, but I’m working through it. I’ve learned the hard way. Life doesn’t always turn out the way you’d hoped it would.”

“No, it doesn’t. What did you need my help with?”

Donna sighed deeply and studied his eyes. “You’re probably going to think I’m nuts.”

“I doubt that, Donna,” he softly chuckled. “Just tell me what it is and if I can help, I will.”

“I want you to help me find my Mama.”

Sir Richard’s eyes widened. He swallowed the lump in his throat. “Donna...” he began slowly. “My records state both your parents were killed in an explosion when you were nine.

Wasn't that why you were in the cemetery, in Hornbeck? To say goodbye to your parents and grandparents?" Sir Richard couldn't keep the eagerness out of his voice. "Have you found any indication that your mother may still be alive?"

Donna swallowed the ache in her throat. "Here's the part where you'll think I'm crazy. When I go to the cemetery to visit their graves, I know my grandparents are there. I can sense the finality, even from my father. I know he's there too, but, it's different with Mama. I don't sense her resting spirit there like I do the others."

Sir Richard turned his head and blinked away threatening tears. Donna touched his arm. "I'm sorry. Did I say something to upset you?"

Sir Richard pinched the bridge of his nose, swallowed again and turned to face her. "No. I think a midgie flew in my eye. I'm all right. It's gone now. Are you suggesting that you can communicate with the dead?"

Donna sighed. "Not so much as communicate, but I can sense vibrations. Especially negative ones. They can sometimes physically affect me, make me dizzy or nauseous, and make my skin tingle, or send a chill down my spine. You know what I mean. It's kind of like goose bumps, only more intense."

Sir Richard chuckled. "And you get these negative vibes when you visit your parents and your grandparent's graves?"

"No, that's just it. I get a peaceful feeling from my grandparents and a not so peaceful vibe when I visit my father's."

"What about your mother's? What kind of vibes do you get from there?"

"You see – that's just it. I don't get any vibes when I stand by my mother's grave. I know it sounds stupid, but I need to know for certain if there's anything to these feelings. Like I said, I know it sounds farfetched, but will you help me?"

"Sure, petal. I'll get some of my people to investigate it. I wouldn't let my hopes get too high, though. Like I said, all my

records show both your parents died. Was that all you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Well, the other one is a little embarrassing. It concerns me and Sam."

Sir Richard studied her eyes. "I'm listening..."

Chapter 15

After their talk, Sir Richard walked Donna inside the house. Donna hugged him and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Sir Richard. Gary was right about you. I’m sorry Jared doubted you so much. I think we’ll get along just fine.”

“I think so too, petal.”

“Oh, and thanks for talking to Richard for me.”

Sir Richard chuckled. “Ricky doesn’t always listen to me, but I’ll give it my best shot.”

Donna smiled. “That’s all anyone can do. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to tell Sam.”

“Of course,” Sir Richard said and headed for the lounge. John was sitting in his chair, watching the news. Sir Richard poured two tumblers of scotch. He handed one to John.

“Thank you, Sir. What’s up?”

“Come with me to my study. I just had a disturbing talk with Donna.”

“I’ll give you some more bad news. Jared just called. He tried ringing your cell phone, but you must have it either off or on silent. He’s fuming, Sir.”

“What about?”

“He didn’t say, but he wants you to call him back. It has something to do with Donna and keeping her safe. Apparently she’s been exposed as he put it.”

Sir Richard took a sip of his scotch and groaned. “I don’t need all this right now, John. First thing Monday morning, we’ve got a meeting about the space elevator in London. Danni wants me to come to the Isle of Wight, probably so she can pump me for information before the meeting. I told her I would drop by, provided I had time. Then there’s the meeting with The Order that afternoon in Kent. The speaker called an emergency session. I think I know what it’s about, but I won’t know for sure until I get there. I wish Mum would take a more

active part. She doesn't live up to her title when it comes to The Order."

"Sir... no offense, but when it comes to Triplet International, I don't think your Mum is quite as benign as you think. That old lady gives me the creeps. I swear, she has eyes in the back of her head and that cane she leans on is some kind of broomstick."

Sir Richard laughed. "Thank you John. I needed that."

John frowned. "It wasn't meant to be funny, Sir," he said solemnly.

Sir Richard chuckled. "Whether it was or not, it made me laugh. Now, guess I better call Jared back and get this over with."

Donna entered the music room. Sam was still playing the piano. She wasn't prepared for the vice grip of feeling that stole her breath as she recognised the song. A lump rose in her throat. Her heart felt as if it was going to stop beating. Donna stood there listening, wanting to die, unable to move, unable to speak. Hearing the familiar melody reminded Donna of how wrong she'd been when she told Sir Richard she was working through her problems. She wasn't dealing with losing Jared. She was blocking the pain out, or at least trying to, but right now the paper threads holding her broken heart together split and the wound ached so that she couldn't breathe. She pushed her pain down deep, blinked to clear her vision and put on her best fake smile. She cleared her throat. "So, I see you like 'Lifehouse', too," she said, sitting beside him.

"I told you, sweetheart. I like all kinds of music." Sam finished the song and turned to face her. Cupping her chin in his palm, he tenderly kissed her. "Did you get finished talking with Sir Richard?"

"Yes, and I have some news for you, but I don't think I'll tell you, yet. Let's go for that ride now," she said, taking his hand and standing.

Sam saddled up the Appaloosa mare and helped Donna into the saddle. "Slide forward a bit, but not too far," he said as he mounted up behind her.

"I know how to do this," she said, deliberately pressing her firm bottom against the bulge in his jeans. She wiggled a little to get a better position.

Sam's breath caught. "I'll say you know how," he groaned and wrapped an arm around her waist. He dipped his head slightly and kissed up the side of Donna's neck. "I very much like this position," he whispered close to her ear.

Donna twisted her head slightly and parted her lips, eager for his kiss, needing the distraction, hungry to erase the remnants of Jared's face from her consciousness, and the effect Sam's playing had on her. He didn't disappoint her. He kissed her slowly and thoroughly, awakening the longing in her body, replacing the ache with want and desire, the only way Donna knew how to feel, now. A tinge of guilt went through her. She was using Sam's ability to arouse her to dull out the pain. As long as she didn't concentrate, as long as she kept her eyes closed, she could pretend. It may be wrong and selfish of her, but she didn't care. Maybe someday she would be able to see Sam for who he was, but for now, this was the best she could give him.

They rode for a while longer. "Stop here," Donna said as they neared the spot she and Richard had taken off their shoes and went for a paddle in the edge of the Tyne.

Sam dismounted and reached up, grabbing Donna by the waist and setting her on the ground in front of him. He kissed her and grinned. "Are we going to freeze our asses off again, or have you learned your lesson about the temperature of water in the UK?"

Donna smiled as she stared into his aqua eyes. "I'm a fast learner – about a lot of things," she said, pulling his face to hers and kissing him again, stealing his breath.

"I'm still trying to figure out what's going on here."

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure who’s the teacher or who’s the student, but Oh am I enjoying the lessons. You said you had some news for me.”

“What do you want first, the good or the bad?” She teased his lips with the tip of her tongue and kissed him thoroughly.

Sam couldn’t understand why, but he wanted Donna. More than he’d ever wanted any woman. She was like a drug, and he was already addicted. The more he got, the more he wanted, and the feeling grew stronger every time they were together. Her smell was like an aphrodisiac. He couldn’t get enough of it. “I’m optimistic – give me the good first.”

“Despite your conceited and arrogant ways, I’ve decided I like having you around.”

Sam grinned. “OK – I can live with that. Now hit me with the bad news.”

Donna’s smile faded. She’d enjoyed being so close to the sea. “I can’t live with you, at your penthouse apartment on the beach, at Whitley Bay.”

“So that’s it? The head lion roars and you cower in the corner like a lamb?”

Donna frowned and turned away. “I can see this isn’t going to work out. You can’t speak unless you’re badmouthing someone close to me. First you take a stab at Richard, and now his dad. Who’s next – Gary?”

Sam grabbed her wrist and whipped her around. “Donna, the Triplets are used to getting what they want. Richard wants you, can’t you see that?”

“Yes, I can see that, but I don’t want Richard. At least I didn’t. The more you talk about him, the more interesting he’s becoming. I warned you about badmouthing Richard. He has qualities you lack.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up. He frowned, clenching his teeth. Donna’s words stung. “Donna, he’ll do *whatever* it takes to keep us apart. As far as wealth is concerned, he can give you more than I ever could, but he can’t give you what you want. I

can! We're good together. If Richard could give you what you need, you wouldn't be with me now."

"If you hadn't been such an arrogant asshole, I might have told you the solution Sir Richard offered me."

"OK. I'm sorry. It's just that rich brats like..."

Donna pressed her fingers to his lips. "Shut up or I'm going back now, and we'll go our separate ways. I don't need this Sam. I told you what I'm dealing with. I let my guard down. I let you in. I told you how empty I am inside." She paused and swallowed to cool her burning throat. "If only for a little while, you're able to fill that empty space, and I need that Sam, more than you know, but I've had about all the mudslinging I can stand."

Sam snorted. "Well, I've had my slap in the face for tonight."

Donna grinned and shook her head. "Sometimes, you and Richard remind me of politicians. You're both so puffed up with male ego that it's ridiculous. I'm just wasting my breath. You've already formed your opinion. I wouldn't expect you to accept Sir Richard's offer, now. It would mean giving up too much of your male pride."

Sam lifted her chin and lowered his head, so their eyes met. "Tell me what he said, sweetheart. You'd be surprised what I'm willing to do for you."

"I'm not making any commitments, Sam. All I can promise you is now."

Sam's mouth spread in his cocky grin. "Now is a good start."

"I wanted to be honest with you, so you didn't get the wrong idea about this arrangement. Honesty is very important to me. In fact, if we're honest with each other, I can deal with just about anything, but I won't deal with lies."

"Donna, I don't have a lot of experience in what you would know as a relationship," he softly chuckled. "I've seldom kept one woman around long enough to form *any* kind of

relationship. In fact, you're the first I've considered, but I'll give it my best shot."

"Who you've had before doesn't concern me. It's what happens from here. If I should find a way past the pain, then maybe I could offer you more, but for now, this is it. Sir Richard said you could stay with me tonight, in my room, and if you're willing to rethink your disgust of the Triplets as you put it, you can stay with me in his guest house. That's the monster you hate so much."

"Sir Richard has offered his guest house? What's the catch?"

"I decide when you leave. If I don't want you there anymore, one way or the other, you will go. I also want it understood we are not a sure thing. If I want to go out with other men, you'll have to accept that. As long as you behave yourself, that's not going to happen. I like you Sam. You make me laugh, and yes, you make me feel. If you can't accept this, then I'm sorry. Like I told you at your apartment, I don't know what my future holds, and I can't even promise you'll be in it, but for now, I want you with me. Since you'll be helping me with my research, this arrangement makes sense, at least it does to me, and it does to Sir Richard."

"What about Gary and Richard?"

"I'm not worried about how Richard feels. Gary – well – he's always going to be the big brother. That's something you'll just have to get used to, and he'll always tell you straight. Gary doesn't fancy lacy things. He's already warned me about some of your wanton ways, but he hasn't told me not to see you. Is this enough for you, or would you rather not get involved with somebody as confused as I am?"

Sam smiled. "Sweetheart, the only thing I'm concerned with right now, is which side of the bed you want to sleep on."

Donna softly smiled and embraced him, resting her head on his shoulder. "I'm not bothered, as long as I can keep this for my pillow. I need that closeness. I have nightmares Sam – bad

ones sometimes. I have some other unusual qualities, but you'll figure that out soon enough."

"What kind of unusual qualities, sweetheart?"

"I'm a psychic."

"Can you read minds?" he asked incredulously.

"Not everybody's and not all the time. Why, you don't want me to read your mind?"

"I'm not keen on the idea."

"I'll try not to, then. So... are we going to give this living together thing a chance? You can opt out anytime. I'd like you to be with me, but I'm not going to beg you. I haven't seen Sir Richard's guest house, but I'm sure your penthouse is more luxurious."

"I've never shared my domain with anyone, but the idea of playing house with you sounds like fun. I don't know how Richard and I will get along, but we'll see how it goes."

"Good," she smiled, rose on her tiptoes and kissed him. "Sir Richard said we weren't limited to the guest house. That's just our little getaway so we can be totally alone, when we want to. We're welcome to use the house as if it were our own."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "And Richard is OK with all this?"

"I don't know. He hasn't come back. Maybe there's a little more between him and Joyce than they're letting on?"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

Sam and Donna entered the lounge holding hands. "Sir Richard, he's decided he wants to move into the guest house with me."

Sir Richard smiled. "You've decided that's what you want?"

"Yes, Sir. I have."

"Sam, you understand the terms of these living arrangements. If Donna decides she doesn't want you there anymore, you'll have to move back to your penthouse."

Sam wrapped an arm around Donna's waist. "Yes, Sir Richard. I understand the conditions, and thank you for letting me stay."

“So, are you and Sam staying in your room tonight, or would you like a security card to the guest house?”

“If it’s all right with you, I think we’d like to see the guest house first. Then we’ll decide.”

“It’s fine with me. John could you get them a couple of security cards. Oh, and Sam will need one for the house and the gates. Also, we need to upgrade his security classification for the private lift and genetics lab. Sam, you realise there will be some things about the project you won’t be able to share, not even with Joyce.”

“There are a lot of things I don’t tell her now,” he chuckled. “But, yes, Sir, I understand.”

John came back and gave Sam and Donna security cards for the house, guest house, and gates. “I’ll need to take another look at your car, Sam,” John said. “We may need to do some more upgrades. All of our vehicles have trackers and other advanced systems. Yours will have to be the same. Once you have the upgrade, the control on the garage guest house will detect the sensor on your tracker and open automatically. For now, enter the code on the back of your security card using your cell phone.”

“We don’t take risks with our senior team,” Sir Richard added. “Unfortunately, you’ll still have to oversee the infirmary.”

“When I’m not busy, I’ll help him with that,” Donna volunteered. “I’ve not done so well with my doctor patient relationships in the past. I’d like a chance to prove myself.”

“You don’t need to prove anything, petal. I know you’re a brilliant doctor.”

“Yes, but, I have some issues I need to deal with, for myself.”

“Well, I’m not the person you need to talk to about that. Sam is the head doctor and administrator over the infirmary. That will be up to you and him to decide.”

Sam grinned. “I think we can work something out.” Sam and Donna turned to leave.

“Oh, one other thing. I really enjoyed your performance Donna. It’s a shame things couldn’t have been different.”

Donna shared a knowing look with Sir Richard and swallowed the lump in her throat. “Thank you, Sir Richard. I’m... surviving,” she said and followed Sam outside.

Chapter 16

A guilty feeling washed over Donna as they approached the garage door to Sir Richard's guest house. Jared was on the other side of the Atlantic. From what he'd told her, his ability to communicate with her telepathically was limited. On occasion, when she'd been in Shreveport, Jared had been able to reach her from as far away as Arizona; a little over a thousand miles. Corbridge, UK was over five thousand miles from Wickenburg or Shreveport. Why did she still sense his presence, as if he were there with her? Jared shouldn't be able to touch her from that distance. Had he lied to her?

Sam pulled his red BMW inside the two-car garage. The motion sensed LED lights started getting brighter. Sam shut off the engine. Donna glanced over her shoulder and watched the garage door slowly drop. Sam touched her arm, and she jumped. He frowned. "Sweetheart, are you OK? You seem anxious."

"I'm fine," she lied. "I'm still dealing with my claustrophobia." Donna swallowed hard and got out of the car. She could almost feel the heat from Jared's accusing crimson eyes. He'd left her. He didn't want her. Had he been so upset with her that he would make her miserable for the rest of her days? If she couldn't shake this feeling, how was she ever going to have *any* kind of life with anyone?

Sam met her at the back of the car and took her hand. He pulled her close, kissed her temple and held her. "I'll help you get over your phobias," he whispered, burying his face in her hair.

Donna sighed deeply and clung to Sam, breathing his masculine scent into her lungs. That's when it hit her. Sam wore the same cologne as Jared. Maybe that was why Donna felt guilty. She loved that smell. The differences in their chemistry altered it slightly, but it was comforting to her,

nonetheless. If she couldn't have Jared, maybe she could have the next best thing. She breathed deeply again and shoved her foreboding aside, allowing the physical attraction between them to take over. She pulled back, lifted her face and kissed him fervently, melding their lips together.

Sam's body responded instantly to hers. He slid his hands down to the small of her back, palming her bottom and pressing her into his throbbing groin. Donna's blood thrummed in her ears. A familiar need started building deep inside. She gave in to those feelings; her automatic barrier to temporarily numb the ache that wouldn't go away. She threaded her fingers through his black hair, holding him in place while her probing tongue tangled with his.

Donna locked her eyes with his. "I think we should get inside, don't you?"

Sam's breath caught. She was as eager as he was. He swept Donna into his arms. He motioned to his shirt pocket. "Grab the security card before I strip you and take you here," he huffed.

Donna used the card and unlocked the door, flipping the light switch on as Sam closed the door. The outside lock automatically set, sealing them away from the world. Sam grinned and set her on her feet. "At least we made it across the threshold."

"Barely," she gasped, unbuckled his belt and reached for the button on his jeans.

Sam peeled her T-shirt off and slung it over his shoulder. Donna unfastened her bra and threw it on the floor. She kissed him as she hastily unbuttoned his shirt. Sam made light of her jeans and underwear and then stripped out of his. He pulled her into his arms, pressing their naked bodies tightly together, kissing her again. Donna breathed her hot breath into his mouth, and Sam's body shuddered. "Counter... couch... bed... or floor?" he murmured as he kissed his way down the side of her neck to her breast, teasing her nipple between his teeth.

Donna cradled his head and drew in a quick breath. She closed her eyes, threw her head back and wrapped a leg around his, rubbing herself against his hard arousal. “I don’t care – take your pick...” she panted, “...but *please*... decide now!”

Sam lowered her to the softly carpeted floor. Donna’s body hungrily rose to meet his. She moaned into his mouth as he thrust into her, lustfully grinding her pelvis against his as they rapidly pushed toward their peaks. Sam groaned as Donna’s nails bit into his skin, the pleasure pain feeding the fire inside him, urging him on, lifting her body and meeting his thrust for thrust. Sweat trickled down her temples and the back of her neck as she felt her release coming. Donna forced her breath out, allowing the wave to take her.

Gary parked his car and went inside. From the entrance hall, he could see a dim light. He followed it to Sir Richard’s office. He tapped on the door a couple of times. “Sir Richard, are you in there?”

“Come in Gary,” a familiar voice replied.

Sir Richard was sitting at his desk working on his laptop. He glanced up as Gary entered the room and waved him to a chair. “Has Donna gone to bed?”

Sir Richard softly smiled. “I wouldn’t know. They haven’t come back from the guest house.”

Gary slowly sank into the cold leather chair. “They?” he prompted.

“Sam is moving into the guest house with Donna. They went to see it a couple of hours ago, and I haven’t heard from them since.”

“Was this *your* idea?”

“Partly. Donna was going to move into Sam’s penthouse. That wouldn’t have been safe. I suggested Sam move into her room with her, but Donna wasn’t keen on that idea. Apparently Ricky and Sam have been competing for Donna’s attention.”

“Yeah, I know. She told me about it when we went riding earlier this afternoon. I’m not surprised.”

Sir Richard sighed. “Neither am I. You can’t blame them. Donna is a beautiful and desirous woman. I think Ricky’s been keen on her since he was a teenager, long before we left Shreveport.”

“Then why in the hell did he wait until now to do something about it?”

“Why does anybody wait, Gary? I don’t know. Anyway, I couldn’t let Donna move in with Sam. Sooner or later Forrest will make another move. I’m a bit surprised he hasn’t already. I’m not particularly fond of Sam living here, either, but at least this way, I can keep an eye on them. John is upgrading Sam’s classification at the Centre and bringing his car up to scratch.”

Gary sighed. “I can’t believe she’s getting over Jared this easily – I mean – don’t get me wrong – I’m glad she’s moving on. I’m just not sure Sam is a long-term solution for Donna.”

“He accepted Donna’s conditions.”

“What conditions?”

“Donna is not committing to Sam. If she decides she doesn’t want this arrangement any longer, trust me, Sam will be moving out. As to her being over Jared, I don’t think she is, and neither does John. I think Donna is using Sam as a distraction. I’d lay odds if Jared showed up; Sam wouldn’t know which way Donna went.”

Gary chuckled. “It’s about time somebody gave Sam a little of his own medicine. I just hope Donna doesn’t slip too deeply and end up hurt again.”

“It’s not our choice, Gary,” Sir Richard responded.

Gary motioned to Sir Richard’s laptop. “What are you working on?”

“Presentation for a meeting about our project in Ecuador. I have to meet with the Chancellor and the Foreign Secretary first thing Monday. Dependent on how long that takes, I may have to go to the Isle of Wight, and then there’s the meeting in Kent that afternoon with The Order.” Sir Richard groaned. “The speaker called an emergency meeting. I’ve got a full weekend planned. We’re leaving first thing in the morning.”

“Is this meeting with The Order about Donna and the project?”

“Probably – the speaker didn’t give me a reason. If it’s concerning Donna, I have a feeling I’m wasting my time. I’m sure the majority of the members will lean toward Forrest’s side. I hope he won’t attend. I don’t feel like another shouting match. I can usually keep the peace, but our last meeting ended in angry words. The Russian and Chinese representatives don’t think we should consider Donna’s feelings on the matter. On the scope of things, they don’t believe she should have a say.”

Gary scoffed. “Why should they? She’s just a woman and under contract with Triplet International.”

“And...” Sir Richard added, “...since Triplet International is inevitably tied by the code of The Order, they believe I should hold her to her contract – force her – as Forrest did. I don’t see it that way, and I’ll fight them if I have to.”

“Sir Richard, you can’t take on The Order alone.”

Sir Richard exhaled and closed his laptop. “I’m hoping I won’t be alone,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “I’m hoping I still have allies who will stand with me, but even if they don’t...” he broke off. “We have another slight problem, as far as Donna is concerned.”

Gary slid to the edge of his seat. “What?” he asked, attention peaked.

“She wants me to use my resources and help her find your Aunt Marie.”

Gary’s eyes widened; his mouth gaped. “Aunt Marie is dead, Sir Richard. Donna knows that.”

“I know Gary, and I don’t have much hope of success, but I’m going to help her, nonetheless. Donna needs closure, as far as her mother is concerned.”

Gary furrowed his brow. “Sir Richard, I’m curious. Donna didn’t mention anything about Uncle Ken?”

Sir Richard pressed his lips into a thin line. “The way Donna explained it to me; she senses her father is dead. She senses her grandparents are dead, as well, but she doesn’t sense

her mother is dead. She says she doesn't feel her mother's resting spirit when she visits her grave. She does sense the others. I don't fully understand what she's talking about, but then I'm not psychic."

"How did you know Donna was psychic?"

"She told me."

"Do you believe her?"

"Oddly enough, yes, I do. Her mother was psychic. Her grandmother was psychic. Who am I to say? If being psychic is genetic, then I would say Donna stands a good chance of carrying that gene." Sir Richard scratched his chin, mulling that over. "Perhaps we should consider looking deeper into that possibility. Maybe there's a scientific explanation for it." Sir Richard stood and put his laptop in its case. "At any rate, you won't have to deal with Ricky and Sam coming to blows, until Monday afternoon."

Gary stood. "When do you plan to tell Richard about Sam and Donna moving into the guest house?"

"I'll tell him sometimes tomorrow. I figured it would be better. With a few miles between him and them, maybe by the time we get back, he'll be cooled off. I don't expect him to take this well. That's one of the reasons I'm taking him with me – assuming he comes home in time to get enough sleep to co-pilot the helicopter. Besides, I figured now that Donna is here, and Sam will be helping with the project, you don't really need Ricky in your hair. Do you?"

"No Sir..." Gary answered slowly, "...but Richard is an important part of my genetics team. We've been working on this project together."

Sir Richard chuckled. "Don't worry. He'll be back. He hates administrative work. I just thought it would give you a break. Despite what Ricky says, I don't think he'll give Donna up without a fight."

"As far as Donna is concerned, I don't think it would matter. She seems pretty taken with Sam."

“Since both Ricky and John will be with me, I want you to keep an eye on things, Gary. I’ve already talked to Donna about this. She was a little reluctant, but she understands more about what’s going on, now. Her curiosity is as active as it ever was. Jason and Jaime have been assigned as their bodyguards, so wherever Sam and Donna go, they go. After Monday, it won’t matter, as far as Sam’s car is concerned, but they’ll need to ride to the Centre with you. Over the weekend, if they just want to go for a drive, they can use one of our cars.”

“I doubt Richard will appreciate Sam using his car, especially to take Donna out.”

“Yeah, well, there’s more at stake here than his and Sam’s hormones. Ricky will get over it. If they’re uncomfortable using his, then they are welcome to mine. Try to keep them here at the Hall if you can, but give them some space. That’s another reason I offered the guest house.”

“I’ll do what I can, Sir Richard.” Gary turned to leave. “I’m going to shower and head up to bed.”

“One other thing before you go!”

Gary stopped, hand resting on the door handle, waiting.

“You and Donna did discuss the death gene project while you were out riding didn’t you?”

Gary sighed, swallowed hard and turned. “Ah – No Sir – we didn’t.”

Sir Richard raised an eyebrow and laced his fingers in front of him. “Why not?”

“The subject didn’t come up.”

“Gary... you have to tell her.”

“I know,” he groaned. “I’m just not looking forward to it. I’ll... talk to her on Monday. Maybe Sam can help calm her down.”

As soon as Gary closed the door, Sir Richard took out the folder on Donna’s mother and started going through the information again. He lovingly gazed at her photograph. The surface had a few scratches, but the smile was still the same.

His eyes glossed. “If only things had worked out differently,” he mused.

When Donna woke, she was still wrapped tightly in Sam’s arms, on the floor of the guest house lounge. She lifted her head from off his shoulder and grinned. Their clothes were scattered everywhere. Sighing deeply, she propped on her elbow and studied Sam’s face. Despite his shorter hair, Donna found him incredibly handsome. She trailed her eyes down Sam’s body. Like Jared, Sam was toned and fit and had obviously taken good care of his body. He certainly knew how to use it. That part of their relationship was perfect, and right now, that’s what Donna needed – pleasure to block out the pain. “I wish I could forget,” she whispered and planted a tender kiss on Sam’s lips. “It would be so easy to fall for you.”

Sam roused and pulled her on top of him, kissing her. He felt her arousal pressed against his growing erection. One slight move and he would be inside her again. He grinned. “So, did I get any more stripes?”

Donna softly chuckled. “Probably.”

Sam lifted his hips, brushing against her moist entrance. “Want to try again?”

Donna closed her eyes and moaned. “Tempting...” she gasped, “very... tempting, but I think we should take a look around the place.”

“I don’t need to look around. As long as I’m with you, I wouldn’t care if we lived in a cardboard box, but I suppose you’re right. We should at least see how the shower works and take a look at the bedroom.”

“*Bedrooms*,” Donna corrected and grinned. “It has three.”

“In that case, we may have to try out each one to see which is more suitable for our purposes.”

“And you called *me* insatiable,” Donna laughed. Her body deliciously vibrated against Sam’s erection.

“I *love* your laugh,” he groaned. “Especially when you’re sitting where you are... right now.”

Donna bent down and kissed him, brushing the tips of her aroused nipples against the matt of hair on Sam's chest. "Yes, and if we don't get off this floor now, we're not going to *make* it to the shower," she said, standing. "I have work clothes for Monday, but you don't. We'll probably need to pick up a few groceries for the fridge. I doubt Sir Richard's staff will have our unique taste in food."

Sam grabbed her around the waist in a bear hug and growled. "I can't wait to see you in a set of scrubs," he murmured against the skin of her shoulder as he nibbled it.

"Stop it Sam!" she giggled. "That tickles. We should probably go back to your apartment and get a few things."

"I intend to spend as much time with you as I can over the weekend," he smiled and consulted his watch. "It's back to the grinding stone on Monday."

Donna softly smiled. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Actually, I am too, now that I'll be working beside a hot sheila like you," he growled and nibbled her shoulder again.

"Sam!" she squealed. "Behave." She peeped through a crack in the drapes and unlocked her cell phone. "I can't tell whether there's a light on at the Hall, but I'm going to chance it. Sir Richard is a night owl. Sir Richard, it's Donna."

"Hi petal. I was wondering when I would hear from you. Everything all right with the guest house?"

Donna studied Sam's eyes and blushed. "It's perfect, Sir Richard. Thank you. What I called about. Sam needs to get some clothes from his apartment, and we'd like to pick up some food for the fridge, so we're making a fast trip to Whitley Bay. I wouldn't have disturbed you, but after our talk, I figured I might better tell you first."

"I'm glad you did, petal. Hang on a second," he said and pressed mute. "I need you to take Sam and Donna to Whitley Bay, so they can get some things from his apartment. They also want to pick up some food, so take the Escalade. I don't want Donna going anywhere in Sam's car until after Monday. Even *after* you've done the security upgrade, if they go out, I still

want Jason and Jaime with them. Gary and I have talked. He's going to keep an eye on things while we're gone." John nodded and headed for the garage. Sir Richard took his cell phone off mute. "Petal, are you still there?"

"Yes, Sir Richard."

"John will be there in a couple of minutes. I've told him what we talked about, so you and Sam will have your first self-defence lesson on Monday evening. He's also going to teach you about firearm safety and how to use a Taser."

"Sir Richard, is all of this necessary?"

"Yes, Donna, it is. Someone in Louisiana was trying to kill you. I want you to be able to protect yourself if it happens again. It doesn't hurt to be prepared."

Donna groaned. "OK, fine. As long as it doesn't interfere with my research. I like to work long hours, sometimes, especially if I'm on to something."

Sir Richard chuckled. "So I've been told. See you Monday afternoon."

"You won't be at the Centre on Monday?"

"No, petal. I've got business in London and Kent. Richard and John are going with me, so please; do as I've asked you. I'll expect some good news about our projects when I get back."

Donna chuckled. "I'll see what I can do for you, Sir Richard, and thanks again."

"Goodnight, petal..."

Donna locked her cell phone and started scrambling for her clothes. "What's up sweetheart?"

"Get dressed – fast! We'll shower when we get back. John is on his way to take us to Whitley Bay."

"Shit!" Sam's eyes widened in surprise. He started jumping into his underwear and reaching for his jeans. "Where are my socks?"

Donna frowned, searching the room with her eyes. “Where’s my bra?” She zipped up her jeans and shoved her T-shirt over her head.

“Here. Turn around and I’ll fasten it for you.”

The doorbell rang. “You get that while I do this!” She gave him a peck on the lips and ran for the downstairs toilet.

Sam buttoned the last two buttons on his shirt, raked his fingers through his tousled hair and reached for the door handle. Donna appeared behind him.

“Are you two ready to...” John glanced at Donna, looked down at his feet and started laughing.

“Oops!” Sam grinned, stifling a laugh. “Sweetheart, you’d better check your shirt.”

Donna looked down at her inside-out T-shirt. “Damn!” Her face turned crimson. “I’ll be right back.”

John chuckled. “Having... fun, Sam?”

Sam grinned. “More than I’ve *ever* had. She’s something else!”

Two men in a white van watched as a black Escalade pulled into the car park behind Sam’s building and backed into his reserved space. They watched as Sam and Donna, and a strange man got out, taking the back entrance to the apartment complex.

“That’s Dr. Kaliea and Dr. Rigden, but who’s the man with them?”

The driver frowned. “Probably one of Triplet’s bodyguards, no doubt.” He opened his cell phone and pushed a speed number. “It’s me. They’re at his apartment again, but they didn’t come alone. It looks like Sir Richard sent one of his bodyguards with them.”

“In Sam’s red sports car? That thing only has two seats! It must not be them.”

The man shone a penlight on the snapshots of Sam and Donna he’d taken while they were standing in the queue at Pantrini’s. “No, there’s no doubt. It’s them, but they’re not in

his BMW. They're in a black Escalade, and it looks like they're loading something in the back."

"He probably sent John Sherriff, with them. Damn him! He always has to make things difficult."

"With a bodyguard with them, I can't guarantee the girl's safety. She may get caught in the crossfire. What do you want us to do?"

"Nothing – for now. Leave them alone. We'll have to set something else up at a later date."

Richard pulled in the garage at Triplet Hall and got out of his car. He was pleased no one was up, especially Gary or Sir Richard. He closed the garage door and leaned his back against it for a few seconds, shoving both hands through his hair. He shook his head and blinked a couple of times, then pushed away from the door and headed for the lounge. He poured a shot of scotch and tipped the tumbler to his lips, trying to clear the fuzz from his head. He furrowed his brow in confusion. "What the bloody hell was I thinking?"

Richard finished his drink, poured another one and headed up the stairs. He paused briefly at Donna's bedroom door, took another sip of scotch, shook his head and wandered on down the landing. "This wasn't supposed to happen!" he groaned as he closed his bedroom door. He set his drink on the bedside table, sipping on it while he packed for the trip and then took a quick shower. Sitting on the side of the bed, he finished his scotch and switched off the bedside lamp. He turned over on his side, staring into the darkness. "Did I just... *sleep* with Joyce?"

Chapter 17

As soon as he'd packed his laptop case, Richard unlocked his cell phone, ready to call Joyce. He was about to push her speed number, when he realised it might be too early to call her on a Sunday morning. Richard really didn't want to explain his behaviour. For the most part, he couldn't remember what happened last night. Finally, since they'd been friends all these years, he felt she deserved some kind of explanation and decided to send her a text. She could respond if and when she felt like it. No sooner had he hit send than his cell phone rang.

"Good morning, honey. I was afraid you might still be in bed. Did my text wake you?"

"Yes, it did, but no worries. I needed to get up early. I don't suppose you'd like to go house hunting with me?"

"House hunting?" he echoed. "You're moving?"

"I'm thinking about it. I'd like to move closer to the Centre, so I don't have so far to drive."

"I'd love to, honey, but I'll be out of town until Monday afternoon. We could look then if you want to. I know a few places. I even *have* a few places. I wish you'd said something before now."

The words from the threatening text flashed through Joyce's memory. She swallowed hard. "I hadn't thought about it a lot until just lately. I'm in no rush, and I haven't made up my mind yet. I'm just... thinking about it."

"Then I'll put that down on my to-do list, for when I get back. Listen, honey, about last night..."

"Richard, as far as I'm concerned, we were just two old souls, tired of being lonely. I was feeling sorry for myself because of Sam, and you were feeling sorry for yourself because of Donna. It doesn't have to get awkward between us.

You're one of my best friends, and as far as I'm concerned that hasn't changed – OK?"

"I just didn't want you to feel cheap because we slept together."

"I don't feel cheap, Richard, believe me. And I don't want you to feel obligated. Let's just drop it. It happened, but it didn't."

"Sam really shouldn't take you for granted. I gotta go honey. I'll see you sometime Monday evening."

Richard grabbed his luggage and laptop case and headed downstairs. "Morning Ricky," Sir Richard said.

"Put your suitcase by the door in the conservatory, next to ours," John said. "I'll move them to the chopper, as soon as I've finished my coffee."

"What would you like for breakfast?"

"Scrambled eggs, toast and marmalade, please, Alice," Richard responded, pouring a cup of coffee and reaching for the milk jug. "I don't suppose you know whether or not Donna is up?"

John and Sir Richard shared a worried look. "I had hoped to talk to you about this tomorrow." Sir Richard said.

Richard gingerly sipped his coffee. "Talk to me about what?"

"Sam and Donna are living in the guest house."

Richard broke out in a paroxysm of coughing. "Whose bright idea was this," he finally said, when he could speak.

"Mine and Donna's, but mainly mine. I wasn't going to let her move into Sam's apartment, Ricky."

"So, instead, you let Sam move in to our guest house? Dad, whose side are you on?"

"I'm on Donna's side, Ricky, and it's *my* guest house. I can let whomever I choose live there. I do not need your permission. If that little show you and Joyce put on was meant to make Sam and Donna jealous, well, I'm sorry... it backfired. Sam was not jealous that you were hanging all over Joyce, and

Donna was not bothered that Joyce was hanging all over you. I think you both acted a little childish.”

“What do you expect me to do, Dad? Throw my hands up and walk away? You know how I feel about her. Sam is going to do nothing but hurt her in the end. She hurt enough when Jared left.”

Sir Richard narrowed his eyes. “Jared did not *leave* Donna, Ricky. You know that! Jared was forced to make a difficult decision, and in all truthfulness, I think he was extremely noble in the end. Now that she’s here with us, I think you’re forgetting that little factor. If you cared about Donna in the same way as Jared did, you would do the same. Donna is with Sam because that is where she chooses to be. The sooner you accept that, the sooner we can all get back to a normal life. Sam may break Donna’s heart, I’m not saying he won’t, but I think Donna knows exactly what she’s doing with both of you. Move on Ricky. Sometimes it’s the only choice we have.”

Alice set Richard’s plate on the table in front of him. “Would you like anything else?”

Richard clenched his teeth and picked up his fork. “No, Alice! I’m just bloody fine!” he said with sarcasm. Last night I slept with my best friend. I come home to find my father has let a man I’d love to choke move next door with the woman I love. I couldn’t be happier!

Donna lay on Sam’s shoulder, listening to the steady sound of his relaxed heartbeat. He was an excellent bed partner, both awake and asleep. In his arms, she felt safe and secure, and the dreams had subsided, at least for the time being. Donna took that as a sign that she was where she needed to be, where she *should* be, not necessarily where she wanted to be, but then Donna never expected to be where she wanted to be, again.

She shut her eyes and concentrated on the little girl with long black hair and aqua eyes – eyes like Sam’s. Donna rested her nose at the side of Sam’s neck and breathed deeply. A soft slow smile spread across her mouth. She kissed his cheek and

eased out of bed. She slipped on her short robe, not bothering to dress. She walked to the other side of the bed, kissed her fingers, pressed them to Sam's lips and went downstairs to make breakfast.

Donna carried the tray back upstairs and quietly slid it on the bedside table. The smell of the hot coffee swirled under Sam's nose, bringing him to life. Donna sat on the side of the bed and brushed some loose hairs from his temple.

Breathing in the faint fragrance from her wrist, Sam smiled. He grabbed her wrist and kissed it. "First thing in the morning, you have the sweetest smell, I've ever come across. What brand of perfume do you use?"

"Why do you want to know that?"

"Because I will personally make sure you always have a supply of it around."

Donna softly smiled. "It's called Sand and Sable."

Sam furrowed his brow. "I don't think I've ever heard of that one."

"It's from America. I've worn it since I was a teenager, but if I can't find it over here, I guess I'll have to look for a suitable replacement."

"No, you won't! We'll fly to America or have some shipped over here. I love the way it smells, especially when it's on you. The fragrance suits you."

Donna grinned at him incredulously. "How do you think it suits me?"

Sam pulled her on top of him and wrapped his arms around her waist. "It reminds me of meadows full of wildflowers and trickling waterfalls under a cloudless sky."

Donna lowered her face and kissed him. "I kind of like the way you smell, too. Now sit up so we can have our breakfast."

"I'd rather have you. I love kissing you. I could kiss you forever. You're getting under my skin, sweetheart."

Donna shook her head and set the tray on his lap. “Let’s see if I can get to your belly. According to my grandmother, that’s the way to a man’s heart.”

Sam danced his aqua eyes over hers. “You don’t need food to get to mine.”

Donna sighed and tucked her head. “You’ve got a line for everything, haven’t you Sam?” She ruffled his hair.

“I meant it Donna. You’re touching something deep inside me that I didn’t know was there.”

“Don’t go changing on me. Right now, you’re exactly what I need.”

“He messed you up good, didn’t he, sweetheart?”

“Do you want strawberry jam, or this icky marmalade?”

Sam chuckled. “I’ll take the strawberry jam and you. We’ll let the Brits eat the icky marmalade.” He picked up his fork. “This smells heavenly. What is it?”

“Omelette a la Donna – British style,” she chuckled.

Sam put a bite in his mouth and closed his eyes, savouring the flavours. “Mmm, I see I’m not the only one who has a heavy hand on the garlic cloves. Good thing we’ve got plenty of minty mouthwash.”

Donna sat beside him and started eating her breakfast. “I’m thinking of talking to Sir Richard, and seeing if he’ll let us build a garden next to the guest house, so we can grow some fresh vegetables. I don’t really like the ones that come from the store.”

“Do you know anything about gardening?”

“I’m living with a nature freak. Are you going to tell me you don’t know how to grow vegetables?”

“Oh, no. I know. I just didn’t know if you did. There’s something else I’ve been meaning to ask you. When is your birthday?”

“Why do you want to know that? When is yours?”

“Because I want to know everything about you. Women get a little testy if you miss things like anniversaries and birthdays.

My birthday is on the 31 January, and I'm twenty-eight years old. Now it's your turn."

Donna laughed. "OK, I was born after Thanksgiving, but before the New Year. I'm old enough to sleep by myself, but prefer not to. There, is that good enough?"

Sam narrowed his eyes. "Well, at least I know the month. Come on sweetheart! You're not playing fair."

"OK, but if you tell anybody, from now on, you'll be eating out of a cardboard box, or at the Hall with Richard."

"Oh God – a fate worse than death. I won't tell a soul. I promise."

"It's on December 17, and I'm twenty-seven. I was almost a Christmas baby."

"Wow! That makes me what – ten months older than you. So when we play, I can boss you around."

Donna pressed her lips to a thin line. "That would depend on what we're... playing," she grinned. "But don't press your luck. I've had enough of being ordered around. Getting back to the garden thing. What do you think of the idea?"

"I think it's a wonderful idea. There's just one problem."

She frowned. "You don't like getting your hands dirty."

"No. I don't mind getting my hands dirty. There are limited things you can grow in a garden in the UK. The growing season is shorter here than in the States. Unless you're a farmer, most people grow vegetables in a greenhouse. That way it's easier to regulate the temperature and weather conditions."

Donna rolled her eyes and shook her head. "OK, then let's build a greenhouse."

Sam sighed. "Sweetheart, I can compose a full scale piano concerto, from beginning to end, but I know nothing about carpentry. I'll hire someone to build it for you, but if I had to do it myself, I wouldn't know where to begin. I'm lucky if I can drive a nail without bending it double."

Donna stared down at her half-eaten breakfast. She swallowed the lump in her throat and crawled off the bed. "I'm going to take a shower."

"Wait! What about your breakfast?"

She started choosing some clothes. "I'm not hungry anymore."

"Hang on, let me finish this piece of toast, and I'll come join you."

"Finish your breakfast. I won't be that long. I want to get dressed and start organising my kitchen." She stepped into the bathroom and closed the door.

"What did I say?" Sam frowned and stared at the closed door. He took a bite of his toast and shook his head. "Is she mad at me because I don't know how to build a bloody greenhouse?"

Donna turned on the shower, adjusted the temperature and slipped out of her robe. Standing in front of the shower cabinet – hand on the handle – she glanced to the side at the bathtub. Bad mistake. Memories of hot, steaming water flashed through her mind. For a while, she closed her eyes and let the memory take her. The smell of honeysuckle and jasmine mingled with cranberry filled her senses. His face was crystal clear. She had memorised every smile line at the corners of his sensual mouth. His wolfish smile and set of perfect white teeth. His penetrating dark eyes that quickly changed to glowing crimson, when he gazed into hers.

Donna's breath caught; her heart pounded faster. She remembered the feel of his palms as they caressed her body. The taste of his lips. The velvety texture of his tongue as it tangled with hers. She could almost feel his hard body pressed into hers as he pulled her against his chest. His teeth nipping at her pulse as he kissed his way down the side of her neck, all the while his magical fingers creating pools of desire as her womb clenched and throbbed, aching to feel him inside her.

She drew in a short breath and opened her burning eyes. She couldn't take any more. Her throat choked and ached, but the dam wouldn't break. Taking a few more deep breaths, she did as Nadine had taught her. She boxed the memory, slammed the lid and sealed it tight. Donna wondered if a time would come when she would run out of boxes, or just stop feeling altogether.

She opened the door and stepped inside. Turning her face up, she held it there, drowning under the hot spray, imagining it was a waterfall, washing the hurt away. She cleared her throat and swallowed hard. "I miss you, Jared," she whispered as she turned and reached for the shampoo. "Sam will *never* be you."

Slowly, Sam tried the handle on the bathroom door. He groaned and sighed deeply, leaning his back against the door. It was locked. Glancing at Donna's electronic keyboard and guitar, he thought about his black grand piano, back in the lounge of his penthouse apartment. Sam used music to work through his problems – that and sex - but right now, music sounded more appealing. That was odd to Sam. Sex was his usual balm, and it didn't matter who it was with, but for some reason, he could only imagine it with Donna, now. To Sam, that was a scary thought. He reached for Donna's guitar.

"What has she done to me?" he mused as he strummed the strings. "Am I broken?"

Chapter 18

Donna finished drying off and slipped into her bathrobe. She reached for the door handle and stopped. Listening to Sam singing and playing her guitar, Donna realised how little they knew about each other. She didn't even know Sam could play a guitar. If he had any real feelings for her, it was understandable that he would want to know more about her. Donna wasn't sure she wanted him to. That would mean letting him in, and she'd already let him in more than she'd intended to.

She listened for a while longer. A lump rose in her throat. Was his song meant for her? Had he fallen in love with her that quickly? Would she let him fill the emptiness inside her? Did she want that space to be filled? That place was reserved, sacred – his place. How could she ever let Sam or any other man that close to her again? Donna didn't want to hurt that way, but if she couldn't get past this, there was no hope for them. She had to find a way, even if it meant shoving half of her heart into one of those cardboard boxes. Would that be fair to Sam?

Donna had heard rumours of Sam's wanton ways, and she'd seen some evidence that suggest they might be true, but she'd also seen something that wasn't supposed to be there – devotion. Maybe Sam was worth a little more effort, on her part. Maybe she should stop comparing him to Jared. She remembered how painful it had been when Jared compared her to Sara. Wasn't she doing the same to Sam? Up to now, her dream had been accurate. She and Jared were walking separate paths, and Sam was real. Should she trust her sixth sense and give him a chance?

Donna hugged herself, sighed deeply and opened the door. Sam glanced up as she entered the room. She walked up to him, took her guitar and put it back on her stand. She locked

her eyes on his, untied his robe and pushed it aside. Donna bent her head and parted her lips, kissing him.

Sam cautiously untied her robe and slid his hands around her rib cage, urging her forward. Without hesitation, Donna parted her legs and straddled his lap. Sam buried his face in her hair, trailing kisses behind her ear and down the side of her neck. Donna cradled his head, threading her fingers through his black hair as his lips worked their way across the top of her breasts to her aching nipple. She gasped and moaned as he swirled his tongue around it, sucking and teasing it between his teeth.

She propped her knees on the side of the chair, positioning herself over him. He lifted his head, dancing his eyes over hers as she gently lowered her body onto his. Donna gasped as Sam eagerly lifted his hips, meeting her halfway and filling her. He pulled her lips back to his, kissing her, burying his probing tongue in the warmth of her mouth. Donna rested her feet on the floor, bracing her hands on his shoulders as she slowly started to ride him. Sam moved with her. Donna locked the memories behind a strong warning barrier and gave in to her body's lustful desires as Sam picked up the pace.

Donna arched her body, stilling over him as her orgasm hit hard, shattering her control into a million tiny pieces. Sam's body jerked inside her. He moaned as her tight muscles clamped onto him, milking jets of warmth from his body, draining his strength. His lips found hers, kissing her leisurely and thoroughly as they panted for breath.

"I'm sorry," she finally gasped.

"For what, and please tell me it's not for what we just did."

"I'm not sorry, Sam," Donna softly smiled. "How could I ever be sorry, when you send me to the stars? If I hadn't wanted it, you wouldn't be under me."

"Then I guess I'm the one who should be apologising to you," Sam solemnly said. "You don't send me to the stars."

Donna smile faded. "Oh..."

Sam grinned and nuzzled her neck. “You send me beyond the stars.”

Donna giggled and slapped her palms against his chest with a whack. “Sam, that was mean!”

Sam’s eyes widened as the sting shot through his body. “Ow!” He frowned. “What was that for? I thought you weren’t into the kinky stuff.”

Donna’s eyes filled with shock. “I’m... sorry... Sam. I didn’t realise I’d hit you that hard.” She could already see the red imprint of her hands on his pectoral muscles. She leaned over and planted a tender kiss over the red mark. *If I’d hit Jared like that, all he would have done was laugh at me.*

Sam cradled her face and kissed her. “You’re forgiven, but I did mush you up. Now you’ll have to take another shower.”

Donna stood and took his hand, leading him to the bathroom. “Yes, and this time, it *may* take a little longer,” she grinned. “I don’t want to take another shower. I want to take a bath with you.”

Sam narrowed his eyes and cocked his head to one side. “What about organising your kitchen?”

“*Our* kitchen...” she stressed, giving him a sultry smile. “And we can do that when we’re done... *bathing.*”

Sam smiled his sexy crooked smile and closed the door behind them.

Chapter 19

Sir Richard normally would have suggested they eat in their suite, but since the Savoy has such an elegant restaurant, he decided they would dine out. He was sitting in an armchair, reading through the financial section of the Times. John was on the other side of the room, quietly checking in with his security team at the Thundercloud Ranch in Wickenburg, Arizona and his other team in Shreveport, Louisiana.

Richard was busy getting changed for lunch. He glanced at his reflection and smoothed down some stray hairs. “Dad, I’d like to add a few facilities to the complex.” He straightened his tie, clipped on his gold phoenix tie tack and reached for his matching gold cuff links; birthday presents from his grandmother on his twenty-first birthday.

Sir Richard glanced over the top of his Times. “What sort of facilities?”

Richard fastened his last cuff link. He turned; sitting on the edge of the antique table. “Entertainment – for Donna. Since music is such an important part of her life; don’t you think she needs a place to perform?”

“I never considered live entertainment, but now that you mention it, yes, I do, especially after seeing her music video. She’s good. We’ve got the theatre room, but Donna certainly could add a little spice to the end of a dull workday.”

“She would be extremely popular with the workforce,” John chuckled, joining the conversation. “They don’t get out much.”

“That she would,” Sir Richard grinned. “Building her a stage wouldn’t be a problem, but what about the band? Donna is a country entertainer. There aren’t that many country bands in the UK. Especially those willing to undergo such a drastic change in lifestyle.”

“Donna was part of an excellent country band before all this with Jared’s daughter came up,” John interjected. “She and

Jared were a perfect duo. It's a shame they had to be busted up."

"For more reasons than one," Sir Richard sighed.

Richard frowned and clenched his teeth, glaring at John for mentioning Jared. Richard knew John and his father were right, but it didn't mean he had to accept it. He wanted to put Jared as far out of Donna's mind as possible. Sam as well, but how? "With everyone that'll be living there, I'm sure we'll be able to find talented musicians. Raging Storm is not the only talented country band in the world."

"That's true Ricky, but facts are facts. Whether you like it or not, Donna and Jared were good together. "

"That's why I want to build something like Jared's recording studio behind Wisteria Hall. That's where the music video was shot. It has a dance hall and even what he called a mock stage. The technology in that thing was awesome. I'd like to recreate that if possible."

"Well, I'm sure it's possible, but since I didn't see Jared's recording studio, I don't have any idea what you're talking about."

Richard opened his laptop and clicked on an icon on his desktop. "I took some movies when John and I were staying there." He turned the screen so he could see.

Sir Richard leaned forward, narrowing his eyes. "I assume you've talked to her about this. Donna already has a demanding career, Ricky. Have you considered she may want to put all this behind her?"

Kneeling on the edge of the kitchen counter, Donna was busy organising things on the top shelf of her spice cabinet, next to the cooker. Sam had just stepped outside to put something in the rubbish bin. Taken by surprise, Donna squealed when Sam grabbed her around the waist and cradled her in his arms. "You shouldn't risk your beautiful body that way," he grinned and kissed her.

“You shouldn’t sneak up on me like that,” she responded, kissing him back. “I might have come at you swinging.”

Sam softly chuckled. “I’ll take my chances,” he said, kissed her again, and then sat her feet on the floor. “How are you doing with the spice sorting?”

Donna turned. “I think I’ve pretty well got them the way I want them. You cook, though; can you find everything OK this way?”

Sam scanned over the contents of the cupboard. “Sweetheart, a blind person could. The only thing that’s missing is the braille.”

“Oddly enough, when I cook, I like to be able to just reach in and pull out what I want, without looking. I keep the spices I use the most nearest to the stove.”

Sam chuckled. “What so funny?” she asked.

“The differences in what we call things. What you call a stove, over here, we call a cooker. I’m sure you would call this a cabinet, but we call it a cupboard.”

Donna turned and put her arms around his neck, studying his eyes. “Do the differences matter to you?”

Sam cradled her face and softly smiled. “No, sweetheart, not in the slightest,” he said and tenderly kissed her. Donna’s stomach rumbled. “I think it’s lunchtime,” he smiled. “Since you did breakfast, I’m treating you to lunch.”

“What did you have in mind?” Donna smiled. “Salad, I’m sure.”

“I have a particular favourite, made with crab meat and baby greens.”

“Sounds delicious. Can I help?”

“Not a lot of preparation goes into this salad, but you can toss the greens if you want to.”

“As long as you don’t ask me to chop the onions.”

Sam brushed the back of his fingers down her cheek. “If there is one thing I don’t want to see in your brown eyes it’s tears. Put the bag of baby greens we bought last night in a bowl and toss them with 60ml of the extra-virgin olive oil. Then

season them with salt and pepper. I usually add a little garlic granules.”

“Do you want me to use my hands or the salad tongs?”

“Use your hands...” Sam said and lifted them to his mouth, “...that way I can lick your fingers,” he teased, nibbling the pads of her fingers.

Donna grinned slightly. “Is that the special Sam Kaliea touch?”

“What? The licking your fingers part, or the garlic granules?”

“Both...” she chuckled.

Sam snorted. “I hope you like leftovers. This usually serves four people.”

“If something is good...” she grinned, slowly licking her fingertips. “I don’t mind having it again.”

Sam groaned and turned back to his crabmeat.

Sam finished making lunch, put it on the table and sat across from Donna. She picked up her fork. “So what’s the name of this dish?”

“Lemony crab salad with baby greens. Do you like it?”

She licked her lips. “Do I ever. Is this one of yours?”

Sam grinned. “Sorry, sweetheart. I found this one on the Internet through one of those social networks. The garlic and fresh chopped cilantro were my idea.”

“It gives it a nice fresh flavour.”

Sam reached across the table and stroked the pulse on her wrist with the pad of his thumb. “You make everything fresh and exciting.”

“Sam, I think you’re getting too attached to me.” Donna softly smiled and carried on with her meal.

“I’m trying to get *very* attached to you.” Sam laced his fingers with hers. “What do you want to do after lunch?”

“Finish organising the house and then maybe go up and visit with Gary – assuming he’s there. What was that song you

were singing this morning when I came out of the bathroom? I wasn't aware you liked country music."

"We have country bands in Tasmania."

"Are there any other instruments you can play besides keyboard and guitar?"

Sam grinned. "Sweetheart, if it has strings or keys, I can play it."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No. I'm an only child. You?"

"Same. My parents were killed when I was nine. My maternal grandparents raised me."

"So what made you decide to go into medicine?"

Donna picked at her salad. "I don't know, for sure. I'm really not that good of a doctor."

Sam frowned. "Why in the hell would you think that?"

Donna sighed. "I get too attached to my patients. My last – a close friend of mine told me I'm trying to save the world. It hurts me when one of my patients dies. I don't like losing people."

"What doctor does?" Sam scoffed. "That doesn't make you a bad doctor. There's nothing wrong with caring for your patients – I do."

"Yeah, but you don't let it get to you, I'm sure."

"I don't let it show, but trust me, it still gets to me. Being a doctor doesn't mean you have to shut your emotions down."

"Yeah – well – it won't matter now anyway. From what I've learned about Sir Richard, I doubt there will be that many real patients at the Centre. I'm sure you don't treat something as simple as the common cold, do you?"

Sam drew air between his teeth and winced. "It's not a daily occurrence, but I'm also responsible for the people who work at the Centre. Sometimes I have to treat simple illnesses. Sir Richard has this one man who works in the mechanical lab – Frank Oliver. I think Frank's one goal is to break the world record for the number of stitches a single human being can have in their lifetime. I often have to patch him up."

Donna laughed. "Is there a world record for that?"

One side of Sam's mouth turned up. "I don't know, but if there is, Frank Oliver holds it. Whatever your problems are, we'll work through them. Like I said, I'll help you get over your phobias."

"You might help me get over *some*, but there's one nobody will ever be able to help me with."

"Which one is that, sweetheart?"

Donna pushed her empty plate aside. "Spiders! Several people have already tried to get me over my arachnophobia."

Sam groaned inwardly, smiled politely, gathered their dirty dishes and put them in the dishwasher. That last bit of information was disturbing to him.

"Sam, is something wrong? You've gone quiet."

Sam swallowed hard and lied. "No, sweetheart. I just remembered something I forgot at my apartment." *Like my pet tarantula. Oh well... looks like Fang gets a new home.*

Chapter 20

Sam and Donna walked up to the main house. Alan answered the door. “Good afternoon, Dr. Rigden, Dr. Kaliea. Are you here to see Dr. Browne?”

Donna glanced at Sam and frowned. “Alan, please call me Donna. I don’t like titles.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Donna. Please, do come in. Dr. Browne is in the lounge. I’ll let him know you’re here. Sir Richard and Master Richard are out of town for the weekend. Would you like something to drink?”

“A scotch would be nice,” Sam spoke up.

“I’ll just have a glass of lemonade, over ice with a slice of lime, please. You don’t need to announce us,” Donna responded. “I know where the lounge is.”

“I’ll bring your drinks in shortly. I assume you wanted your scotch neat?”

“Yes, Alan. Thank you.”

Sam laced his fingers with Donna’s and led her to the lounge. Gary was sitting in the middle of the sofa. He looked up from his laptop and grinned. “So you two finally decided to come up for air?”

Donna’s cheeks showed some colour. “We decided to come pester you for a while. What are you doing?”

Gary slid down and made room. “Nothing really. I’m just about ready to choke one of my best friends - that’s all.”

Donna sat by Gary. Sam sat next to Donna and stretched an arm across the back of the sofa, resting his palm over her nape and massaging circles on the back of her neck with his thumb. “What are you watching?” Donna asked.

“A YouTube video of your autograph signing at HMV on Facebook.”

Sam studied her eyes. “You deserve that fame, but it wasn’t a wise decision on Richard’s part.”

Gary groaned. "I'm sure Forrest keeps up with the competition. Richard knows how dangerous that man is! He'll stop at nothing to get what he wants, and he wants a cure. I hope I'm wrong, but my gut instinct tells me he knows we have one. I don't know *what* Richard was thinking exposing you like that."

"I do," Sam snorted. "He wants Donna. He figures if he puts enough pressure on her, she'll give in. He's halfway there now."

Donna frowned. "Why do you say that, Sam?"

"Oh, come on honey...."

Donna flinched. Hearing Sam call her 'honey' was like a stake, driven straight through her heart. She stiffened and swallowed the lump in her throat. Gary shared a knowing look of condolence with her. Sam didn't miss a beat.

"...Sir Richard has security cameras everywhere, including the guest house. Richard probably knows every move we've made."

Gary closed his eyes and groaned. "God – I'm slipping. I forgot about that."

Donna's mouth gaped. "Richard would do that?"

"Oh yes," Gary nodded, calling up the security system for the Hall. "Richard is cunning, but not *quite*... as cunning as I am."

Sam grinned. "What are you doing?"

"Setting a trap," Gary responded rapidly skimming his fingers over his keyboard. "Because John has to have access to the security system, no matter where he is, I can't just shut down the cameras at the guest house. If something went wrong with them, just like me, he would be alerted. So... what I've got to do is fix it so if Richard tries to access them, I'll know. I can't guarantee what he may have already seen, but I can prevent him from seeing anything from now on."

"But what about John?" Donna asked.

Gary grinned. "That's the clever part. You know how an antivirus program works on a computer system? How certain

things like popup ads and cookies can be blocked? Or how certain sites can be added to a blacklist?"

"Yes...."

"You remember my virus program that's on your laptop and cell phone?"

A sly grin turned up the corners of Donna's mouth. "Yes...."

"All I've got to do is tell it to look for a specific IP address."

"What if he accesses it – say - using the Savoy's network system?" Sam asked. "Won't the hotel use a common IP address for all their guests?"

"Yes, they will - and Richard *could* use that - but I would still be able to trace the signal back to its origin, whether it was sent from London, or anywhere else in the UK."

"But, by that time wouldn't it be too late? Wouldn't Richard have already seen more than he needed to?"

"Not if you and Sam are *aware*... of things. Due to network traffic, if the cameras are accessed remotely there's a slight delay before the cameras start transmitting. I can lengthen that delay slightly so it sends a signal to your cell phones first, before it starts transmitting. John or whoever is trying to access the cameras will be expecting this. I probably could safely give you about a fifteen second delay, but I couldn't risk much more than that."

Sam narrowed his eyes. "What would be transmitting, during this delay?"

Gary grinned. "Whatever I wanted, but we would need to make it believable."

Donna's eyes twinkled. "Grab your cell phone. I've got an idea."

"Well, that's the last of them," Gary said with a mischievous grin. "Now all I've got to do is reprogram the cameras to run these feeds."

"How long will that take?" Donna asked.

“About forty minutes.”

“That long?” she frowned.

“Well, look, D. There are fifty cameras dedicated to the guest house.”

Donna’s mouth gaped. “Fifty!”

“Sir Richard is thorough,” Gary sighed. “Now, as I said before you interrupted me. There are fifty cameras dedicated to the guest house. Each one of these cameras has to be programmed to use the right feed at the right time of day. That’s why we took more than one feed for each room. I have to praise you two for the sex scene in the bedroom, and in the shower. Very nicely executed and very convincing.”

Donna grinned. “It’s amazing what a few discreetly placed pillows and sheets can hide.”

“Well, I can tell you this. If I hadn’t known what you were doing, I would have been convinced, and so will Richard.”

Donna locked her eyes with Sam’s and pressed her lips together. “That’s as close to the real thing as you’re ever going to get.”

“There is one thing I’d like to point out. If someone is trying to spy on your private moments, it might not be Richard.”

“There’s another thing that’s bothering me,” Sam interjected. “Whoever was playing target practice with you and Richard at the cemetery may not have been trying to kill either one of you. They may have been trying to drive you away.”

Donna furrowed her brow. “What do you mean?”

“Sweetheart, whoever shot you had to be a marksman. He wasn’t aiming with the site on his rifle. A little more toward the centre of your upper arm and the bullet would have shattered your humerus, severed your brachial artery and if it had gone between your fourth and fifth rib, penetrated both your lungs. It was too sloppy. They would have shot you in the back and...” Sam broke off, unable to continue. He pulled her close and held her.

“Sam is right, baby. Their goal was to drive you away.”

“Forrest or another one of Triplet International’s adversaries was behind that.”

Donna snorted. “Well, they were convincing enough for me. Bullets were flying around us like mosquitoes. The only warning we had was a spray of earth or shattered granite fragments. We couldn’t even tell where the shots were coming from.”

“They must have been using a silencer,” Sam added.

Donna’s eyes widened. “No shit! And a pretty effective one, to boot.”

“What I don’t understand is why?” Sam mused. “Why would a dying man do everything he could to drive you away if he was depending on you and your research to find a cure for him? If Forrest wanted Donna kidnaped, then why not just shoot Richard and John, grab her and be done with it?”

Gary looked incredulous. “Are you suggesting that Forrest *wanted* Donna in the UK?”

“Somebody apparently did.”

Gary got quiet, mulling things over. “If Forrest wanted you in the UK, then that means he knows exactly where you are. If the shooters were working for him, they would have known you left with Richard.”

“Forrest also would have known if Sir Richard was involved, the first thing he would have done was get Donna back to the UK,” Sam groaned.

“What has that sick bastard got up his sleeve?” Donna asked, swallowing the fear at the back of her throat. “Is he watching us now?” She looked up at Sam. “Maybe Richard is not the one we need to be worrying about.”

“Look, I think we all might be getting a little paranoid,” Gary offered. “You’re safe here. If Richard is spying on you, so what. I’ll have that problem solved in less than an hour. Why don’t you and Sam go for a walk, or a ride to clear your minds? Just don’t go too far. Maybe no further than the duck pond, or the river. Take your cell phones with you, and I’ll ring you and let you know when I’m finished.”

Donna leaned close to Sam's ear. "I'd love to go for a... ride with you," she whispered. "I'll go change and meet you at the stables." She kissed him and left.

Sam grinned, his body responding to the promise in her sultry voice. He turned to leave. "Hold up!" Gary said and went behind the bar. "Here – take this. Put it in your saddlebag. I assume you know how to use it?"

Sam took the 9mm pistol and clip of bullets from Gary's hand. "Yeah, I do, but why do I need this?"

"Just in case. If Forrest is behind this, I'm not sure anywhere is a hundred percent safe. Unless you have to use it, don't let D see it. She hates guns."

Sam groaned. "So much for UK gun law."

"I've got to get busy. Check your cell phone and make sure the battery is charged."

"Full bars."

"Good. I'll ring you when I'm done. Have a nice ride, but stay alert. If Forrest planned this and he knows where Donna is, we don't know when he might decide to make a move."

Sam nodded and left. As he stepped off the back portico, he glanced toward the guest house. Donna was just about to the edge of the concrete walkway. Sensing him she turned and blew him a kiss; Sam's heart turned over. He swallowed hard and picked up his pace.

He saddled the Appaloosa mare and led her out of the paddock, latching the gate behind him. Checking the safety again to make sure it was secured; Sam dropped the pistol into the saddlebag and mounted the mare. Instead of waiting for Donna at the stables, he rode down to the guest house and tied the mare to a bush in the front garden.

"Donna!" Sam called out as he neared the stairs.

"In the kitchen!"

Donna had changed into her black suede knee-high moccasin boots, a loosely fitting sheer black mid-calf skirt, and black and white crinkle cotton, midriff shirt. Sam blew his breath out in a whistle. "When you said you were going to

change, you weren't kidding," he said in a broad Australian accent. He shook the front of his jeans as he stepped through the doorway to the kitchen. "What are you doing, Pretty Lady?" he asked and sidled closer.

"Getting us a snack." She turned, holding up a bag of his exotic homemade trail mix in one hand and a thermos in the other. Donna had loosely tied the shirt under her breasts. The little gold heart and key pendant hung neatly between her cleavage. She locked her eyes on his and softly grinned. "Do you approve?"

One side of Sam's mouth turned up in his sexy grin. He groaned, shook his head and pulled her into his arms. "What have you got on under this?" he asked in a husky whisper as he nibbled the side of her neck and cupped her bottom in his palms.

"Very little," she gasped, a slow seductive smile spreading her full petal pink lips.

Sam set the trail mix and thermos on the counter. "We won't need those," he groaned, dipping his head to kiss her as he moved a hand to her breast, squeezing and circling the pad of his thumb over her peaked nipple through the thin fabric of her shirt. "You're not wearing a bra, either. Are you?"

Donna kept her eyes locked on his and slowly shook her head.

Sam slid his hand inside her shirt and cupped hot satin skin. "I will never find anyone more perfect for me than you," he moaned and kissed her again, slowly and deeply, stealing her breath.

Donna wrapped her arms around his waist. "Why do you think I'm perfect for you?"

Sam counted the reasons off between kisses as he worked his way from her lips to the top of her jaw and down the side of her neck. "You're a doctor. You're intelligent. You're a musician. You love to sing. You're *incredibly* sexy, and..." he said kissing her mouth again, thoroughly, exploring her with

his wayward tongue, "...you are undoubtedly the best lover I have *ever* had."

Donna slid her hands into Sam's back pockets. She lifted a leg and pressed her body against his bulging erection. She gazed up into his eyes. "You're not so bad yourself," she panted. "Let's get out of here before we give our peeping Tom another free show."

Donna took one look at the barefoot saddle and grinned. "Where am I going to sit?"

"On my lap," Sam replied, putting his foot in the stirrup and mounting the horse.

Donna looked up at him. "This could be tricky."

Sam held out a hand. "Yes, but I'm willing to try if you are."

"You've never done this before?" she asked dubiously.

Sam arched an eyebrow, a slow grin spreading across his mouth. "Have you?" he countered.

Donna tucked her chin, her cheeks showing some colour. "No, I haven't..." she said, looking back up at him, "...but it sounds... exciting. How do I get up there?"

"Put your right foot in the stirrup and swing your left leg over."

Donna grabbed his hand. "Good thing I'm not wearing anything... complicated," she whispered as she settled on his lap, pressing her pelvis against his throbbing arousal. "Feels like you need to... loosen up a bit." She rubbed his hand over the satin bow over her right hip.

He reined the horse around and nudged her toward the trees next to the river bank. "Let's get away from these fucking security cameras, and I'll see if I can't ... pull a few strings."

Donna slid back a bit and reached for the button on his jeans. "I'll just make things a little less... complicated... for you," she teased, inching down his zip and closing the gap between their bodies.

At random, for a few seconds, the wall of monitors connected to the security cameras at the Triplet Hall guest house showed nothing but static.

“What the hell is going on? What happened to the sound?”

“It could be a cascading network failure.”

“You said this method was fool proof!”

“Well, considering the conditions and the poor quality signal in this area, I’m surprised you’re able to pick up this much.”

He rewound the video and timed the signal drop. “Fifteen seconds exactly before the picture clears,” he mused. “That can’t be coincidental. One or two cameras, maybe even three – yes, but not all fifty.”

“Notify the look out – find out where they are and what they’re doing!”

He opened his cell phone. “It’s me. Where are you?”

The reply came over the speaker phone; both could hear. “On the other side of the Tyne, about quarter of a mile from the bridge.”

“What’s going on at the Hall?”

“Nothing – why?”

“Where are the two doctors?”

“Horseback riding in the edge of the trees along the opposite bank.”

“What are they doing?”

“They’re partially hidden, but they look extremely cosy to me. I wouldn’t mind a piece of her.”

“Wouldn’t we both. Think we ought to off the Aussie and see how sweet her honey is?”

“Touch one hair on either of their heads and you will experience the *real* meaning of pain! Are they... engaged?”

“Let’s just say they’re getting hot and heavy in an extremely erotic and unusual way.”

“What do you mean by extremely unusual?”

“Ever got it on the back of a horse at half trot?”

Sir Richard and John were watching reruns of 'One Foot In The Grave' on telly. Richard was busy planning out the entertainment section for the complex. He had no intention of talking to Donna about it. He would have it built and present it to her as a gift – or incentive, depending on how you looked at it - to choose him. For Richard, there was little difference between a kind gesture and covert blackmail. He wasn't accustomed to losing, especially to Sam, and he always took measures to ensure his success.

Richard's cell phone rang, momentarily catching John and Sir Richard's attention; their heads turned in his direction. Richard glanced at the name on the display, groaned and accepted the call. "I'll be with you in a couple of seconds," he said, pressing hold without waiting for a response. He saved what he was doing on his laptop and stepped out into the corridor. Walking a few steps from the door, he took his cell phone off mute. "What do you want?" he forced through his teeth. "I was busy!"

"What are you doing in London while Sam and Donna are playing husband and wife in your guest house?"

Richard clenched his fist. "It is not my guest house, and I've been properly rebuked and reminded of that fact. What Sam and Donna do is of no concern to me."

"What do you mean no concern to you? Have you given up on her?"

Richard grinned. "Quite the contrary. I'm taking steps to make her drop Sam like a hot cake. I'm going out today to buy her engagement ring. When the right time comes, I'll put it on her finger."

"So it doesn't bother you that Sam and Donna are mating like rabbits on the back of your appaloosa mare in broad daylight?"

Richard tightened his jaw. "I'm not worried about how many times Donna has sex with Sam. I already know what she has to offer. In the end, she'll give him up."

"You've slept with her! When?"

Richard frowned. "I am not going to discuss my personal life with you, especially when it concerns Donna. In fact, I don't need your help anymore. I have everything under control. When Donna sees that I can give her everything she could ever possibly want - no matter what it is or how much it costs - she'll kick Sam out of the guest house and out of her bed. Once that happens, I will put Sam Kaliea in his place, away from Donna. Now, if you had something important to discuss with me, could you make it snappy? I have work to do."

Richard entered the room and closed his laptop. Sir Richard gave him an expectant look. "I'm going out for a while," Richard volunteered.

"One of your girlfriends?" he asked, motioning to the cell phone in Richard's hand.

"That's what she'd *like* to think," Richard grinned wryly. "I'm just fanning an old flame."

Sir Richard raised an incredulous eyebrow. "An old flame...?"

"I'm just going to have some fun, Dad. We don't get to do that a lot lately. I'd rather be with Donna, but then she'd rather be with Sam. I'm stepping down. I want her to be happy. If that's with Sam, then I'll just have to live with that."

"Will you be back tonight?"

Richard grinned again. "Depends on how much heat it takes to get her fire going," he said and shut the door behind him.

Sir Richard glanced at John and unlocked his cell phone. "Gary, it's Sir Richard. Is everything all right at the Hall?"

Chapter 21

Richard approached a young woman tying a silk scarf around a mannequin's neck. He gently tapped her shoulder. "Excuse me – Sophie," he said, glancing at her name badge, when she turned. "Could I have a word with you, please?"

"Of course," she swooned, mesmerised by Richard's dancing blue eyes. "How can I... help you?"

He led her out of earshot. "Do you work on commission?"

"Yes, I do."

"I assume the shop has access to the Internet?"

"Yes, we do."

"I need to borrow your computer for a couple of minutes."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Mr..." she hedged.

"It's Richard, Sophie," he smiled.

Sophie's cheeks showed some colour. "I can't let you do that, Richard," she shyly smiled. "You would need to speak to the manager, and she's not here on Sundays."

Richard grinned. "What if I were to make you an irresistible offer. Let me use your computer for ten minutes, and I'll buy one of everything you have in the shop."

Sophie's mouth gaped. "Everything? Including the perfume and jewellery departments?"

"*Everything*... Sophie, as long as it doesn't have anything to do with spiders. Do we have a deal?"

Sophie gave Richard an incredulous stare. "Are you for real? You're going to buy one of everything if I let you use the shop's computer?"

"OK. To be on the safe side..." he smiled, sweetening the pot, "...make it five minutes. I wouldn't want you to get into trouble."

"Are you kidding? I was going to let you have it for ten minutes, but you'll have to use the one in the stock room, and you'll need to look like a worker – as if you could ever do

that,” she grinned, flirting with him. “Come with me,” she said, crooking her finger.

Richard softly chuckled. “You’d be surprised what I’ll do to get what I want,” he teased, following her.

Sophie stopped at one of the lockers. “I’ll loan you one of my friend’s uniforms. He’s about your size. Here, try it on. I don’t think you’ll need the trousers. They would be too short on you, anyway,” she smiled, avoiding his dancing eyes. She pointed. “Through that door is where you’ll find the shipping department.”

Richard laid his hand on her wrist, disarming her. “Thank you Sophie,” he said and placed something in her hand. “The sizes and the address I’d like them delivered to are on that card. This is for you,” he said, slipping some folded bank notes in her uniform pocket.”

Sophie looked at the address on the card. She furrowed her brow. “You want them delivered to the Newcastle Stem Cell Research Centre?”

“Yes, please. I’d like it delivered by FedEx. You can add the extra delivery charges to the bill.”

“It won’t go out until tomorrow.”

“That’s fine.”

“Then I guess I’d better get busy boxing your things.”

“Thank you, Sophie,” Richard smiled and walked away.

Richard took a USB drive out of his pocket and plugged it into the shop’s computer. Quickly keying in the access code, he ran the program and downloaded the camera feeds to his USB key. Smiling, he undocked it and put it back in his pocket. He scanned through the images, searching for the right time index and brought up a picture of Sam and Donna, cuddled on the sofa reading their Kindles. “How boring,” he mused. “Looks like someone has been badly misinformed. If I were in Sam’s place, Donna and I wouldn’t be reading a Kindle. I wouldn’t give her time to read. This may be easier than I thought. ” He chuckled

and shut off the computer. “Now what to do with the rest of my day...?”

Sam wrapped his arms around Donna, just below her breasts, holding her as he kissed the side of her neck. “That has to be one of the most erotic things I’ve ever done,” he groaned in her hair.

Donna leaned her head to the side, giving him better access to her neck, enjoying the feel of his soft hot lips skimming over her pulse. She stroked the back of his head, pushing her fingers through his hair, grazing and massaging his scalp with her fingertips. “It was pretty exciting for me, too,” she said turning her head. Sam bent his head and kissed her.

The mare stopped drinking, lifted her head, perked her ears and snorted, catching Sam and Donna’s attention. Sam chuckled. “I think she’s jealous of you,” he teased.

Donna leaned forward, patting the mare’s neck. “What’s wrong baby,” she cooed. The mare snorted again and stomped nervously. Donna furrowed her brow. “I think something spooked her, Sam. She keeps looking across the river toward that patch of bushes just below the bridge.”

Sam thought about the gun Gary had given him, concealed in the saddle bag, by his right hip. He hooded his eyes and scanned the area. “I don’t see anything. Maybe she just got water up her nose.”

“It feels like we’re being watched.” A cold chill went down Donna’s spine, and she shivered.

“We are,” Sam laughed. “Look. It’s a hare. That’s probably what spooked the mare.”

Donna frowned. “Horses aren’t spooked by rabbits, Sam, and neither am I.” She took her cell phone out to check the time. “I think I need a new battery,” she groaned.

“Battery down?”

“Yeah, and I just charged the damn thing last night. I had two bars before we left.” She checked the time on her watch. “We’ve been gone over two hours. Gary should have called before now. I don’t like this.”

Donna was used to the security at Wisteria Hall. Jared's ten-foot fence boxed in the whole area, and she knew she was safe with him. She *didn't* feel safe with Sam. "I have a bad feeling about this. Let's go, Sam."

"What are you afraid of?" Sam growled and nibbled her shoulder. "Honey, the only wild animal you need to be worrying about is me."

Donna swallowed the lump in her throat and clenched her teeth. "Sam, take me back now!" she said sternly and pushed his head away. "Don't ever call me that name again!" she snapped, blinking her stinging eyes.

"What did I do this time?" Sam frowned, confused. "I can't call you honey?"

"No, Sam!"

"Can I still call you sweetheart?"

"That I will tolerate, but you could stop being so chauvinistic and try calling me by my name."

Sam chuckled. "I usually don't call women by their name."

Donna sighed. *So I've noticed.* "Do you take me home, or do I walk?"

Sam kept an arm under Donna's breasts. Making clicking sounds, he tugged on the reins and gently nudged the mare toward the Hall. "You're a bit moody for some reason. I didn't relax you as much as I thought I had." Sam rubbed his cheek against hers. "I must be losing my touch. Maybe I should try some of that Euphoria, after all." Donna didn't respond.

"Drop me off at the guest house," Donna said. "I want to change into some more appropriate clothes. I'll meet you back at the Hall."

Sam got off the mare and reached up for Donna, grabbing her on the sides of her waist. He stood her in front of him. Donna circled her arms around Sam's neck and turned her face up, so she could see into his eyes. "Donna... I'm sorry if it upsets you, but why don't you want me to call you honey?"

Donna tucked her chin. She swallowed hard. "It's what... *he* called me, Sam, and the memory still stings. I didn't mean to lose my temper with you."

"No worries, sweetheart." Sam lifted her chin and pressed his lips to hers, giving her a slow, tender kiss. "I'll find a way to take the sting and the memory away," he whispered and kissed her again.

Donna deepened the kiss, pressing her body against his and stealing his breath. "I'll be up there just as soon as I get on some jeans and a T-shirt." She kissed him thoroughly again. "You don't need Euphoria, Sam, and you haven't lost your touch." She smiled softly and went inside the guest house.

Sam walked the mare back to the stables, took her bridle and saddle off and gave her rump a firm slap. The mare reared up, whinnied, pawed at the air and galloped off to the back with the other horses. Sam chuckled and went inside the Hall.

"Afternoon, Dr. Kaliea," Alan said, glancing around Sam's shoulder. "Where is Miss Donna?"

"She went back to the guest house to change. She got a little... mushed up."

"Would you like another scotch, Sir?"

"Yes, thank you Alan."

"Should I fix Miss Donna another glass of lemonade, the way she had before?"

"Yes, please. Donna probably would like that, I'm sure. Where is – ah – where is Dr. Browne?"

"I believe he's in the library, Sir. Shall I bring your drinks in there?"

"Could you please take them to the music room? When Donna comes in, could you ask her to join me in there?"

"Of course, Dr. Kaliea. Will you and Miss Donna be dining at the Hall, with Dr. Browne tonight?"

"Yes, Alan, as far as I'm concerned, but you'll need to check with Donna. I'm flexible. I'll let her decide." Sam smiled and made his way to the library. He tapped on the doorframe, before entering.

Gary glared at Sam and turned his attention back to his laptop. "I thought you were taking your cell phones with you."

Sam frowned. "We did."

"Where's Donna?"

"At the guest house – changing."

"Why didn't you or Donna answer your cell phones?"

"Because they didn't ring. When did you try to call?"

"When I finished loading the feeds to the cameras. About half an hour ago. I was fixing to come after you."

Sam grinned wryly. "That might not have been such a good idea," he softly chuckled. "Donna checked hers when the horse got spooked. Her battery is flat, but mine is working fine. Try ringing me now."

Gary pushed Sam's speed number and waited. Nothing happened. He narrowed his eyes. "Well...?"

"Hmm," Sam said and took his cell phone out of his back pocket. He winced. "Sorry. I guess I bumped the switch. It's on silent."

Gary raised an eyebrow. "I'm *not* going to ask how that happened."

Sam grinned. "Probably best not to."

"Sam, can I ask you a question about you and Donna?"

"Sure – shoot!"

"Are you two getting *serious* about each other?"

Sam frowned. "What do you mean by ... serious?"

"Oh, let me see. How can I put this? Let's try the direct approach. Sam, you get around a bit. You've probably slept with every woman in the Centre – possibly Newcastle and Whitley Bay, as well."

Sam narrowed his eyes. "I think that's a mild exaggeration, Gary."

"OK, maybe," Gary agreed, "But you get the picture. Donna has just been through an extremely *painful* breakup. She does *not* need someone to come along and do it again." Sam opened his mouth to speak; Gary held up his hand. "Let me finish. Being with you seems to be... helping her, to some

extent, and that's good. Donna hasn't had an easy childhood. I don't care *who* she's with, as long as *she*'s happy. If that turns out to be you, we'll learn to get along- somehow - but if you're not planning on the long haul, do us all a favour. End it now, before she gets in too deep, and ends up hurt again."

Sam swallowed hard. "I am in for the long haul."

Gary raised an incredulous eyebrow. "That would be a change."

"For the first time in my life, I finally feel like I *want* something permanent, and I *want* it with Donna. She's my equal in every way. I intend to stay with her as long as she'll let me."

Gary scoffed. "I'm sorry Sam, but knowing your reputation with women, that sounds a bit strange. I'm not suggesting you *can't* change, or that you don't mean what you're saying, but let me tell you something," he warned wagging a finger in Sam's face. "Hurt Donna, and you and I become *instant* enemies. I won't ask questions. She is like a little sister to me. I've always looked out for her, and I always will. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Sam grinned. "Yes, Gary, I do."

"What's so funny?"

"Donna said you would be blunt. She wasn't kidding." He motioned to Gary's laptop. "Have you had any nibbles?"

"See if Donna is coming," Gary said quietly.

Sam leaned out the doorway. "No. She's not. What's up?"

"Come look at this." He pointed to the screen. "You see this red arrow that keeps jumping from one point to another?"

"Yes...."

"That is someone accessing all fifty cameras at random."

"Can you tell where it's coming from, or who's doing it?"

"No, that's what's puzzling me. It's like a loop of some kind, but it doesn't appear to be running from a single terminal. Every fifteen seconds, its origin changes. I've got Jeff Wein, at the complex, running this through VICi." Gary shook his head. "Even she can't figure it out. Every time I get close to

pinpointing its location, it either drops or jumps, right before I can grab it. I don't think this is Richard. If it is, he's been doing a snow job, on his computer knowledge for years."

"I wouldn't put it past him."

Gary frowned and forced the air from his lungs. "Neither would I, but we can't just point the finger at him. The problem is this. I don't know how we would ever prove it's him."

"Then maybe what you should be doing is proving it's *not* him."

Gary laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his chair. Fascinated by its design, he watched as his visual trace route blinked from one hop to another, like an Indiana Jones map. "Unfortunately..." he sighed, "...unless I can pinpoint the original signal, I can't do that either. However..." he said, looking up at Sam. "Whoever it is, I think it's fairly obvious they're extremely interested in yours and Donna's relationship. To me... that suggests that it *could* be Richard, or someone trying to make us *believe*... that it's Richard."

"So your trap didn't work?"

"Oh no – it worked. If you hadn't had your cell phone on silent – you would have known that, too." Gary narrowed his eyes in concentration. "You said D's battery was flat. When did she last charge it?"

"Last night. Why?"

Gary's eyes widened. "Call her. Tell her to turn her cell phone off and bring it to me now! I think I need to tweak my virus code."

Chapter 22

“Jared... it’s Gary. Are you still using my virus program on your cell phone and computer system?”

“Yes....”

“Until I can send you another copy, stop using it.”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“You remember when Donna was taken to Forrest’s penthouse apartment, at D’Netics?”

“Yes....”

“I’m fairly certain my virus program was compromised.”

“*What do you mean compromised?*” Jared’s voice was low with anger.

“I mean it’s not as secure... as I thought it was, Jared. I suspect that someone has been using Donna’s cell phone to spy on her.”

“Why do you suspect that someone is spying on her?”

“I don’t know for sure, Jared, but her battery keeps going flat.”

“Is Donna in any danger?”

Gary swallowed hard. “No, not where she is now. They won’t be able to use that again.”

“That’s a relief, considering Richard let her get shot.”

Gary frowned. “How did you know about that?”

“I trust she’s healed now?”

“Yes, but....”

“How is she Gary?”

“She’s... coping, Jared. There’s something you need to know. Richard promoted your latest album on the UK charts. Donna and Raging Storm are pretty popular over here.”

“She’s popular all right. What the fuck was he thinking, exposing her like that? He spent all that time preaching about how dangerous Forrest was, and then he practically hand-delivers her. I came very close to getting on a plane.”

“What were you going to do, Jared?”

“What I planned to do in the first place. Take her home with me, to Arizona, where I could make sure she was safe.”

“If you thought she would be safe with you Jared, why did you leave her behind?”

“Because I was caught in the middle, Gary. I couldn’t protect her and my family in Arizona at the same time. Walking away that night was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I’d never felt so fucking helpless. For every mile I put between us, I hurt that much more. The pain became unbearable. I came back for her, but she was gone.”

“Wait a minute – you came back for Donna? When?”

“I came back to Shreveport that Saturday. The day after she was shot. When I came back and found her rings and the words she wrote, I died inside.”

“Donna left a message for you at Wisteria Hall?”

“Yes – near the back of my dream diary. She left her promise ring and her engagement ring on top of the diary, so I would see it first, and know she’d given up. I expected her to move out of Wisteria Hall, but I never expected her to leave the country, so soon. That all happened so conveniently. Two people, very much wanted Donna in the UK. Sir Richard said if he had to, he would have kidnaped her. In a round-about way, that’s what he’s done. He could have orchestrated the entire scene at the cemetery. When I talked to him about the HMY thing, he reluctantly told me about the shooting. I already knew, but I didn’t know all the details. Sir Richard said he believed whoever was responsible was not trying to kill Donna, but to drive her away. That’s why I believe he could have set the whole thing up. Neither Richard nor John had the knowledge to decide whether or not Donna could make it. She could have been treated in the emergency room in Many, but instead, they took her all the way to Shreveport – eighty miles away. Who made that decision?”

“Our doctor examined her by video phone.”

“By video phone,” Jared snorted. “So he wasted more time on a fucking video. OK let me ask you this. Why didn’t they contact Juanita, who was Donna’s doctor and knew her medical history, or even Terry Downing? Either one of them would have met you, but instead you cart her off to Barksdale where she sees someone that doesn’t know anything about her. Was he afraid Juanita or Terry might have kept her in Shreveport?”

“Jared... are you implying Sir Richard had Donna shot?”

“I don’t know, Gary, you tell me. Without a scope, from the back of the church, it would have been extremely hard to hit someone on the other side of Prewitt Chapel cemetery, especially if they were running – which Donna and Richard were. If it hadn’t been for her accelerated healing abilities, Donna might have died.”

“Jared, Donna was conscious part of the time. She knew if they examined her at Many – or anywhere else – she ran the risk of exposing your secret. Donna didn’t want to take that risk. I admit, some of the things you’ve said sound believable, but I don’t think Sir Richard would have risked Donna’s life just so he could get her to the UK.”

“What about Richard, then? Does his father have control of his actions?”

“No... not always. I just can’t believe either one of them would risk her life like that, Jared, especially Sir Richard. Although I can’t explain why, I believe Forrest could have been behind it. I can’t for the life of me think of one good reason why he would want to drive her out of the country, though. She was the one person who might have been able to save his sorry ass. It doesn’t matter now. We will keep Donna safe.”

“Gary, you’re the only person in that organisation that I halfway trust. If Donna is ever in a situation where she needs me, or she asks for me, I want your word that you will let me know. I don’t care who I have to go through, one way or the other, I will be there.”

“Jared, what about your family?”

Jared growled low in his throat, “*Gary – your word!*”

“OK, Jared. You have it. I will. I’m curious about something. You said Donna left her rings behind. Did she say why? I wondered what she did with them. I kind of expected her to keep them.”

“I had hoped she would keep them too, but she didn’t. Donna explained why. Because of what she’d done, Donna didn’t feel worthy to be my wife or to wear my rings. She said maybe someday I would find someone that would be. That’s the part where I wanted to die. The only reasons I exist now are for her and Beth. I live for the possibility of holding Donna in my arms again so I can explain why I walked away, and so I can tell her how wrong she was. There will never be anyone more worthy than Donna. I hope, for everything I’m worth, when I tell her that she’ll forgive me.”

Gary arched an eyebrow. “Jared... what if Donna moves on? What if she honestly believes what she said and looks for happiness with someone else?”

“If I search her mind and no longer find myself there. If I no longer live in her heart, I will set her free.”

“What do you mean, set her free?”

“Donna and I share a telepathic connection. I won’t let go of that until I know for sure. I won’t interfere with her life, but I won’t let go until she tells me to. Do not put her life in danger, Gary!”

“Jared, I am doing everything I can to make sure that does not happen. I love Donna, too. She’s like my little sister.”

“She’s my world, Gary. Every breath I take whispers her name. I meant what I said. If I get the chance, I will take back what’s mine.”

“Honestly, Jared, I don’t think she will ever be able to forget you. I hope you get the chance to talk to her – to be with her – if that’s what she wants. I’m sure when she understands the reason you left was to protect your daughter, Donna will

have no trouble forgiving you. The question is can you forgive her?"

Jared laughed. "Forgive her for what? For giving you samples of her DNA to analyse? I don't care about that Gary. I used that as an excuse. I knew if Donna thought it was her fault then she would let me go. That's what I need her to forgive me for. I don't know if I could take it if she doesn't."

"I'm sure that won't be the case. Just do what I said, get rid of the virus program."

"How do I do that?"

"I've sent a file to your cell phone that will take care of that. You should have it by now. It's another one of my little gems. The program is called 'Dessert'."

"Why would you name a virus program Dessert?"

"Because it's a worm from hell. It devours any file it comes in contact with, for dessert. Be sure you aim it at the right one. After 'Dessert' recovery of the file is not possible. Not even I can save it. That's why it's used as a last resort. Run 'Dessert' and when it asks, tell it to look for 'Acid Rain'. I've gotta run, Donna will be back any minute."

"Let me know what you find out about her cell phone. If Forrest is behind this, it would give me a perfectly good reason for revenge. No matter who it is, if they're in the States, I'll take care of them. I will be in touch."

"OK, Jar - red." The line was dead. "Some things don't change," he mused and locked his cell phone.

Donna finished washing her hair and stepped out of the shower. After slipping on her bathrobe, she towel dried her hair, twisted it into a knot on top of her head and fastened it with a hairclip. She went into the bedroom and started getting dressed. As she reached for her jeans, the guest house phone rang. "Hello?"

"You are with the wrong person," a robotic voice replied.

Donna furrowed her brow. "Pardon?"

"He has no future with you."

She propped the phone against her shoulder and chin as she zipped up her jeans. “What do you mean? Who has no future with me?” Donna narrowed her eyes. “Is this Richard?”

“Walk away or he will suffer. You belong with another.”

Donna tightened her jaw. “I don’t *belong* to anyone!” she snapped, disconnected the call and reached for her wide-tooth comb. “Richard if you think because I slept with you one night that you can bully me away from Sam,” she mused. “You are sadly mistaken!”

“Donna! Sweetheart!” Sam called out from the ground floor as he skipped every other stair. “Are you up here?”

“Sam, what are you shouting about?” Donna frowned and stepped onto the landing. “Of course I’m up here. Where did you expect me to be?”

“Give me your cell phone.”

“Why do you need my cell phone?”

“Donna, please. Just give it to me,” Sam groaned.

Donna pressed her lips into a thin line and narrowed her eyes. “Here!” she huffed and thrust it at him.

Sam switched it off and took out the battery.

“Sam, what’s going on?”

Sam breathed a sigh of relief and pulled her into his arms. He pressed Gary’s speed button. “She’s fine. I’ve got the phone, Bluetooth and Wi-Fi have been turned off, and I’ve taken the battery out. We’ll be there in a couple of minutes,” he said and ended the call. He buried his face in her damp hair and slowly forced the air from his lungs. The idea that someone might have hurt her made him sick to his stomach. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t mean to scare you. After what you said by the river, and then you didn’t answer your cell phone...” he broke off, letting out another long sigh.

Donna pulled back, staring into his worried eyes. “I was taking a shower, Sam. If you hadn’t taken my battery out. Wait a minute. Why *did* you take my battery out?”

“Gary thinks someone has been listening in on your phone conversations.”

Donna's eyes widened. "If someone has been accessing my cell phone through Bluetooth that would explain why the battery keeps going flat."

Sam grinned. "You sound as if you've had this problem before."

Donna snorted. "You'd be surprised what I've been through. Let's go. I need to talk to Gary about this, plus I'm itching to see what he's found out about the cameras."

Sam took Donna's hand and led her to the Hall.

"Good afternoon, Miss Donna," Alan smiled. "Would you like a fresh glass of lemonade?"

Donna furrowed her brow. "Fresh glass?"

Sam groaned. "Damn – I forgot about that. I thought you were coming straight away, so I had Alan take us some drinks to the music room."

Donna smiled. "We're you going to play for me?"

"If we're going professional, I'd like to get some practice in."

"That sounds like fun. Yes, Alan. I'd love a fresh glass of lemonade."

"Same as before?"

"Yes, please. Alan, where is Gary?"

"He's in the library, Miss Donna. Would you like your drinks brought in there?"

"Yes, please, Alan," Sam spoke up.

"Would you like your meals served in the formal dining room, Dr. Kaliea?"

"The morning room is fine with me," Donna interjected. "I was actually looking forward to the rest of your salad from lunch," she continued, turning her attention to Sam.

"What's on the menu, Alan?" Sam asked.

"Spicy lamb steaks with coconut and broad bean rice, and apple crumble with custard for dessert."

“Why don’t we have the salad for lunch tomorrow at the Centre? That way we won’t have to stop and go to the cafeteria.”

Donna smiled. “If the Centre’s cafeteria food is anything like what we had at D’Netics, I’d much rather have yours.”

Sam frowned. “Some things are OK. We’ll have the lamb, in the morning room, Alan.”

Donna held up her hand. “Could I ask a question?”

“Of course, you can, Miss Donna,” Alan smiled and waited.

“Does Alice know how to make coconut layer cake?”

“I’m sure she does. Do you have a specific recipe you prefer?”

“Yes, but it’s a very old American recipe,” Donna sighed.

“Not to worry, Miss Donna,” Alan said, producing a scratch pad and pencil from his pocket. “If you’ll jot down the recipe, I’ll be happy to pass it on to Alice. Would you like that as well as your apple crumble and custard?”

Sam leaned over Donna’s shoulder, reading as she quickly wrote out the recipe. “Alice probably wouldn’t have time to make it for tonight, but I wouldn’t mind having it at a later date,” Donna smiled and handed him the recipe. “I hope you can read it.”

Alan glanced at the recipe. “Cassie’s Coconut Layer Cake, is that right?”

“Yes. Cassie was my...” Donna broke off and swallowed hard. “Cassie was a dear friend of mine, from Louisiana. It was my favourite, and she made it special for me.”

“I’ll give it to Alice and tell her that it was a special request from you.”

“Thank you, Alan.”

“I’ll bring your drinks in shortly,” he said and disappeared.

Sam put his arm around her waist and led her to the library. “It sounded delicious. I’m quite fond of coconut layer cake, too, but I’ve never had it with orange filling.”

“Cassie taught me,” Donna softly smiled. “I’ll make it for you sometime.”

“So, let’s see. There’s one more thing we have in common. The list is growing,” he grinned and kissed the side of her neck.

“It does seem that way.”

“Hi D,” Gary smiled as she entered the room.

“What have you found out about the cameras?” Donna asked.

Gary held out his hand. “First, let’s see if someone is trying to use your cell phone to locate you and listen in on your phone conversations.”

Sam handed him Donna’s cell phone and battery. The first thing Gary did was remove Donna’s SIM card. Then he put the battery back in and turned it on. Once the phone rebooted, he went to the settings and waited. A few seconds later, the Bluetooth light came on and then the Wi-Fi. Gary pressed his finger to his lips, opened the cover and took the battery out again. “Well, I think that question has been answered.”

“So what now?” Sam asked.

Gary sighed. “Without the SIM and RAM chips in it, we know that the ‘nasty’ is being stored in your phone’s memory. I’ll download that, disassemble it and see what it’s doing.”

“What about Sam’s cell phone?” Donna asked.

“That’s a point,” Gary agreed. “Let’s check yours, Sam. If it’s on your cell phone that could be bad news.”

Donna’s eyes widened. “A Bluetooth virus?”

“Quite possibly,” Gary responded. “Turn off Bluetooth and Wi-Fi and then take the battery and SIM card out.”

Sam and Donna watched. As soon as Sam put the battery back in and switched his cell phone on, the Bluetooth and Wi-Fi light lit. Donna looked up at Gary and nodded. “Hmm,” he commented and switched Donna’s cell phone back on. As soon as hers rebooted, Sam’s Bluetooth and Wi-Fi light went out. Gary then took both his, Donna’s, and Sam’s batteries and SIM cards out. When he rebooted his cell phone, his Bluetooth and Wi-Fi light lit. Gary turned Sam’s phone back on, and Gary’s Bluetooth and Wi-Fi went out. Gary made a motion as if

slitting his throat; Sam and Donna took their cell phones offline again. “The little shit – I’ll fix you!”

“Do you know what it is?” Donna asked.

“Oh yes! It’s called a BSV – Bluetooth Seeker Virus and you...” he said, pointing to Donna, “...appear to be its primary target. It most likely spread from *your* cell phone.”

“Forrest must have done it when I was at his penthouse apartment.”

“That’s one strong possibility, but I can think of two others.”

Sam pressed his lips into a tight line. “Richard,” he suggested.

“If it’s him, he knows a lot more about hacking than I thought he did.” Gary shared a knowing glance with Donna; her eyes widened. “I wouldn’t lay the blame on Richard just yet,” Gary continued with a sigh. “Let me see if I can get to the bottom of this. In the meantime, I’m afraid we’re stuck to using landlines.”

Donna frowned. “If our cell phones are infected there’s a good chance that Sir Richard’s and John’s will be infected, as well.”

Gary leaned back in his chair. “Yes there is,” he grinned.

Donna narrowed her eyes. “Why are you grinning, Gary? This is not good!”

“I’m just impressed. You’ve obviously been paying attention to my harking.”

Donna smirked. “Yes, and you’ve obviously been slipping, or your little program would have caught this before it became a major nuisance.”

Sam laughed. “Let’s go work on some songs while Captain Spock here figures this out.”

Gary waited until they were out of earshot and picked up the house phone. “Sir Richard Triplet’s room please,” he said after the general Savoy greeting by the phone receptionist.

“I’m sorry. Sir Richard is not accepting calls. Would you like to leave a message?”

“No, I would not like to leave a message. Tell him it’s Dr. Gary Browne. I need to speak to him urgently.”

“Please hold,” the receptionist responded and rang Sir Richard’s room. “I have Dr. Gary Browne on hold for Sir Richard Triplet. He insists it’s urgent. Would you like me to transfer the call?”

“Yes,” John said, giving Sir Richard a wary look as he waited. “It’s Gary. He says it’s urgent.” Sir Richard took the receiver.

“John this is Gary.”

“Gary, it’s me. What’s going on?”

“Is Richard there with you?”

Sir Richard’s eyes widened. “No – he went out.”

“Damn. I wanted to test my theory.”

“Theory about what? Wait – why didn’t you ring my cell phone?”

“Because I think it’s been infected with a BSV.”

“Pardon?”

“A Bluetooth Seeker Virus, Sir Richard. I think Forrest might have put it on Donna’s cell phone when she was in his penthouse apartment. I need you to turn off your Bluetooth and Wi-Fi and then take out your SIM cards and batteries. Tell John to do the same. When I tell you, put the battery back in and turn the cell phone on again, but do not put the SIM card or memory card back in it.”

“Hang on a second, Gary. I’ll give you back to John, tell him what to do,” Sir Richard responded and handed John his cell phone. Gary explained what he wanted John to do, but when John turned on Sir Richard’s cell phone, nothing happened. The Bluetooth and Wi-Fi connections stayed off.

“OK,” Gary said. “This proves three things. One – you are not the next target in the line. Two – either Richard, or someone else is, and Three – there’s a possibility that Richard or someone else is behind this. If it’s Richard, we can stop it fairly easily.”

“Yeah,” Sir Richard groaned. “I’ll wring his bloody neck!”

“That might be a little drastic,” Gary sighed. “I’m more concerned if it’s someone else because then, I would have to find a way of exposing them. I don’t want to simply eradicate the ‘nasty’ until I know who sent it. The easiest and safest way to do this is send them some dessert.”

Sir Richard frowned. “Gary, that’s drastic.”

“That’s why I want to find out where it came from. If I can do that, I can alter their code to turn it back on itself. It would then bounce from infected phone to infected phone, clearing itself and ultimately destroying the computer that was collecting the data. If that should turn out to be Richard’s laptop – oh well!”

“Gary... if I find out Ricky is behind this...” Sir Richard broke off to control his anger. “Just get to the bottom of this. In the meantime, Sam and Donna stay in her room.”

“Sir Richard, Donna has already...”

“...This is not a choice,” Sir Richard interjected. “This is an order! If Sam wants to go, that’s fine, but Donna stays in the Hall!” Sir Richard ended the call and turned to John. “As soon as Ricky gets back, I want all of these cell phones replaced with Triplet International models only. I want each of them fitted with satellite options. In the meantime, we’ll have to use the landlines and my satellite phone. Gary thinks we’ve all been infected with a Bluetooth Seeker Virus. Unless he can find out where it came from, in order to get rid of it we may have to do something drastic. When we get back, *after* Gary gets rid of the virus – if he’s able to get rid of it - I want the guest house set up as a temporary work area for the genetics team. We can’t wait. I want the complex security system up and running yesterday. I’m fed up with these damn outside leaks. Let’s see if they can find us there.”

“Sir, what about Jared? Could he be behind this?” John asked.

“I hope to hell he’s not!”

Chapter 23

“Mrs. Thundercloud, it’s Gary Browne from England.”

A big smile spread across Nadine’s mouth. “It’s Nada to you, Gary. How are you, and how is my Donna doing?”

“I’m sorry, Nada. It’s been a while. I’m good. It’s hard to tell how Donna is doing. One minute she seems like she’s making some progress, then the next... I don’t know Nada.”

Nadine shook her head. “Jared is much the same. Such a tragic situation for two people who are destined to be together. What can I do for you Gary? I’m sure you didn’t call to make small talk with me.”

“I’m sorry, Nada, but no, I didn’t. I need to talk to Jared.”

“Why didn’t you call him on his cell phone?”

“It’s a long story Nada. I don’t have much time. Donna doesn’t know Jared, and I are still talking. I think if she did, it would make this harder on her.”

“Of course. He’s in the music room.”

“What’s going on with Raging Storm?”

Nadine frowned. “I fear the band is finally coming to a close, Gary,” her voice fell. “The rest of the group are performing at the convention at the end of the month, but not Jared. We all tried talking to him, but he won’t perform. He just can’t take it. Not even this last time. I’m gonna put you on hold and let him pick up in there. He’ll be with you in a minute.”

“OK, thanks, Nada.”

Nadine stopped at the doorway, listening as Jared played. She felt such sadness in her heart for him. “Jared! Gary Browne is on the phone for you.”

Jared paused, his fingers resting over the keys. He let out a slow sigh and reached for the handset, taking it off hold. “Gary, since you’ve called me on this phone, I assume you don’t have good news.”

“No Jared. I don’t. In fact, it’s worse than we thought, but before I go into that, I need to ask you a question. Jared... I need an honest answer. You said you trusted me, well, I feel the same way about you. Are you behind this?”

Jared frowned. “Gary, I won’t explain this, but like I told you before, I don’t need anything to know what’s going on in Donna’s life.”

“I suspected that was what you were talking about earlier – your telepathic bond with her. How does that work, as far as she’s concerned? Can she communicate with you in the same way?”

“No. I won’t let her. I let her sense my presence, but I don’t allow her to get inside my head.”

“Is that fair to her, Jared. It might make things easier on Donna if she knew how you really felt about her.”

“Gary... it’s complicated. Just – tell me what you found out.”

“If you’re not responsible, then that means...” Gary paused. “Hang on a second. Let me check something before I tell you anymore.” Gary accessed the Hall security cameras and landlines on his laptop. “OK, I’m back. I wanted to make sure we hadn’t been compromised at the house. It’s still secure.”

“So you were right?”

“Yes, Jared,” Gary groaned. “Whoever compromised ‘Acid Rain’ did a good job. I can’t use it anymore.”

“Well, this thing you sent me certainly knew what it was doing. There is no trace of your virus program on my cell phone or my computer system. I ran ‘Dessert’ on all of our systems here, including my other house. ‘Acid Rain’ is history, my friend. Does ‘Dessert’ work on any file like that?”

Gary grinned. “Yes it does, Jared, but as I told you before, you have to be specific. If you run ‘Dessert’ without giving it a target file, it assumes you want it to eradicate everything.”

“And that’s the program – the little nasty – you left on Donna’s desktop in her apartment?”

“That’s right. Sooner or later D’Netics mainframe is going to get a lot smaller.”

“Assuming that’s their plan.”

“Whether it’s their plan or not, Forrest will want any information Donna may have left on her computer system. Leaving that laptop decoy was a brilliant idea. When Forrest’s men go back in there, which I’m positive they will, he’s going to think he’s hit the jackpot.”

“But you just said you couldn’t use ‘Acid Rain’ anymore.”

“That version is OK. It’s the version that’s compromised that we have to worry about. ‘Acid Rain’ can’t be compromised through a third party. It has to be direct. That’s why I suspected it happened through Donna’s cell phone. If I’d been thinking straight when I talked to you earlier, I would have tested your phone before we hit it with ‘Dessert.’”

“What difference would that have made?”

“I could have checked to see if you were included in the BSV’s targets. If you were, that would mean we’re wrong, and this thing goes further back. Dammit! Oh well. There’s nothing we can do about it now. We’ll just have to assume we’re right and go from there.”

“Is there anything I can do from this end?”

“Yeah. Has anything else been said about the explosion at the new building at D’Netics?”

“Nothing, other than I think they’re planning on charging me as an accomplice – if they could find me.”

“What do you mean, if they could find you? I just did.” Jared chuckled. Gary rolled his eyes. “You didn’t just happen to be at your father’s ranch - did you?”

“*Redman sees all...*” Jared said in a serious prophetic voice.

“Oh, don’t start with that shaman shit, Jared,” Gary groaned. “I know you have limitations.”

“Unfortunately,” Jared chuckled again. “Let’s just say, my parents are keeping an eye on Donna, as well.”

Gary groaned. “Why didn’t I inherit that seer gene?”

“I’m sorry, Gary. I can’t answer that for you. Back to business. What are you planning on doing to fix this?”

“I need to find the fucking source. Without that, this is going to get nasty.”

“At least you know it’s not affecting the SIM and microSD cards. Surely, once it’s wiped from the cell phone’s OS, won’t it be safe to use again?”

“Providing we can keep it from spreading any further. That’s another problem. I have no idea how much it’s spread. For all we know, its seeker seed could have been sitting out there on a computer somewhere on the other side of the world, waiting to be activated. There’s just no way of telling, unless I can get at the computer it came from.”

“Can’t you track it?” Gary laughed. “That wasn’t meant to be funny, Gary,” Jared growled.

“I wasn’t laughing because I thought it was funny. I was laughing because I’ve been tracing this little bugger almost a solid hour. I’m no closer now to the source computer than I was when I started.”

“Why not just piggyback ‘Dessert’ on that signal.”

“I’ve already thought about that, but, if I eradicate it that way, I lose the source. Without a target file, ‘Dessert’ will eradicate everything in its path. While it may destroy the seeker seed on that computer and that particular path, it won’t affect the others. This is not an ordinary seeker seed. It’s working like a real virus.”

“It’s sitting there, waiting for the right conditions before it attacks.”

“Now you’re getting the picture.”

“Nasty little thing.”

“No joke. I have to admit, I’m fascinated by its design. I’d like to capture it if I can. It would be extremely useful.”

“Well, Mr. Spock, be fascinated all you want to, but you have to get this new toy of yours in a box. Have you explained all this to Sir Richard?”

“Not all of it. I have talked to him, but...” Gary paused. “Hang on a second Jared. I just heard someone coming down the corridor. I need to make sure it’s not Donna. I’ll be right back.”

“Do me a favour, Gary. Don’t press mute or put me on hold.”

Gary winced. “OK, Jared, but this is risky. Don’t make a sound on your end.”

Donna stepped through the doorway. “Well, have you had any luck?”

A lump rose in Jared’s throat, threatening to choke him. He swallowed hard and closed his eyes, listening to the familiar sound. The sweet sound that meant she was alive and well. The sound that filled his heart with warmth and sadness. It was torture for Jared, but he would die a thousand deaths just to hear her voice.

“Not a lot, D, but I’m getting there.”

“Can you take a break and come eat with us? Alice has our meal ready in the morning room. I didn’t see any reason to cause her extra work by messing up the formal dining room. If you need me to, I can bring you something in here.”

“No, that’s all right. I’ll be in there in a couple of minutes. I need a break anyway.” Gary took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “My eyes are starting to cross.”

“Who knows, as soon as I can figure out how to synthesise the antibodies in my DNA, maybe you’ll be able to toss those things in the trash can.”

Gary grinned. “I’m sure I will.”

“Well, hurry up and come on. Sam is starving.”

“Don’t wait. Go ahead and start eating. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Donna rolled her eyes and left. Gary listened until he heard the clicking of her heels against the marble tile fading. “Jared... are you still there?”

Jared’s voice was a low growl. “*Did she say Sam?*”

Gary swallowed hard. “Yes, Jared. She said Sam. Donna and Sam are together. That’s one of the reasons I said not putting the phone on mute would be risky.”

“And when did you plan on telling me about this? I assume it’s the womaniser.”

“Yes, Jared. It’s our doctor - Sam Kaliea.”

“Of all the people in Britain, why the fuck did you let her get involved with him?”

“Jared... being with Sam was Donna’s choice. She’s not the same person you walked away from. She won’t let anyone, including me, Sam or Richard, tell her what to do. Donna’s not as emotional as she was.”

“Bet she’s still scared of spiders.”

“Oh yes!”

“Is she still afraid of flying and elevators?”

“No, not really. About the only phobia she hasn’t been able to conquer is her arachnophobia. None of us can figure that one out.”

“Maybe there are just some things in life you’re not meant to figure out, Gary. Maybe there are some times where you have to take a leap of faith and live with the consequences. Sometimes choice means change. Fate doesn’t often give us a lot of insight on what will be.”

“So it seems, Jared. Look, I have to run. We’ll talk again, but don’t use your current cell phone or anything that it’s been connected to. Anyone else that’s been connected to your cell phone or computer system will likely have the virus on it, as well.”

“I’ll get my security team here and at Wisteria Hall working on it, now that I know what to look for. What about Sir Richard’s men?”

“I’m sure John will contact the ones at Barksdale, but the ones at Wisteria Hall need to be informed. I trust you can take care of it from your end?”

“Yeah, I can do that, but I honestly don’t understand why he left them. I did what I said I’d do. I... left Donna behind.

We're no longer together. There shouldn't be any reason for them to be here."

"Jared... Sir Richard does not like loose ends. He knows how important you and your family are to Donna. Forrest is Triplet International's problem, not yours and not your family's. Sir Richard takes care of his own, and whether you like it or not, because of Donna, you're just as important to him now as you were when you and Donna were together. Sir Richard would not leave you exposed. If you asked him to, he would probably take his men away from the ranch and Wisteria Hall, but he would not pull them out of the country. As long as GW Forrest is alive, and he knows you're important to anyone associated with Sir Richard, you need protection."

"Well, like I told Sir Richard, I can take care of my own."

Gary chuckled sarcastically. "Of course you can, Jared. That's why you and Donna aren't together today. Don't be arrogant about this Jared. Don't be so prideful that you lose everything else important in your life. I've told you before, and I'll tell you again. Sir Richard is an honourable man. He is not the monster that the tabloids or Forrest Enterprises make him out to be. Donna is hurt enough as it is. Don't make her face losing you and Beth for good. If anything were to happen to you, Donna would blame herself, and she would give up."

"I don't want her to stop living, Gary. I don't want her to do what I did, when I lost Sara. One way or the other, Donna and I will be together. It may only be in our dreams, and it may not be in this life, but I will find a way."

"Of that I have no doubt. Think about what I've said. Sometimes loving and protecting someone means allowing others to help *you*. Donna may be with Sam, but she still loves you, and despite your arrogant pig-headed ways, I know you love her, too. Oh, before I forget it, make sure you wipe 'Acid Rain' from your car's computer system, as well. I have to go. If I don't Donna will come back in here. You know how persistent she can be."

"Yes, Gary, I do. I'll be in touch."

“Just make sure you’re careful. It’s not likely to happen, but it is *possible* if you call on the house phone, Donna may answer it. She still doesn’t like staff doing everything for her.”

“*Yeah – I remember that part too. Later, Gary.*” The line was dead. Gary smiled, shook his head and went to the kitchen.

Chapter 24

After Richard left the mall, he looked up one of his many female acquaintances in London and spent the rest of the evening passing the time with her. To his surprise, sleeping with Susanne didn't feel right. He and she had spent many hours among damp and tangled sheets. Why should it be any different now? The only explanation Richard could conjure up in his mind was Donna. One night with her and other women could no longer hold his interests.

Richard couldn't understand. For nearly twenty years, he and Donna hadn't been together, yet he felt as drawn to her now as he had as a teenager. What was the reason behind this? Was it possible for a fourteen year-old boy to fall that deep for a nine year old girl? Maybe, what he felt for her back then was protective obligation. After all, they were best friends. Maybe what he felt for her now was the result of seeing her growing up and blossoming as a young woman, but why did he feel as if she belonged to him? Even though he'd said it hadn't, why did it bother him that she'd been with Jared, and was now with Sam?

He'd vowed that it would never happen again, yet without even trying to, he let Donna under his skin. Why, when he could have any woman he wanted did he want her more than any of them? Was it really love, or something else? She didn't want him. She'd made that clear. Richard was beginning to think maybe Donna was more trouble than she was worth.

Richard crawled in the back of a black cab. "The Savoy," he groaned and sank back in his seat, somewhat lightheaded from the several tumblers of scotch he'd consumed before he left Susanne's apartment. He sat, staring at an image on his cell phone. "Why do I need to settle down?" he muttered.

"Sir?" the cabbie prompted.

“Marriage – it’s a waste of time,” Richard sighed.

The cabbie nodded. “Ah – you’re right there, Mate. *Total* waste of time.”

“It’s just legal formalities – right?”

“That it is, Mate. I say, get it when you can and if she starts talking about rings, hit the road running.”

“It’s a dying institution! Why bother? It’s going to fall through in the end, anyway.”

“Absolutely. Just another way to keep the bloody aristocrat’s and priests happy and later fill the lawyer’s coffers.” The light changed, and the cabbie concentrated on the London traffic.

“Family tradition and the continuation of the bloodline is what it is,” Richard mused. “That’s *all* it is.”

Winning Donna had nothing to do with love. It was all about duty. It always overshadowed love. The need to produce the next generation, procured by status and power. Heartless threats passed down from the highest levels, like all the elite bloodlines. The possibility of losing everything. There were many more eligible women waiting in Richard’s queue. Why Donna? Why did it *have* to be her? True, she was beautiful, and she was talented, but her bloodline was about as pure as the Mississippi ran clear.

“We’re here, Sir,” the cabbie announced, pulling Richard from his internal turmoil.

Richard paid the fare, gave the driver a hefty tip and approached the entrance. He tipped the doorman, as well and went inside. As he stepped into the lift, an overly friendly woman gave him the eye and a come-on smile. Richard cleared his throat and smiled back but made no advance. “Sorry Love,” he said and stepped out onto his floor.

“Give John your cell phone,” Sir Richard commanded.

Richard arched his eyebrows. “Excuse me?” he asked as he closed the door behind him.

“Someone has been using Donna’s cell phone to spy on her and Sam. Gary believes when Donna was at Forrest’s

penthouse, they somehow nicked his virus program, reprogramed it and turned it into a BSV. Please, tell me he's right and you're not the one behind this?"

"No, Dad. I've used a BSV before, but I wouldn't have a clue about how to create or alter one, especially using Gary's virus program as a base. I don't think Forrest would either. He must have a professional computer tech working with him. One thing's for certain, it's not the whacks at D'Netics. They're about as thick as two short planks. If Donna's phone has a BSV on it, then we all do. They would have planted the seed on her phone and fed it from a source computer that could connect to an infinite number of computers around the globe. There's no telling how big the web could be now."

Sir Richard furrowed his brow. "Since when did you learn so much about this stuff?"

Richard chuckled. "Since I started hanging around with Gary, is the answer to that."

Sir Richard looked incredulous. "You always rolled your eyes at Gary's key fingering antics."

"Just because I roll my eyes at something, does not mean I won't use it for my own means. You taught me that, Dad. Use what's available and improvise." He handed John his cell phone.

Sir Richard locked his eyes on John's. "I tried to tell you," John shrugged. "Ricky pays more attention than you think he does. If he put his mind to it, there's probably nothing he couldn't do." John pressed speaker phone, dialed an outside number and waited. "Alan, it's John. Could you please ask Gary to come to the phone?"

"Hi John. I assume this is about the BSV?"

"Yes Gary. I have Ricky's cell phone. What do you want me to do?"

"Do the same thing to it that you did to yours and Sir Richard's. Tell me when you've got it turned back on."

“OK. I’ve reset everything and left the SIM and microSD cards out.”

Gary glanced at Sam and Donna. “OK, let’s see what happens. Turn your cell phone on,” he said to Donna. “When hers is on, turn yours on, then I’ll turn mine on. Let’s see if this thing is following a direct path or jumping all over the place.”

Donna turned her cell phone on and immediately her Bluetooth and Wi-Fi lights lit. When she took the battery out of her cell phone, Sam’s Bluetooth and Wi-Fi lights came on. Then the same thing happened with Gary’s. “So far so good. OK, John, I’m turning my cell phone off now. Tell me whose phone it hits next.”

“It’s mine,” Richard spoke up. “The bloody bastard. I’m laying odds, when I take my battery out; Dad’s wireless will light up like a Christmas tree. Here goes.”

Sir Richard waited, but nothing happened. John tested his, and nothing happened. Gary groaned. “This is not good. Unless we can find out whose cell phone is the next link, we can’t follow this path back to the source computer.”

“So what do we do now?” Sir Richard asked. “How can we find out who the next link is?”

“I could try sending a harmless ping tracker back through the line. Provided the next link is still active, it should bounce from Richard’s cell phone to it and then send back the equivalent of an electrical ping.”

“And what if the next link isn’t active?” John asked.

“Then we have a fifty-fifty chance of finding the path back to the source computer. The line would eventually make it back, but it could take a long time. See, the BSV has the ability to latch on to any available connection, and when it can’t follow its direct target path it looks for the nearest link to send the information back to the source computer. The part that I’m concerned about is it could have a link back through VICi. If it does, we all know how many different directions it could go

from there. It could take some doing to clean her up if that should be the case.”

Richard looked sick. He motioned for John to take the phone off speaker. “Hang on a second Gary,” John said. “We’ll be right back. What is it Ricky?”

Richard frowned. “If there *is* a link back to VICi... then it’s probably my fault.”

Sir Richard groaned. “*Why* would it be *your* fault?”

“I needed to know what I was up against, so I linked in with VICi and used her to search for information on Jared and the band.”

Sir Richard narrowed his eyes. “What?”

Richard snorted. “Don’t act so surprised, Dad,” he grinned. “What did you expect? You didn’t think I would go to America empty handed, did you?”

“Oh, I don’t know, Ricky,” Sir Richard frowned. “I guess I thought since you knew how Donna felt about Jared that you would have been a little more honourable.”

“Jared Thundercloud was competition.”

“*Is*, Ricky,” Sir Richard stressed, holding up an imperious hand.

“OK, is - was – whatever!” he groaned. “Until I saw Donna on stage, I didn’t even *like* country music!”

John closed his eyes, grinned slightly and shook his head. “Same old Ricky,” he chuckled.

Sir Richard inhaled deeply and forced the air out of his lungs. He shook his finger in Richard’s face. “I want this sorted. I also want you to start thinking a little more before you do something impulsive like this again. Pressure is building, Ricky. This entire project could blow up in our faces. I don’t know how much longer I can keep the lid on this. You, and Gary, and whoever else - get your heads together and get something done. I do not want to walk in that meeting tomorrow, with a blunder like this hanging over my head. Put us back on speaker, John.”

“Gary, we’re back,” John said.

“Gary...” Sir Richard interjected. “If I’m on speaker, take me off now.”

Gary swallowed hard and shared a troubled look with Sam and Donna. “I’m here Sir.”

“Collect everybody’s cell phones and lock them in the safe in my office. Issue everyone one of our new cell phones from the complex. They can keep their microSD and memory cards, but I want the SIMs replaced with ours – no exceptions.”

Gary glanced at Donna and stepped out of earshot. “Sir, what about the information stored on our SIM cards. I’m sure Donna has some things she’d rather not lose if you know what I mean.”

“I know Gary, but unless you can give me your word that nothing on those SIM cards can be used like this again, she’ll just have to be satisfied with her memories of Jared and Beth. Can you do that?”

Gary swallowed hard again and pressed his lips into a thin line. “No, Sir. I can’t,” he said resolutely. “Until I can find out more about what they’ve done to ‘Acid Rain’ I can’t give you my word.”

“*Then I’m sorry,*” Sir Richard ended the call.

Gary slowly exhaled and turned off the handset. He turned and walked back to where Sam and Donna were talking. “Sam... D... take your microSD cards out of your cell phones and give them to me.”

Without hesitation, Sam took his card out and gave his cell phone to Gary. Donna stepped back. Her eyes widened. “Why do you need my SIM card, Gary? You already said it hadn’t been affected.”

“Sir Richard isn’t taking chances. Everyone is getting one of our new cell phones.”

Donna studied Gary’s eyes. “Will you at least give me a chance to transfer my MP3s and photos?”

Gary sighed deeply and shook his head. “I can’t D.”

Donna swallowed the lump in her throat. “*Gary... please,*” she whispered.

Gary shook his head again. “I’m sorry, D.”

Donna started struggling with the cover.

Sam frowned and studied her eyes. “I’ll take it out for you,” he offered.

“Thank you.” Donna’s hand shook as she placed her cell phone in his hand. “I’m going to step outside for some air.”

“I’ll join you,” Sam said.

Gary waited until Donna was out of earshot. “Sam, I need to go to the complex and pick up some of our cell phones.”

“Sir Richard wants us to start using them now? I thought they were for when we moved.”

“They were supposed to be, but this BSV has him nervous. He knows if we’re using our satellite phones, the only way anyone could get at them would be to have a direct link to VICi’s transmitter. Anyway, can you keep an eye on things here until I get back?”

“Why not take me, and Donna with you and we can give her a quick tour while we’re there?”

“I would, but I think Sir Richard wants Donna to know a little bit more about the project before we show her the complex. She doesn’t know the level of advanced technology we have available there.”

“Has he said anything about when we’ll be moving?”

Gary studied Sam’s eyes. “No, but I know it will be soon. I assume you’ll be keeping Joyce on as your nurse.”

“I had planned to.”

“Have you told her anything about the move?”

“We’ve talked. She knows it’s permanent, but I haven’t explained how remote the complex is.”

“She’s not achluophobic, is she?”

“As far as I know she’s not.”

“Gary got in his car and put the key in the ignition. “I guess we’ll know soon enough,” he chuckled. “I’ll be back as soon as

I can. In the meantime, communicate with me through this,” he said, handing Sam a handheld radio.

Sam arched an eyebrow. “Isn’t a walkie-talkie a little clumsy? Anyone tuned into the right frequency would be able to listen in.”

Gary grinned. “If it were ordinary that would be true. The signal sent out from this radio is on a scrambled frequency, and the signal itself is scrambled. By the time they figure that out and decode the message, I won’t be anywhere near. I’ll be fine, Sam, but thanks for the concern.” Gary closed the door and pulled out of the garage.

Chapter 25

Sam walked through the conservatory and stepped out onto the back portico. Donna was lying on her back, on the grass; her arms propped under her head, knees bent, staring up at the sky. Donna glanced at him when she heard him skipping down the concrete steps and then turned her attention skyward again. Sam propped up on one elbow and stretched out beside her. “Sweetheart, what are you doing?”

She turned to face him and softly smiled. “Star gazing, getting back in touch with myself,” she responded, staring up into his aqua eyes.

“What do you mean, getting back in touch with yourself?”

She sighed and looked back up at the stars. “Things are out of whack. I needed to put myself back in balance so I could feel connected again.”

“You’re very attuned with things around you, aren’t you?”

“I try to be, but sometimes negative vibes get in the way.”

“What negative vibes?”

“Residual memories and feelings that I’ve boxed away.”

Sam frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Donna softly chuckled. “It doesn’t matter.” She caressed the hair at the nape of Sam’s neck, pushing her fingers through it, and gently grazing his skin with her fingertips. “You’re a really special person, Sam.”

Sam grinned. “I’m sure if you stick around me long enough, you’ll change your mind about that.”

Donna softly smiled and kissed him. “I don’t think I will.”

Sam deepened the kiss and eased on top of her, resting his weight on his elbows. “I hope you don’t,” he whispered, kissing her again. He rolled over on his back. Donna rested her head on his shoulder and looked back up at the starry sky.

“Haven’t you ever done this?”

Sam pulled her close and kissed her temple. “What? Lay on the grass with a beautiful woman in my arms and look at the stars? Sure. Hasn’t everybody?”

“Not just look at the stars, Sam – I mean *really* look at them. Appreciate them for what they are. It makes you feel so small and insignificant. Just think of all those worlds out there – tiny specks of light. Some that died billions of years before their first spark reached the Earth, yet to us, there they are. Life is so fickle.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

“Life! It’s so fragile. It’s precious and so mysterious. I mean, we have theories of how it all began with the big bang and evolution but, when you lie here and look up at this view, all the scientific jargon doesn’t seem to matter anymore. It’s just there, and we’re here and right now, this is the only moment that matters.”

Sam smiled and rolled over to face her. He put an arm around her waist and pulled her body tight against his. “Sweetheart, you have a wonderful outlook on life. Not many people today even bother to look at the sky, let alone speak in awe of its grandeur.”

“Think about it, Sam. People push and shove and rush through their lives, and for what – money - power? All the money in the world couldn’t buy a moment like this. All the power in the world couldn’t compare to this. I could lay here in your arms for hours like this. I’m sorry I’m not one of your ordinary lovers who hasn’t a care in the world, but to satisfy your body’s desires.”

Sam frowned. “Sweetheart, you more than satisfy my body’s desires. You make me believe I can be more than I am. That change – even for me - is possible.”

Donna studied his eyes for a long while. “Then you’re OK with staying in my room instead of your apartment, or alone in the guest house?”

Sam smiled. “Of course I’m all right with it. I’m with you. That’s all that matters to me. Richard might have a problem

with us being here, but I've been dealing with his arrogance for years. Who knows, maybe Sir Richard will put him in the guest house."

Donna laughed. "I doubt that." She stood and held out her hand. "Come on, let's get a shower and get to bed. I want to be rested up for my first day at my new job. Where's Gary? Has he gone to bed?"

Sam followed her into the house. "He had to take care of something. He'll be back in a little while."

"Should we wait up for him?"

Sam scooped her up in his arms as they approached the grand staircase. "I don't think so. He'll call me if he needs anything." He stepped onto the landing. "Which is your room?"

"Two doors down," Donna smiled.

Sam set her feet on the floor and opened the door. "Impressive," he commented. "I can see why you would prefer this to the guest house."

Donna closed the door and wrapped her arms around his neck. She kissed him slowly and thoroughly. "I like it a lot more now," she grinned and tugged him through the sitting room to the bathroom. She locked her eyes with his and started unbuttoning his jeans. "Money may be important to some people, Sam, but it's not to me," she whispered and kissed him again.

Sam kissed her back. "I'm beginning to feel the same way."

The next morning, places were set for Sam and Donna at the breakfast table. Gary was already half through his elaborate breakfast, when they entered the morning room. "Good morning Dr. Rigden, Dr. Kaliea," Alan said as he seated Donna. "Would you like coffee or tea?"

"Coffee with Coffee-mate, please," Donna spoke up.

"Dr. Kaliea?"

“Same here,” he responded sitting beside Donna. He crooked his finger and leaned close to her ear. “I was right,” he whispered.

Donna furrowed her brow and leaned her head. “Right about what?” she whispered back.

“You’re extremely sexy in a set of scrubs,” he whispered against the skin of her neck and kissed her.

Gary glanced at them and softly smiled. “Sleep well, Sam?”

Sam grinned at Donna. “Who said I slept?” He motioned to the two black rectangular boxes on the table beside Gary. “Everything go all right last night?”

“Yes.”

“What’s in the boxes?” Donna asked.

“Yours and Sam’s new cell phones....”

Alice appeared with a fresh pitcher of orange juice. “What would you like for breakfast?” she asked, greeting them with a smile.

“I’ll have a bowl of muesli, please, Alice. Morning, Gary.”

Gary glanced up. “...I’ll tell you about them after breakfast,” he responded after wiping his mouth. “Sam, are you ready for another crash course in advanced genetics?”

“Raring to go...” Sam responded. “I’ll be up there with you as soon as I see what’s going on in the infirmary. It shouldn’t take over half an hour or so,” he said, reaching for the pitcher of orange juice.

“Miss Donna, would you like a bowl of muesli?”

“Yes thank you, Alice - with strawberries and bananas, please.” She furrowed her brow and stared in awe at the plate of food in front of Gary. “Are you planning on being my lab rat? What *is* that on your plate?”

“Instant heart attack,” Sam chuckled, pouring juice over his cereal. Donna glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and frowned. “Orange juice – on cereal!”

“Better for you than milk – less saturated fat.”

Donna dropped slices of strawberry and banana in her muesli and reached for the pitcher of milk. “I’ll take the risk.

What about the fish and chips we had Friday night? They were loaded with saturated fats!”

“Chips – I agree, but the fish is OK, as long as you don’t eat the batter, which *I* didn’t,” he grinned.

“I recognise the bacon and scrambled eggs...” Donna said, turning her attention back to Gary, “...but what is that other... stuff?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

Gary pointed with his knife, “Devilled kidney, black pudding, and toast with marmalade. It’s a posh English breakfast, washed down with a cup of hot tea, and it’s absolutely delicious.”

Donna looked incredulous. “And just *what* is ‘black’ pudding?”

Sam cleared his throat. “Sweetheart... you don’t want to know.”

Gary was as straightforward as always. “It’s made from pig’s blood and lumps of fat. It’s really quite tasty. You just have to forget what it’s made from.”

Donna glanced at Sam, twisted her face and swallowed hard. “Sorry I asked.”

“I tried to warn you,” Sam chuckled.

“At least I won’t get hungry before lunch!” Gary spoke up defensively.

“If you live to see lunch,” Donna interjected. “I can’t believe you put that stuff in your body!”

“So what are we doing first, Pretty Lady?” Sam asked.

“That would depend on what he’s found out,” Donna sighed, turning her attention back to Gary. “You said there was something odd about the shape of my chromosomes?”

“Not all of them. Just, the one we share - your maternal X chromosome.”

“In what way?” Sam interjected.

“It’s not something you would notice, but, when the computer analysed her DNA, a leg of one of her X chromosomes was extended as if something had been added to it.”

Donna frowned. “If it wasn’t that noticeable, how did you find out?”

“I compared it to a copy of mine. Except for the extended part, they were identical.”

“If it’s been transcribed into my DNA that would mean it’s permanent.”

Gary nodded. “Yes and any children you have would stand a fifty percent chance of carrying this enhanced healing gene, as well. I wouldn’t mind having it myself, but I think I’ll wait until we figure out whether or not it has any ill sideeffects. Although it might be useful, I don’t particularly want to grow an extra set of arms.”

Sam laughed. “It would certainly mean a drastic change of wardrobe.”

Donna glanced at Sam and softly smiled. “If you’ve found what we’re looking for...” she said, turning her attention back to Gary, again, “...the question is have you been able to replicate it.”

“Replicating - no problem. Transcribing it – that’s been a bit tricky. We need a universal vector. Everything I’ve tried doesn’t seem to work.”

“What have you been using as a vector?”

“Several, D, but let’s discuss this when we get to the Centre. There’s something I want to show you first. He slid one of the black boxes to Sam and the other one to Donna. Have a look at those.”

Donna furrowed her brow as she examined hers, testing its weight in her hand. “Other than it’s extremely light and thin, this doesn’t seem any different than an ordinary cell phone. How is using this one going to be any safer than using the ones we had?”

“These phones were specially designed in our electronics lab. They have three different settings: one that uses a standard cellular phone network, one that uses our satellite network and one that works like a two-way radio. You use the switch on the side to choose which frequency to transmit on. Someone might

be able to listen in on our conversation, on the standard cellular network, but they won't be able to on the other two settings, especially not the shortwave radio frequency, and even on the cellular network, the signal is scrambled between point A and point B."

"Why couldn't I have transferred the information from my old SIM card to this one?"

"Because, D," Gary sighed, "...there's a slight possibility our SIM cards had been hacked. They're in Sir Richard's office, locked in his safe. The information is still on them. If I can figure out a way to safely transfer the information, I'll get your stuff back to you D, but for now, please try to understand why Sir Richard is doing this."

"OK – whatever," she groaned with a dismissive wave. "So, I just keep it on this first setting for standard cellular usage?"

"For now – yes," Gary said. "I'll explain some more about them on the way to work. We'd better leave now," he said, glancing at his watch.

"Let me grab my MP3 player from my room," Donna said, pushing her chair under the table. "I'll go nuts without my music."

Sam stood and grabbed his and Donna's laptops. "We'll wait for you in the car."

Sam crawled in the back seat and buckled up. He leaned forward. "You haven't talked to her about the death gene project, have you?"

"No," Gary groaned. "I'm dreading that part, too. Donna thinks it's a waste of time."

"Why would she think that?"

"Because people have been researching it for years. Most scientists, like me, who still pursue it get laughed out of their careers. I'm hoping since you know about it now, that you'll be able to help me convince her. Donna's enhanced healing gene is the answer – of that – I'm sure. We just need to find a way of transcribing it."

“Surely your ancient drosophila will do the trick, *but* then again, who needs an immortal bug.”

“If we’d been able to get our version to work on mammals, this would have been a lot easier. Unfortunately, if I’m right only a very small percentage of the population will be affected by this enhanced gene. Without the right genetic sequence and a stable vector to deliver it, we don’t have anything, *but* our immortal bug.”

Sam forced air through his parted lips. “And, who needs an immortal bug....”

“And that’s *exactly* what D is going to say.”

Chapter 26

Knowing Donna's distaste for lifts, Gary hesitated before pressing the call button. "Would you rather take the stairs?"

Donna swallowed hard. "No, I'm fine. I'll take the elevator."

"Lift – D – over here we call them lifts," he said and stepped inside.

"Call it a tin box suspended from a steel cable if you want. To me it's still an elevator!" she responded and stepped in beside Sam.

Gary pressed the button and turned. "You seem to be working through your phobias. First flying and now lifts. There may be hope for you yet, D."

Sam grinned, wrapped an arm around her waist and kissed the top of her head.

Donna smiled. "I assume you've installed my simulation software and interfaced it with the Centre's mainframe?"

"Yes...."

"Including my CTZ5 research from D'Netics?"

"Yes, D."

"No more secrets? Sam knows about all of this?"

"Yes, sweetheart," Sam spoke up. "I have been fully briefed on both projects."

"Both?" Donna furrowed her brow. "Sam has been working on the Progeria project, as well?"

"In a round-about way," Gary said. "You can freely talk about either project around Sam."

"Good, that makes things a lot easier. Did you have any problems interfacing my software with yours?"

Gary snorted. "Are you trying to insult me?"

Joyce and Mary were standing outside the medical conference room talking while they waited for Sam. Joyce was facing the

opposite direction, away from the lifts. “Well, I guess I was wrong about Sam getting his hooks into Donna,” Mary frowned. “Looks like that’s not all he’s had in her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Guess who just stepped out of the private lift?”

Joyce turned in time to see Sam dip his head and kiss Donna before he stepped out of the lift. She swallowed the lump in her throat and turned. “It still doesn’t mean anything. You know Sam. Nothing ever lasts with him. If Donna picks him over Richard, she’s a fool.”

Mary sneered. “You did.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Let’s face it Joyce, you could have bedded Richard long ago if you’d given him a little encouragement. I certainly didn’t have any trouble bedding him *or* Sam. Bet I still could, now that Donna’s taken a fancy to Newcastle’s most eligible.”

Images from last night flashed through Joyce’s mind. She jutted her chin. “Who said I wanted to bed Richard?”

“I wouldn’t worry about Donna too much,” Mary grinned. “She looks too wholesome to hang on to someone like Sam. That man’s sex appetite is insatiable, and oh can he....”

“...Shut up Mary!” Joyce snapped. Mary frowned and went inside.

“Good morning, Joyce,” Sam grinned. “Is everyone ready?”

“Waiting on you, Sam,” Joyce responded.

“Then let’s get this over with. I have more important things to do.”

Sir Richard arrived for his meeting in London ten minutes early. He was surprised when the Foreign Secretary assistant met him and told him the meeting would be delayed for another half hour. This had never happened before, especially when Sir Richard stressed that he was pressed for time. That could only mean one thing; someone from Forrest Enterprises and the African representative for The Order had already met with the

Foreign Secretary. Together, they'd managed to influence his decision about reopening the Kilimanjaro Project as a secondary location for the space elevator.

Now Sir Richard would be forced to use all his efforts - costing Triplet International and the Ecuadorian government time and money - to convince the Foreign Secretary that whatever evidence he'd been provided with was unfounded.

Gary decided to wait for Sam before telling Donna about the death gene project. She spent time organising her desk and workstation. She double checked the file system to make sure her simulation software was set up properly. Half an hour later Sam showed up. "It's about time," Gary groaned.

"I had to reshuffle staff responsibilities. We could use another surgeon. I don't suppose you know of anyone."

Gary grinned, "Not at the moment, but ask me again sometime in the future."

Sam arched an eyebrow. "Have you told her?"

"No, I was waiting for you."

"Coward," Sam snorted. "Where is she?"

"In the back, going through my research on the enhanced healing gene."

Sam poured three mugs of coffee and handed Gary one. "Let's go ruffle her feathers."

Donna glanced up as they entered the room. Sam tenderly kissed her. "Here you go sweetheart - with Coffee-mate"

"Thank you."

Sam straddled a chair and facing her; one side of his mouth turned up. "For the kiss or the coffee?"

Donna smiled. "Both." She turned her attention to Gary. "Are we ready to begin?"

He exhaled slowly. "You should be able to log on the network now. Use your same logon information. When it asks for the authorisation code, type in uppercase letters, DRMB1B. Read through it while Sam and I drink our coffee. We'll go from there."

With her coffee in one hand, her mouse in the other, for the next five minutes, Donna read through the notes and journals of what she believed would to be Gary and Richard's research on identifying the gene or genes, responsible for Progeria. She narrowed her eyes. "This is what you wanted my research for?" Gary looked up. "You must be kidding me!" she groaned.

"No, sweetheart. He's not kidding," Sam responded.

Donna glanced at Sam and turned her attention to Gary. "Are you and Richard completely mad? You've wasted all this time extending the life of a fucking fruit fly. Why? They're born. They live for a couple of months, and they die! That's the story of their life - why interfere?"

"Seven months sweetheart," Sam calmly interjected.

"Without a sign of aging," Gary added.

Her eyes widened. "You've extended the life of a drosophila to seven months?"

Gary nodded. "Yes, and we expect to get at least another three years out of them."

"As interesting and *appealing* as this sounds, what does it have to do with my research?"

"I assume you're familiar with HGPS," Sam said.

"Of course," Donna scoffed. "It's commonly known as Progeria - the old age disease. It's a genetic abnormality which causes rapid ageing beginning in childhood. It's rare, and there are no known cures. Patients usually die of old age by the time they're thirteen. Good enough for you?"

Sam cleared his throat. "Five years ago, I took a blood sample from a six-year-old boy with HGPS. He looked old enough to draw his pension. I consulted with Gary and Richard, who figured out the cause, was a faulty gene. They were interested in how that gene..."

Donna held up her hand. "...Stop! I need to know what you've been working on recently."

Sam frowned, "I was getting to that. What you *don't* know is the cancer treatment was a blind alley. They began looking into the aging process."

“...D,” Gary interrupted. “...Assuming we *could* stop the aging process, how would you eradicate all diseases?”

“Simple, identify the death gene and...” she broke off. “Are you gonna spend the rest of your career chasing the ‘elixir of life’?”

“He’s not *chasing* it, sweetheart,” Sam spoke up.

Gary grinned. “I’m ninety-nine percent confident I’ve found it.”

Donna’s mouth gaped. She leaned back in her chair and took some deep breaths.

“Unfortunately,” Gary continued, “it’s inconsistent with mammals. It works for bugs, but what good is a bug that lives ten times its average lifespan?”

“Hell - if it were a wasp,” Donna commented. “I used to be allergic to the damn things.”

Sam cocked his head and frowned. “Used to be?”

“Enhanced healing gene, Sam. We’ll talk about it tonight. Go on Gary.”

“Richard and I couldn’t afford to publish our findings to the science journals.”

“This is where I got excluded from the project - until now,” Sam said.

Donna glanced at him and turned her attention back to Gary who didn’t miss a beat.

“For the last two years we’ve worked with the protein lamin A. For several years, we’ve known its normal function was to destroy damaged cells. A mutated form of lamin A is responsible for Progeria. Richard and I wanted to know how lamin A and its mutated form, functioned in cells.”

Donna shook her head. “You and a thousand other scientists.”

Gary arched an eyebrow. “Our research shows it’s not only the death gene, which is involved. We need to alter the gene, so damaged sections of DNA are marked for transcription. We need a new section of code that induces stem cell behaviour,

detects the marked DNA, and either repairs it or tags the cell for destruction.”

Donna frowned and shook her head again. “I don’t know about this.”

“It works sweetheart.” Sam interjected.

“We developed a gene therapy, which repaired the two damaged sections of DNA responsible for aging,” Gary continued.

Donna folded her arms and stared at Gary. “OK, if it works - how?”

“Richard and I modified the HRV-A virus.”

Donna arched an eyebrow. “You modified the common cold virus, and it worked?”

“After much trial and error, we developed a vector. It sporadically worked on genetically-enhanced lab rats. It didn’t work well on human tissue cultures. Without a safer and more stable delivery system, we know we won’t get approval to test it on humans for the next fifty years - if ever. Besides, we can’t take the risk of the story leaking out.”

“Did you consider the moral implications of what this could mean to society?” Sam asked.

Gary shoved a hand through his hair. “The ethics!” he groaned in exasperation. “Sam the bloody...” he broke off and took a breath. “As scientists and researchers, if we agonize over the morals and ethics, we’d still be in the dark ages. Progress *demand*s sacrifice! If technology is to move forward - it will, one way or the other - society must yield to the times. Who, in their rightful mind wouldn’t want a society where death and disease are things of the past?”

“What about over-population, lack of living space, and famine?” Sam argued.

“Whose side are you on Sam? You’re a doctor. It’s your duty to heal the sick and prevent death whenever possible.”

Donna sighed; she listened intently to their arguments. She understood their points of view – both were right. If they

weighed the ethics in every situation, people would still be dying of pneumonia and tuberculosis.

“Sam - Gary,” she said in a slow even voice. “There’s no right answer to this. Nobody wants to die. It’s human nature, but Mother Nature made that decision millions of years ago.”

Sam scratched the back of his neck. “I’m sorry, Gary, I have to side with Donna. We’re biologically engineered to die.”

Gary shook his head. “What if this weren’t the case Sam? What if someone or something, programmed DNA to *make* us die and, thereby, evolve faster? What if our natural state were immortal, like that of the amoeba?” He turned his attention to Donna. “How would it make you feel to find out we’re right, and all those people who died, didn’t have to?”

Donna lowered her head. Her mind was overloaded with flashbacks of her own experiences with death; especially the loss of her parents and grandparents. The emptiness bled like an open wound. “As much as I’d love to go along with this, I *have* to play the devil’s advocate. If we let this genie out of the bottle, too much could go wrong!”

Gary took her hand and studied her eyes. “D,” he said softly. “When we mapped the human genome the genie *was* out of the bottle.”

Caught off guard Donna quickly recovered. “We don’t have the right to make this kind of decision, for the whole of the human race.”

Gary exhaled. “So does this mean you and Sam don’t wanna help us?”

Donna looked up at him. “I never said that...”

“Donna,” he persevered. “Doctors and scientists have worked for centuries, to increase human lifespan. Were they wrong to try?”

“No, but Gary you’re missing the point.”

Sam quietly mulled things over. He cleared his throat. “Sweetheart. There’s something we’re not considering. We have a chance to wipe out death and disease in a single stroke.

As doctors, isn't this our ultimate goal? Where would we be if Jenner chose not to produce a smallpox vaccine, or Fleming hid his discovery of penicillin?"

Donna shook her head and smiled. "You two should run for office. All right, Gary, let me show you what you're doing wrong."

The door to the Foreign Secretary's office opened; Sir Richard emerged. "Let's go!" he said gruffly, his face reddened with rage.

John shared a worried look with Richard. "This doesn't look good," he said and followed Sir Richard and Richard to the lift.

Richard pushed the call button. "What happened, Dad," he asked as they stepped into the lift.

"Not here!" Sir Richard hissed and glanced at the other people in the lift with them. "In the car!" he forced through his teeth.

After lunch, Donna, Gary, Sam and the lab team worked on the project until early in the afternoon. Working together, Donna and Gary had been successful in forming a base-pair match, but Donna wasn't satisfied with their success rate. She'd studied all of Richard's and Gary's notes. She'd repeated the same tests, and followed their instructions to the letter. According to her calculations, she should at least be getting the same results, if not better than they had, but she hadn't. She was starting to get aggravated. She laced her fingers behind her neck and bent her head down. Donna was getting discouraged. "I just don't understand. Something *has* to be wrong," she groaned.

Gary and Sam looked up from their work. "What is it D?" Gary asked.

Donna rubbed her eyes. "Something is seriously wrong with my calibrations."

"How so, D?"

“I’ve repeated every test you’ve done, using the same data, and when I put it through my calibration program, I can’t come anywhere *near* your results.”

“Are you sure? Let me have a look,” Gary said.

Donna gave him her chair. She walked next to the window and looked out, peering through the blinds. Below them were a crowd of protestors and reporters that appeared to be camped out at the entrance to the gate of the Centre. “Who are they?”

Sam walked next to her and started massaging her shoulders and neck. She let out a long sigh. “Idiots - for the better part. They have no idea what’s really going on here.”

Donna shook her head. “And do you think it would help if they did?”

“Probably not,” Sam responded. “They don’t care that we’re working to help them live longer. As far as they’re concerned we’re playing God. They’d just as soon blow up the building with us in it.”

“Sam,” she said, “Are you so certain we’re helping. Are we really ready to deal with overpopulation and famine on this scale? We seem to be better at destroying life than prolonging it.”

“This is going to take a while,” Gary interjected. “Why don’t you two take a break?”

Sam smiled. “That sounds like a good idea to me. Snack in the cafeteria?”

“Yeah,” Donna agreed. “I think it’s time for one of those unhealthy doughnut breaks.”

Gary chuckled. “I’ll ring you if I come up with anything.”

Chapter 27

The lab technician placed a rolled cotton wad over the bend of Forrest's arm and pulled the needle out; securing the wad with a piece of clear medical tape. "Thank you, Mr. Forrest," she said. "I'll get the results to Dr. Mobley as soon as possible. He'll be in to discuss them with you as soon as he's done making morning rounds."

"How long will that take?" Forrest growled.

The lab tech looked at her watch. "Probably about an hour. Would you like to go for a cup of coffee, or a snack in the cafeteria? I can let the nurse know, and she can contact you," she smiled pleasantly.

"You've got thirty minutes to get the results. If you don't have them by then, Mobley can contact me at D'Netics. I have a company to run. I can't wait around all fucking day for him to tell me he's given me the wrong dosage of medicine!"

"I'll try, Mr. Forrest, but I'm not sure I can. There are a few patients ahead of..."

Forrest glared at her. "Then you'd better make sure mine gets moved to the top of your list, Little Missy, or you can look for another job – in the amazon!"

The lab tech swallowed hard. "I'll see what I can work out for you, Mr. Forrest," she said and closed the door, flipping up her middle finger.

"Having problems with a VIP patient?" a nurse asked as they walked together.

"Just GW Forrest. That sorry bastard thinks he owns the whole fucking world."

"He probably does," the nurse chuckled as they stepped into the elevator. "There are only two major companies in the World anyway. Forrest Enterprises in America and Triplet International in Europe. I hear Sir Richard is just about as bad

as Forrest. They both think they can snap their fingers and make anything happen.”

“That may be true,” the lab technician said. “I can tell you one thing for sure. GW Forrest won’t be around much longer.”

“Excuse me,” a man near the back of the elevator interjected. “Did you just say GW Forrest was leaving D’Netics?”

“Oh he’s leaving it all right – in a pine box!” the lab tech replied. “GW Forrest is dying of leukaemia.”

“What form of leukaemia?”

“CML – why? What difference does it make?”

“I was just curious,” the man said with a sly grin. He took out a little notebook and jotted down a few notes.

The elevator stopped, and the lab tech and nurse got off.

“God,” the lab tech said. “I hope he wasn’t a reporter. I’ll be on Forrest’s hit list.”

“Doesn’t really matter,” the nurse said. “If he was a reporter, he didn’t take down our names. I wouldn’t worry anyway. He’ll be dead before he figures out who we are.”

Forrest stood and everything around him started fading out. His heart started pounding as it struggled to pump the remaining red blood left in his withered body. His white blood cells had devoured most of it. He rolled his sleeve up, grabbing the edge of the clear tape, securing the gauze to his arm and yanked. He grimaced as the tape brought off several hairs with it. He looked at the trash can, swore and tossed the soiled gauze on the floor. Staggering back to the exam table, he rolled his sleeve down and buttoned the cuff back. He glanced at his watch, groaned and unlocked his cell phone.

“Missy, patch me through to the research department. I need to speak to Rigden.”

Melissa’s eyes widened. “Mr. Forrest, Dr. Rigden is gone. She met with you on Thursday and turned in her resignation. She left Shreveport and hasn’t been heard from since.”

“What the fuck kind of game are you playing, Missy? Her contract doesn’t run out until the end of September, and I sure as hell didn’t meet with her on Thursday. I wasn’t even in the country on Thursday. If you want to keep your job....”

“With all due respect, Mr. Forrest. I’m no longer your secretary. You hired Kim Gentry in my place and sent me back to my old post about a month ago.”

“I did what? Are you listening to me, or has your fake blonde rubbed off on you. I have been out of the country for the last two months. Now stop playing games with me or I’ll put you in the mail room – or worse.”

“Mr. Forrest. I am not playing games with you. Right after, Dr. Rigden had her surgery....”

“What surgery? What’s wrong with her?”

“Mr. Forrest, have you been drinking?”

“Oh, fuck it. I’ll deal with you - when I get there. I want a report of everything that’s been going on for the last two months waiting on my desk, in fifteen minutes. Include Rigden’s contract with the report. I’ll sue the little bitch. Tell Wilson I expect him to be waiting in my office, or else! ” Forrest ended the call. He felt something tickle his top lip. He touched the back of his hand to his nose.

Dr. Mobley tapped on the door and entered the room. Forrest looked down at his hand and glared at the doctor. “What the fuck is going on?”

“I told you not to upset yourself, Mr. Forrest,” Dr. Mobley said, holding a box of tissues in front of him. “I could hear you shouting all the way down the hall. I have other patients.”

Forrest jerked several tissues from the box and held them under his nose. “I’ll shout whenever I fucking well feel like it! You said the treatment worked!”

Dr. Mobley sat behind his desk, opened the folder and read through the test results. He sighed and closed it. “I’m sorry Mr. Forrest. The treatment had appeared to be working, but this last blood test confirms my suspicions. There’s been very little

change in your condition. The treatment slowed down the white cell growth, but it hasn't stopped it. I'm afraid your remission is over."

"How long?"

"Unless we find something soon, all I can give you is three months - six at the most. I *am* sorry."

Forrest's eyes burned with rage. He swallowed the ache in his throat and slowly stood. "Where are you going, Mr. Forrest? In your condition, you should be hospitalised."

"No fucking hospital!"

"Then at least let me give you a transfusion to counteract your white cell count."

"How long will it take?"

"A couple of hours."

"Then send someone to my penthouse apartment over at D'Netics. I have business to attend to. They can give it to me when I'm done," he said and slammed the door. His driver stood. "Take me to D'Netics."

Melissa knocked on Wilson's office door. "We need to talk."

Wilson raked something in his top desk drawer and quickly closed it. "Missy, I told you. I can't. Too much is at stake."

"Well, you better think about getting out now, because it's fixing to hit the fan."

"What do you mean?"

"Forrest just called. Something is seriously wrong with him. He wants a report of everything that's happen in the last two months on his desk, in fifteen minutes. He also said to tell you to be waiting in his office, or else. Kevin, what's going on? He didn't remember meeting with Donna on Thursday or her resigning. He didn't act as if he knew anything about moving me back to my old post or hiring Kim Gentry. He also claimed he hasn't been in the country for the last two months."

Wilson swallowed the fear in his throat. "You know him Missy," he chuckled dismissively. "He was probably drunk or

high on something. He'll be fine when he sobers up." He stood. "Do you have the report together?"

"Yes, but..."

"Give it to me. I'm sure when he reads it, he'll remember. Don't worry about it."

Wilson followed Melissa back to her desk and collected the report. "For the time being, take what you need to function, get back to your desk outside Forrest's office and if he says anything, tell him you don't know what he's talking about. Play dumb."

Melissa grabbed her things and followed Wilson to her old desk. She quickly set things up as they were before and tried not to look nervous. She watched Wilson use his key to get in Forrest's office. She waited until Wilson disappeared behind the door and opened her cell phone. "Mildred, something very strange is going on here. I need to speak to Sir Richard urgently. It's about Donna."

Wilson knew there were only two places the advanced security cameras could be turned off; Forrest's office and the one in his penthouse apartment. With Forrest on his way back to the office, Wilson had to act fast. Once he'd shut the camera off in Forrest's office, he unlocked his cell phone.

"Honey, it's me. Did everything go OK with your doctor's appointment? Did you find out what was wrong?"

"Yes, he said it was a kidney infection that was causing the Braxton contractions. He gave me a round of antibiotics. He's still talking about inducing labour."

"I thought it was still too soon."

"Well, technically it is, but he said if this infection doesn't clear up, it could develop into something worse. He gave me something for the Braxton contractions and told me to stay off my feet. He's hoping the antibiotics will help. If not..."

"Where are you?"

"Waiting for the driver. There was a problem with the car, on the way here. Something to do with an engine sensor. The

driver took it to the shop. He said it would – hang on – he’s here now. I’m going to put you on mute until I get in the car.”

Wilson glanced at his watch. “Hurry honey, I don’t have much time to talk. I’m in Forrest’s office. He’s on his way here. I can’t be on the phone when he arrives.”

“Where’s my regular driver?” Linda Wilson asked as she approached the back door.

“He had a family emergency,” the driver responded and closed the door behind her.

Linda took her cell phone off mute. “OK Kevin, I’m back. I’m sorry to keep you waiting, but being seven months pregnant in August in this Louisiana heat is not easy to deal with. If you decide to knock me up again, could we plan on the next child being born in a cooler month?”

“It’s OK, honey,” Kevin laughed. “The summers are a lot shorter in the UK. Listen, I can’t explain right now, but we have to leave America. Call the airport and make reservations for the earliest possible flight to the UK. I want you to...”

“...Kevin, what’s wrong? Why do we need to leave America?”

“Linda, please, just do what I’m telling you. I wouldn’t ask you to do this if it wasn’t important.”

“You want me to do it *right* now?”

“Yes Linda. I’m texting you the number. Once you’ve booked the flight, call me back. Then tell the driver to drop you off at your mother’s. I’ll pick you up there. Don’t try and carry your suitcases. Get the driver to do that. I don’t want you hurting yourself.”

“OK, Kevin, but I don’t understand. Why can’t I just wait for you at our house?”

“I’ll explain when I see you. I have to go. I love you Linda.”

“Excuse me,” Linda said, waving her hand at the driver. He glanced in his rear view mirror, waiting. “When we get to the

house, you might as well leave the motor running. I'll be going to my mother's."

The driver glanced at the other man sitting in the passenger seat and nodded to Linda. "Yes Mrs. Wilson," he responded and put up the divider glass.

Forrest's cell phone rang. "Yes...?"

"Mr. Forrest, this is Dr. Mobley. I have some good news for you."

"You were wrong about my remission?"

"No, Sir. I'm sorry, but there may still be hope. I ran your information through the donor database again, and this time it's come up with a possible genetic match."

"Where?"

"One of your employees at D'Netics. Now all we have to do is convince her to come in for the tests so I can make sure there hasn't been a mistake. If she checks out and agrees to be a donor, I believe you could be well on your way to a full recovery."

Forrest's eyes turned to two black marbles. "She...?"

"Yes. Dr. Donna Rigden - the head of your research department. I've tried reaching her on her cell phone, but it seems she's changed the number. I was hoping you might be able to give me her new one."

Forrest's face reddened with rage. He clenched his other fist at his side. "Donna Rigden is a possible donor for me? How in the hell is that possible?"

"I don't know, Mr. Forrest. That's why I need to test her. You see...."

Flashes of his dream came back to Forrest as his doctor explained some of the reasons why they could have overlooked Donna as a possible donor for him. Soon Dr. Mobley's voice faded as the memory got clearer. Donna didn't need to find a cure – Donna was the cure!

Forrest saw himself again, crawling on hands and knees to his saviour, and she laughed at him. Donna sneered at him as she held the cure in her hand. Her words reverberated inside his head.

‘Do you want this you poor pathetic creature? Do you think you deserve it? What good have you done in your worthless existence that I should grant you life? I’d sooner rot in hell before I gave you one drop of this cure.’

He watched with horror as Donna opened the vial and poured its contents on the floor. He’d dove for the spreading liquid, lapping at it as a dog. He remembered how it burned his mouth like acid. How he’d wailed and screamed as the blisters rose on his tongue and inside his mouth.

‘You’ve poisoned me. Why Donna? Why? You’re a doctor.’

Donna had glared at him. ‘Doctors heal those who deserve to be healed. You deserve to die, and you will when I’m gone because there will be no one who can save you.’

“...That’s why we need to make sure there hasn’t been a mistake before we ask for her help. Mr. Forrest? Are you still there – hello?”

Forrest snapped back. Donna’s last few words made sense now. If Dr. Mobley was right about her, he would die without her help. “There will be no asking in this matter. I will handle this myself. Donna Rigden is under contract with Forrest Enterprises until the end of next month. I will deliver Miss Rigden!” Forrest ended the call. As his driver turned down the street to D’Netics, Forrest’s cell phone rang again. “Has it been accomplished?”

“Mrs. Wilson is in our hands.”

Forrest grinned. “Good, that should give me the leverage I need. Keep her at her house. I do *not* want her harmed. If anything happens to her or the baby she’s carrying, you *will not* see the sunrise. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Mr. Forrest.”

“Linda Wilson is not to leave her house under any circumstances.”

“Sir, there’s something I think you should know. Mrs. Wilson has just booked two seats on British Airways to the UK.”

“Linda Wilson will not be leaving the United States today or any other day. As to Kevin Wilson, I already have plans for him. Until she’s given birth, Linda Wilson is your only concern. Remember what I said!”

“Yes, Sir. We’ll take care of it, Mr. Forrest.”

Forrest pushed a speed number. “Now to set the hook,” he mused. “Hello, Missy. I’m running a little late. Tell Kevin, in the meantime to check on the problem with the hard drive we took from Donna’s desktop. I want her found and arrested for breach of contract and attempted murder. I’ve just come from my doctor. He’s confirmed it. I’ll meet with Wilson in about forty-five minutes.” Forrest locked his cell phone and stepped out onto the balcony of his penthouse apartment. “Now, let’s see how many birds I’ve killed with that stone.”

Chapter 28

“Forrest is going to be pissed,” one technician said to the other.

“Yes, and I wouldn’t want to be the one to tell him,” added the other technician.

“Tell him what?” Wilson asked.

“That we’ve been unable to break the encryption code or recover any lost data from the main frame.”

Wilson exhaled forcefully. “What *have* you found out?”

The technicians exchanged weary looks. “Dr. Rigden’s hard disc has a real nasty worm on it. It passed the virus scans but, when we connected it to the mainframe, it started altering files and sending them out over the Internet.”

“Were you able to trace where the files were sent?”

“They went to a server in China, but that server is no longer functioning. We’re assuming someone retrieved the files from it before they shut it down. We’ve worked through the night to remove the worm from the mainframe. We’re still not certain we were successful. When staff start logging onto their work stations again tomorrow, the server may be re-infected. We’ve managed to restore some of the files from backup but not all of them.” He paused. “I don’t know who wrote this encryption program, but I’ve never come across anything like it before. I’ve never seen such a complicated algorithm.”

Wilson looked at the screen and sighed in exasperation, “I have - once.” He left the room. The technicians looked at each other in confusion. As soon as Wilson was out of the room he unlocked his cell phone. After several rings, Linda’s voicemail picked up. “Hi honey. I’m still waiting on your call. Call me when you get out of the tub. I’m on my way back to Forrest’s office now. See you soon.”

Forrest watched the video footage again in slow motion. He furrowed his brow and unlocked his cell phone. “Did you get a lock on the transmission?”

“Yes Sir, it’s coming from somewhere in Europe. We’re unable to access the conversation or pinpoint its source, but it’s definitely coming from there.”

“Pinpoint its source immediately!”

“Sir, I can’t. The source has stopped transmitting.”

“Did you trace it?”

“We did Sir. It’s coming from Melissa Hart’s cell phone.”

“Get the bitch and bring her to me!” With a wave of Forrest’s hand, Melissa’s fate was sealed. “One down – one to go,” he mused, his mouth spreading into an evil grin.

John Liu approached Melissa’s desk. “Mr. Forrest would like a word with you. Please come peacefully, and do not make a scene, Miss Hart.”

“Who are you?” Melissa frowned and slipped her hand into her pocket to press the emergency distress beacon on her cell phone.

“Pressing your distress beacon would have been a waste of time, Miss Hart,” Liu said, jerking her hand away and confiscating her cell phone. He flipped it over and took out the battery. “It wouldn’t have penetrated the EMP field around this area of the building, or where you’re going. I am sorry for what’s about to happen to you, but you made an extremely foolish judgement call when you sided against Mr. Forrest,” he said jerking her to her feet.

Melissa narrowed her eyes. “It’s you!” she gasped. “You were the man in the cafeteria, that day. Where are you taking me?”

“I think you already know the answer to that, Miss Hart. Unfortunately, your debriefing is out of my hands. Mr. Forrest seems to think pain is a more effective way of extracting information.”

Fear rose to the back of Melissa's throat as she was pushed into the foyer of Forrest's penthouse apartment. "Put her in the bedroom," Forrest said without turning as he sipped his glass of brandy. "Give her something to help her relax. I'll be back to deal with her later."

Wilson called Melissa's workstation as soon as he stepped in the lift. "*GW Forrest's office. This is Haley Dodd.*"

"Haley, this is Kevin Wilson. Where's Melissa Hart?"

"I don't know, Mr. Wilson. She was gone when I got here. Personnel called me and told me to come up here. She mentioned the position might be permanent. Was Missy planning on leaving?"

"If she was, she hadn't said anything to me about it. I'll check into it, though. Could you ring Mr. Forrest on his cell phone and tell him I had to make a quick trip to the mail room, but I should be there by the time he gets there?"

"Mr. Wilson," Haley interjected. "Mr. Forrest is already in his office. Would you still like me to let him know?"

"No, Haley. That's fine. I'll do it later."

Wilson stepped off the lift and approached Forrest's temporary secretary. "Haley, has my wife called?"

Haley checked the stack of messages. "Yes, Mr. Wilson. Your wife said to tell you she was unable to book a flight to the UK until tomorrow morning."

"Did she say why?"

"No, Sir. She didn't. That's all that was on the message. I think you should go in. Mr. Forrest is waiting on you. He seemed upset."

Wilson drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He tapped on the door and went inside. Forrest's attention was focused on the stack of printouts in his hand. He glanced up and waved to the chair in front of his desk. "Have a seat, Kevin. It seems we have a few things to discuss concerning Donna Rigden and what's been going on for the last two

months. Where exactly is Rigden?" he asked, locking his eyes with Wilson's.

"Sir, since she resigned on Thursday, we've been doing everything we can to ascertain her whereabouts."

"I know where she is, and so do you. She's in England with Triplet. I've dealt with it! You're going to England to find her for me and bring her back. You see, Donna is being charged with attempted murder."

Wilson's mouth dropped open. "Donna is not a murderer, Mr. Forrest. She may have breached her contract with D'Netics, but that's all."

Forrest narrowed his eyes. "Are you trying to protect her, Wilson? Perhaps *you* were her accomplice. I doubt the little hothead had the brains to pull this off alone."

Wilson frowned. "Pull what off, Mr. Forrest?"

"Pumping me full of mind altering drugs that made me do all kinds of irrational things, make stupid investments that cost the company billions. I have a mole at D'Netics, Wilson. In fact, I have two. I don't suppose you would know who they might be?"

"Mr. Forrest, I don't know what you're talking about. I believe some of the medication you're taking may be clouding your judgement. Perhaps you should consider taking that vacation, after all."

Forrest leaned across the desk, glaring at Wilson. "I don't need *another* vacation, Wilson. I've been gone for two months and what do I find when I return? What the fuck have you been doing behind my back? Where did all this money for a new research building come from? Who is Kim Gentry and why were her remains found among what was left of this mysterious research building? What did you do Wilson? Play boss while I was gone? Now that I'm back you're trying to make people think I'm crazy? What were you planning on doing? Declaring me mentally incompetent so you could take ownership of D'Netics back? What were you going to do then, give it back to the Triplets? Is that what this was all about? You're trying to

get back in his good graces? You *fucked* his wife. Do you think he's ever going to forget that? You could have stopped her marrying Triplet, but you didn't have the balls to stand up to the one you knew was responsible. So, you see, Wilson, it's your fault Martha Triplet died."

"GW, you should be committed. I loved Martha Allen. Apart from Linda, she may be the only woman I ever loved. Martha died of cancer. No one but fate was responsible for that. I don't know what you're playing at, but you have no evidence to back up *any* of these slanderous accusations, especially the ones about Donna Rigden."

Forrest jutted his chin and arched an eyebrow. "Don't I? Are you willing to stake your life on that?" Forrest slid a copy of Donna's expired contract with D'Netics, a fake copy of an active contract with D'Netics and a copy of her active contract with Triplet International in front of Wilson. "Is this evidence enough?" He walked to the window again.

Wilson glanced over the three contracts. His face paled. "I had no idea this was going on!"

"I had a feeling you would say that. You still don't have any balls, do you Wilson? You're a worthless leech. You see this window I'm standing in front of?" He paused briefly. "I've got a good mind to throw your spineless ass out there and see how many of your bones break when your useless body hits the pavement. I may be dying, but I'm not stupid. If you weren't useful to me, you would already be dead. One of my private jets is sitting on the runway. A car is waiting for you at the front of the building. You're leaving for London, Wilson."

"I won't leave Linda."

Forrest held up a hand as he stared out the window. "Do not test my patience. You are not that useful to me any longer, but I'm giving you a chance to redeem yourself – somewhat. If you do not wish to consider my offer, then you can walk away now, but you leave with nothing. Do I continue?"

"I'm listening...."

“There is a reservation waiting for you at the Savoy.” Forrest turned. “Ten hours from now, I will call your hotel room. If you don’t want to lose everything you’ve worked for, including your wife, you’d better be there to answer that fucking phone. Do I make myself clear?”

Wilson’s mouth dried with fear. His heart began to pound. His chest ached. “Please don’t do anything to Linda.”

“Why would I do anything to hurt your beautiful *young* wife? She’s carrying my heir. I’m not going to hurt her! Why, if you should have an unfortunate accident while you’re away, Linda will live in the lap of luxury. I will see she wants for nothing, and I will give her more pleasure than you ever could.”

“Linda would never have anything to do with you!”

The corners of Forrest’s mouth turned up. “Are you sure about that, Wilson? I’ve come into some interesting information, about a lot of things that went on behind the scenes while I was away. You see despite Rigden trying to halt our mind control research, EIA went forward without her help or approval. In fact, there’s a mild version of it being tested in perfume shops all over the globe.”

“That stuff is unstable, GW. It opens people’s minds to the most unimaginable nightmares possible. It does irreversible damage.”

Forrest grinned. “Yes, it does, but it’s the ultimate weapon of war. Enemies do not deserve mercy.”

“But in some cases the enemy are children. Innocently led down the wrong path. Programmed to be thieves and killers. It’s not their fault. They don’t deserve to have their sanity eaten away by an endless nightmare of their worst fears!”

“Enemies come in all forms, Wilson. I’m not debating the issue with you. Rigden is to blame for what happened to our first test subject, and all the others. They were extremely cooperative. Too bad those experiments ended poorly, but then we didn’t know about the genetic incompatibility issue, did we? That was Donna’s contribution. If she’d helped us, we

might have had better results. I'm sure Linda will make a much more appropriate test subject. If anything should go wrong, I'll make sure my son lives to inherit his dues. You will find Donna, and you will do whatever it takes to bring her back. Remember, Kevin, ten hours. You'd better get to the car – time is ticking. Oh, and don't call Linda. You wouldn't want to upset her in her very delicate condition.”

Wilson slowly stood to leave. “I'll be there when you call,” he said. His hand shook as he reached for the door handle. He didn't even bother to speak as he passed Haley, sitting at Melissa's desk. A sick feeling roiled his stomach as he thought about her. Forrest had probably caught her and tortured her if not killed her, but Wilson's main concern now was that of his wife and their unborn child. Despite who its father was, the child was innocent and part of the woman he loved.

“Cancel the rest of my appointments for today,” Forrest said as he passed Haley's desk and stepped into his private lift. “Time to have some fun – real fun,” he grinned as he approached the two bodyguards at his apartment door. “Have you managed to extract any useful information from the fucking bitch?” Forrest asked as he opened his bedroom door.

Liu shook his head. “No. I warned you, she was one of Triplet's best. She's had special training. Maybe Triplet had her slowly exposed to the drug until her system built up immunity to it. If I give her much more, it's going to kill her.”

Forrest reached into the drawer of a small table and slipped on a set of brass knuckles. “Maybe Miss Hart needs a little of my special treatment.”

Liu groaned and stepped aside. “I'll be on the balcony if you need me.”

Forrest frowned. “You don't want to watch. You might learn a few things.”

“No, your men have beaten her to near death, and she still hasn't talked. I suppose you'll go in there and finish the job. I prefer to be more constructive with my interrogation. Your

methods are too... messy. Pain is not always the easiest way to get answers. If she's dead you won't find out anything," he said and left.

Forrest stepped into the bedroom and closed the door. "Missy, why are you being so difficult? You know you can't win."

Every breath Melissa took was like a knife stabbing between her ribs. She'd been strong, but it was getting harder to resist. Whatever drug they'd given her was starting to cloud her judgement.

Forrest straddled her partially naked and bleeding body. He grabbed her long blonde hair and jerked her neck back hard, adding to her already excruciating pain. She cried out in agony.

He put his face in hers. The smell of his breath was making her nauseous; it had a sickening scent she couldn't recognise. "Tell me where Rigden is!"

Melissa stared back at him with raw contempt and said nothing. Mustering her last bit of strength, she smiled scornfully.

Forrest backhanded the side of her face. Something snapped, and Melissa nearly lost consciousness. She prayed for death, but it didn't come. "Liu, get in here!" he shouted. Liu clenched his teeth and opened the door. "Start the EIA drip on her."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to Mobley's office, and then home."

"What about her?"

"There's no need to stay with her. Missy's not going anywhere, are you? Give her the drug and do whatever you want to. If she lasts through the night, I'll try talking to her again in the morning. If not..."

Liu waited until Forrest was gone. Instead of starting the drip as he'd been ordered, Liu put a strong dose of morphine in her IV. As he saw it, Melissa wouldn't last until morning. There was no need for her to lay in agony until she died. It wasn't going to accomplish anything. At least this way, she

wouldn't be in so much pain. He tossed a sheet over her body, turned out the light and left. "Barbaric bastard," he mused as he stepped in the lift.

Chapter 29

Seated around the conference table at Leeds Castle, the members of The Order waited for the meeting to start. The subject of today's meeting had caused dissention and angry words among those who once called each other friends.

Sir Richard sat deep in thought, remembering everyone he'd given up or lost. Now everything he had left was at stake. The price had become too high. *No more! It's not worth this!* he thought. He was torn from his private reverie as the speaker rose and called the meeting to order; all eyes turned to the head of the table.

"Gentlemen, I think we know why we're all here today. We are dealing with a very sensitive subject, and we must think long and hard before making a decision. I assume you have received copies of the report and have gone through it thoroughly."

Chaudhuri, the representative of India, raised his hand and was acknowledged. "Are we to assume the rumours are true?"

"The information we have received casts enough doubt to warrant some kind of action; at least as a precaution. Whether or not the information is conclusive is not important. The question we must answer is what do we do *if* it becomes conclusive?"

Sir Richard listened to their arguments until the conversation became aggressive. "Gentlemen, friends, getting angry won't accomplish anything, nor will it help us make a responsible decision. Aren't we being a little hasty? The information was posted to a conspiracy site, which has not always proven to be entirely credible. As I see it, the things we must ask ourselves are:

- 1) *If* the rumours are indeed true; do we have the right to deny the World this discovery? Who among you would not take advantage of it?

2) Knowing the implication and the chaos this could, and I stress, *could* cause, do we allow it to continue?"

"If we deal with this by 'sweeping it under the rug' as we've done to so many things in the past, I fear it is a matter of time before someone else makes the same discovery."

"You should talk!" Bongai, the representative for South Africa shouted in anger. "Your opinion is biased; your son is on the research team that has been named."

"If my son had achieved this, do you honestly believe I would not know? Do I look as though I have benefited from it? I assure you, in this matter, my son's alleged involvement is entirely irrelevant. No matter the cost; I have always fought, and will always fight for the greater good."

"And what of the girl?" Veloski shouted in contempt. "If we take action; are you willing to abide by our decision?"

Sir Richard felt his blood pressure rising. He would *never* allow Richard *or* Donna to come to *any* harm. Enough blood had been shed. Too many of his loved ones had been put in the ground and no matter what the conclusion of this meeting or whatever decision they came to, if a choice had to be made between The Order and his family, The Order would lose, hands down. Sir Richard held his anger in check. He spoke calmly and with sincerity, reflecting the responsible person he was. "I will do whatever is best for the World, no matter what!"

After they'd finished their doughnuts and coffee, Sam and Donna sat and talked for a while. Joyce and Ian came in, got a cup of tea and some black currant cheesecake and approached the table where Sam and Donna were sitting. "Do you mind if we sit with you?" Ian asked, giving Donna a warm smile.

Sam slid his chair closer to Donna and put his arm across her shoulders. Donna laced her fingers with his. Sam waved to the space. "Pull up some chairs."

Joyce cut her eyes at Donna's hand and sighed deeply. She took a sip of tea and set the cup on the table in front of her.

“Sam,” she began, “Jasmine came by the infirmary earlier looking for you. She said she stopped by your apartment last night when she got back from Cornwall, but you weren’t there.”

Sam swallowed hard, annoyed with Joyce. He knew what she was trying to do. His response was wary. “Did she, now?”

Joyce cleared her throat, grinning slightly, enjoying Sam’s displeasure. “She said she tried ringing your cell, but she was told the number was no longer active. She wanted to know what time to meet you at your apartment tonight.”

Donna turned her head, studying Sam’s eyes. “You’re meeting someone at your apartment tonight? Was that the Jasmine who called you Friday night?”

Sam glared at Joyce. “Yes, sweetheart. It is,” he forced through his teeth. “But I’m not seeing her again.”

Donna swallowed hard and caressed his cheek. “It’s OK,” she smiled. “I said no strings, remember?”

“I remember, but I don’t *want* to see Jasmine, or any other woman, sweetheart. Not tonight, or any night,” he whispered and tenderly kissed her.

Joyce felt sick. Sam had lied to her face many times, but Sam lied to every woman he’d ever been involved with. Joyce knew that. There was a different look in Sam’s eyes when he looked at Donna. Either he’d become more skilled at lying, or he genuinely meant what he was saying to her. If he did, getting him away from Donna was not going to be easy.

Sam decided to do a bit of stirring to turn the tables. “So, are you and Richard becoming an issue now?”

“No, Sam,” she responded. “Richard and I are no more of an issue than you and me, or Jasmine or any of your other female pastimes.”

Donna moved Sam’s arm and slowly stood. She framed his face and kissed him. “I’m going upstairs and see what Gary’s accomplished.” She groaned, turned her attention to Joyce and shook her head. “For the record, if you’re trying to make me jealous, of you and Sam or anybody else, you’re wasting your

time. Sam is free to walk away anytime he feels like it.” She kissed him again. “I’ll see you later.”

Sam smiled and kissed the back of her hand. “I’ll be there shortly. Ian, would you mind leaving us alone?”

Ian checked his watch. “I’ve got to go anyway,” he said and left, thankful not to be witness to another one of Sam and Joyce’s confrontations.

Sam laced his fingers in front of him and rested his hands on the table. “Joyce, why are you trying to cause problems between me and Donna?”

“Who said I was trying to cause problems? The way Donna talked, there’s nothing between you – other than physical attraction. Although she doesn’t seem that bothered about that either. If you ask me, I’d say the one you need to be worrying about is Richard.”

Sam cocked his head. “Why would I be worried about Richard?”

“Because when Donna realises who you really are, Richard is going to look a lot better to her. If she had half a brain she’d be with him now, instead of wallowing all over you. You won’t be faithful to her Sam. You can’t be faithful to anyone. You certainly weren’t to me.”

Sam scoffed. “Oh, I get it now. This is not about how faithful I can be to Donna. This is about me *being* with Donna. Joyce, I told you. I don’t want to be with you. You’re fun for a laugh or two, but you’re too – I don’t know – possessive. You want something I’m not willing to give up – my freedom.”

“She’s happy with what you have now, but what happens if Donna suddenly decides she wants more, Sam? This is not a common call girl you’re dealing with. This is a handpicked Triplet favourite. Why do you think she’s living with the Triplets, Sam?”

Sam grinned. “*We’re* living with the Triplets,” he boasted.

Joyce’s mouth gaped. “You’re living with Donna at the Hall? Are you crazy Sam? You’re going to lose your job over this. Do you think you’re there because Sir Richard wants you

there? You're there because of Donna. When she gets tired of you, let's see how long it takes for Sir Richard to give you your walking papers."

"You'd better watch your stuff!" he countered. "Keep trying to cause problems for me and I'll show you how long it takes me to give you *your* walking papers. Stay out of my personal affairs Joyce!"

Gary glanced up as Donna entered the room. "Why the long face, D?"

"Joyce and Sam. Jasmine and Sam. The girl at the fish and chip shop and Sam. I seem to be caught in the middle of the Sam Kaliea fan club, and nobody likes me. I'm not so sure being this close to the fire is a good idea."

Gary turned in his chair. "What do you mean?"

Donna sighed deeply. "I got a strange phone call at the guest house yesterday. I didn't take it seriously because I thought it was Richard. I mean, it was so vague, it might have been a wrong number - not intended for me."

Gary's eyes widened. "I would have thought you would have recognised Richard's voice if it were him. What did the person say?"

"That's just it. I didn't recognise who it was. I couldn't even tell if it was a man or a woman, or possibly a recording. The voice was raspy, metallic, like one of those cheap text-to-speech voices."

Gary studied her eyes; his attention peaked. "What did it say, Donna?"

"Several things. 'You are with the wrong person.', 'He has no future with you.', 'Walk away, or he will suffer.', 'You belong with another.'"

"And they called you on the guest house phone? When yesterday?"

"Right after I got out of the shower and started getting dressed. Not long before Sam came and took my cell phone."

“I can see why you thought it was Richard, but without confronting him – assuming he doesn’t deny it – we’ll never know who it was.”

“I suppose I could always go back to the guest house. If it was a genuine threat, maybe they’ll call back. If they don’t, at least we’d know.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, D. When you’re involved with Triplet International, you tend to take threats seriously. If it was Richard who called that would be a different situation.”

“Gary, is Richard a dangerous person?”

Gary groaned. “That would depend on what you mean by dangerous. Let’s just say Richard is used to getting what he wants, and for the most part, he gets it.”

“But surely they’re just empty threats, Gary. Richard wouldn’t actually hurt somebody over this, would he?”

“He might, baby. I didn’t think you were that serious about Sam.”

Donna’s eyes widened. “What if he wasn’t talking about Sam?” Her heart started pounding. She twisted her hands in her lap. “What if he was talking about Jared?”

“What makes you think he could be talking about Jared?”

“Richard knows how I feel about Jared. He’s known all along.”

“Did Jared have any problems with Richard while he was there?”

Donna rolled her eyes. “Gary, Jared had a problem with any male that came around me,” she groaned. “Because he knew Richard had feelings for me, he was *extremely* jealous of Richard.”

“Well, I have a feeling, Richard is still extremely jealous of Sam.”

“I don’t love Richard, Gary. He knows that. I’ve told him how I feel.”

“Are you saying you love Sam?”

“No. Gary. I told you. I’m not capable of *loving* anyone. Not the way I loved Jared. That part of me is dead and gone,

buried, locked away. That kind of love happens once in a lifetime, and I blew it.”

“I don’t know D. I think if you let go a little, you might find at least part of what you had with Jared.”

Donna locked her eyes on Gary’s and slowly shook her head. “No, I won’t, Gary. After Jared... nothing compares. For him, or Beth, I would endure anything. Could we change the subject now? I came up here to see what you’d found out – if anything.”

“OK, D,” Gary sighed and shook his head. Donna had done it again. Just shut it off. It was almost as if her emotions had an on-off switch. “Where is Sam?”

“Right here,” Sam said. “I got held up at the lift. What are we doing?”

“About ready to pull my hair out,” Gary groaned. “I ran this test three times and got the same readings each time. Sam, for the sake of argument and my sanity, run the test again on Richard’s terminal.”

Sam’s results were entirely different from Donna’s *or* Gary’s. They were the same as Richard’s had been. Gary and Donna looked on in amazement. Donna rolled her eyes and shook her head, “Oh I’m such an idiot. Sam reset your variables. This time, include a thirty percent evolutionary factor of 0.5 per annum, and set the simulation to run for a span of ten years.”

Sam entered the figures and started the calibration again. The numbers ticked along. They waited as the last number set.

“There are your true results,” Donna said, pointing to the screen. “Without including the effects of evolution the simulation gives a false read out.”

Sam looked up at Gary and then back to Donna. “Then that would mean...”

“...Richard and I were thirty percent from our target.” Gary finished Sam’s statement, his tone depressed.

“But, what about the *drosophila*?” Sam asked. “If your calculations were *that* far off, why did it work?”

“Simple, Sam,” Donna responded. “They did their tests using a short-term calibration. I used long-term calibration. If you do the same calibration on the drosophila, add in the evolution factors, for the same time period, you will get the same results. Now the work begins,” she said and walked back to her terminal.

Chapter 30

Sir Richard walked out of Leeds Castle conference room, looking much the same as he had, when he'd met with the Foreign Secretary in London. John and Richard stood. "Is it over now?"

"No, Ricky. It's far from over," Sir Richard forced through his teeth. "It's just beginning. We'll talk in the chopper. Let's go home. I've had all the meetings I can handle for one day."

As soon as Sir Richard settled in his seat; the chopper lifted off. His cell phone rang. An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of his stomach as he read the name and accepted the call. He knew she only called him in transit when it was an emergency. "What's wrong, Mildred?"

"It's Melissa, Sir. I can't reach her cell phone, and she's not responding to her voicemail. I'm concerned. She's never failed to return my calls."

"Thank you Mildred. I'll take care of this." Sir Richard ended the call. He pushed a speed button and waited. "Gary, can we safely use VICi to run a tracker check?"

"We should be able to, why, what's up?"

Sam and Donna looked up from their work. Donna walked next to Gary. "What's wrong?"

Gary held up his hand. "Hang on a second, D. It's Sir Richard."

"Are Sam and Donna there with you?"

"Yes, Sir. Do I need to...?"

"No, it's fine. She's going to find out sooner or later, probably sooner."

"Meetings didn't go well?"

"Gary, you don't want to know. Things are going to get really sticky, from now on. Mildred just tried to call Missy, and she's not answering her cell phone. I need you to use VICi and see if you can locate her."

“Hang on, let me switch my screen over, and logon to the complex.”

“Put me on speaker.”

Gary glanced at Donna. “Sir, are you sure?”

“Donna’s part of us now, Gary, and it looks like Sam is going to be hanging around her, so....”

“OK, Sir, you’re on speaker.”

“Hello, Donna, Sam. How is the research going?”

Donna smiled. “Hello, Sir Richard. It’s going good, now that I’ve figured out what I was doing wrong.”

“And that’s the death gene project you’re working on?”

Donna glanced at Gary and Sam. “Well... actually... I think we’ll make more progress by combining the two. I’ve just got to figure out what to use as a universal vector. Gary and Richard had the right idea, but rhinopharyngitis is the wrong vector. That’s why it worked with their Yoda fruit fly, but wouldn’t work consistently with mammals.”

Sir Richard chuckled at Donna’s enthusiasm. “So, can I expect that by the time I get back?”

“I don’t know about that, Sir Richard, but I’ll give it my best shot.”

“What about the enhanced healing antibodies? Will they be helpful?”

“Yes Sir. That’s why it was so important for me to figure this thing out.”

“I’m sure you will, petal. Gary... anything?”

“No, Sir. I’ve scanned her apartment, the surrounding areas, and as much of D’Netics as VICI’s sensors can penetrate. Unless she’s in one of those blank areas, I can’t locate her.”

Donna frowned. “Who are you trying to locate?”

“Melissa Hart,” Sir Richard said with a sigh. “Gary, contact the team in Shreveport. Tell Joe to start a ground search of the area. I have a bad feeling about this, and I have to tell John. I’ll need you and the medical team on stand-by, Sam.”

“Always ready, Sir Richard.”

“I’ll be helping too,” Donna spoke up.

“Thank you, petal,” Sir Richard said. “I kind of figured you might. We’ll be at the Centre in about an hour. Unless you find out something Gary, I think I’ll wait until then to say anything to Ricky or John.”

“That might be wise,” Gary said. “Especially since John decided not to see Missy when he was in America.”

“See you soon, then.”

Gary locked his cell phone. “I have to phone the team in Shreveport. We can stop for today if you want.”

“No,” Donna said. “Go ahead and talk to Sir Richard’s team. If Forrest is responsible, Missy may need our help. Let’s keep plugging.” She went back to her workstation, next to Sam’s. “You don’t mind, do you Sam?”

Sam kissed her forehead. “No, sweetheart. I’ll sit here as long as you do. I’m as anxious to figure this out as you are.”

Donna smiled. “Thank you.”

“OK, well, I’m going to step in the other room and take care of this. I’ll be back in a couple of minutes,” Gary said as he stood to leave.

Gary pulled the door to and called Sir Richard straight back. “Gary, I didn’t expect to hear from you this soon. What’s going on?”

Gary kept a wary eye on the door. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of Donna, but I think we should consider getting Jared and his security team to help search for Missy.”

Sir Richard frowned. “Gary, my last conversation with Jared ended in angry words. I’m not sure he would even talk to me. He made it quite clear that he blames me for Donna being shot.”

“He was pretty upset when I called him about the BSV, but...”

“You called Jared about that?”

“Yes Sir, I did. It made sense that Jared’s phone could have been infected as well.”

“And if his was,” Sir Richard added, “...every cell phone that came in contact with his would have been infected, as well. So, what did you find out? Had Jared’s phone been infected?”

Gary groaned. “I kind of messed up on that part. I had him run ‘Dessert’ before we checked.”

“That wasn’t a smart move. You did right by calling him, but I’d rather you consulted me before doing something like this again.”

“Sir Richard, Jared and I have been friends for years. You’re not going to ask me to stop communicating with my friends, are you?”

“Of course not, Gary. We just have to be careful where Jared is concerned.”

“Sir Richard, Jared still loves Donna, as much as I’m sure she still loves him. Circumstances just won’t let them be together.”

“No, and this Bluetooth virus just proves how many leaks we’re still dealing with. I hope some of these disappear when we move to the complex. If you had him use ‘Dessert’ on his cell phone, will it still work? Will he have to get another SIM card?”

“No, Sir. The only thing targeted by ‘Dessert’ was ‘Acid Rain’.”

“Where was he when you talked to him?”

“Wickenburg, but Tim could have him in Shreveport in two hours. Sir, Jared knows his way around, and he has special talents for this kind of thing.”

“What sort of special talents, Gary?”

“I can’t say, but trust me. If Missy’s cover has been blown and Forrest has her, Jared is the person you need to be talking to.”

“All right, Gary. I’ll call him as soon as I get back to my office at the Centre. How are things going with Sam?”

“Surprisingly well. Of course, Richard is more skilled in this area, but under the circumstances, Sam is catching on quick.”

“So you still stand by your decision to let him work with Donna?”

“Sir Richard, this was Donna’s choice. But yes, I think it was a wise decision. I am a little concerned as to what will happen when Richard gets here.”

“If you don’t need him around, I’m sure I can keep Ricky busy.”

Gary chuckled. “I’m sure you could too, Sir Richard, but sooner or later Richard will have to learn to get along with Sam. Unless something changes, Sam and Donna could be together for a long time.”

“Then I guess we’ll find out tonight.”

Donna re-read the notes and studied the results again.

“Well, that’s that,” Gary said as he sat back at his work station. Donna didn’t even acknowledge him. For the next half hour, she was in a world of her own. Finally she looked up, “We need HIV1.”

“What?” Sam’s head jerked in her direction. He studied her eyes. “Sweetheart... did you say we needed HIV1 - the virus responsible for AIDS?”

“Yes Sam. I did! We need an active sample of HIV1.”

Gary looked up, “Ok D – talk to me.” He knew Donna wouldn’t suggest something as drastic as AIDS if she didn’t know what she was talking about.

“We want something that will affect *all* the cells, not just part of them. Like I told Sir Richard, the HRV-A can’t do that, it’s simply not strong enough. At one time or another, everyone on the planet has experienced the common cold. When the HRV-A enters our bodies, our T-cells immediately identify it and mark it for destruction. Your modified virus has then been given a death sentence. It’s just a matter of time before it’s eradicated by the immune system.”

“Why didn’t I think of that?” Gary commented.

Donna grinned and continued. “HIV1 is stronger and has a wonderful feature that makes it an excellent delivery system. It affects *all* the cells at the same time, and then it starts changing. Each time the virus replicates a new generation it’s already mutated and the T-cells have to re-identify it, and send out a fresh troop of antibodies. But, by the time it’s done this, HIV1 has replicated itself thousands of times.”

Gary put his hands on Donna’s shoulders and kissed her cheek. “D, your theory is brilliant! There’s just one problem. To get permission to modify something like the HIV1 would mean going through a lot of red tape. We’d have to consult with a Research Ethics Committee, and the Human Genetics Commission. Over here, getting *any* kind of approval through the medical Research Council, takes months.”

“If I were back in the States, I’d go through the CDC. Don’t you have anything similar to that over here?”

“Yes - we do...” Sam interjected, “...but nobody – myself included - likes the idea of releasing a potentially life threatening virus. Getting permission would be difficult, unless....”

Donna looked up. “Unless what?”

“Unless you can convince Sir Richard to get on the band wagon. If you sell your idea to him, you could examine a piece of the spacecraft that crashed at Roswell, New Mexico.” Sam looked genuinely serious.

Gary rolled his eyes and chuckled. Donna narrowed her eyes at Gary, “Are you telling me...?”

Sam laughed, at how quickly Donna fell for it. “A figure of speech, sweetheart.”

Donna shook her fist at him and laughed. “That wasn’t funny!”

Chapter 31

The three rings dangling on a chain around his neck softly clanged together as he reached for the door handle on his black BMW. One, his grandmother's ring served as a constant reminder of what he'd lost; the other two a constant reminder of what he'd let go. He popped his cell phone in the car cradle and reached for the ignition. Rubbing his eyes against the bright, morning sun, he slipped on his dark sunshades. His cell phone rang. The ice-blue LED light from his console flashed a name. He groaned and pushed a button on his steering wheel. Checking the traffic, he peeled onto the highway and put his foot down. "What have you done to her now?"

"This is not about Donna, Jared."

"Then I'm sorry, Sir Richard, but I don't have time to chase bad guys with you today. Besides, haven't you heard? I hung my white hat on the wall. I'm not the good guy anymore."

"I heard about the news. It's been taken care of."

"More carpet sweeping?"

Sir Richard softly chuckled. "You might call it that. No charges will be filed against you or Donna."

"Donna! Why would charges be filed against her? She had nothing to do with it. Forrest set me and Kim up to take the fall. He had no intention of keeping his end of the agreement."

"No, he didn't, and I tried to warn you about...."

Jared growled. "I don't need you reminding me of my mistakes. Just get on with it - will ya? *Why* have you called?"

"I don't know if you met Melissa Hart while you were at D'Netics, but...."

"You mean the mole you left behind to keep an eye on Donna?" Jared interjected. Sir Richard chuckled again. "I'm glad you find me amusing, Sir Richard. Yes, I know of her. We never personally met. She wasn't at her desk when my lawyer and I went to talk with Forrest. What about her?"

“I wasn’t laughing at you, Jared. I just find it uncanny that you knew more about me than I did about you, at the time. We may be getting upset over nothing. Missy may be fine, but she didn’t check in at her normal time. When my secretary tried to reach her, Missy didn’t respond. That’s not like her. Missy is in a precarious position. You might say she’s walking in the furnace if you know what I mean.”

Jared pulled into his parking space behind the clinic. “Hang on a second,” he said, put his Bluetooth ear bud in, grabbed his cell phone and got out of his car. “OK, I’m back. Yes, Sir Richard. You seem to put your people in unnecessarily dangerous positions.” He slid his security card through the slot and opened the door. “Let me guess. You think her cover has been blown, and Forrest has her?”

“That’s what we’re afraid of. Gary scanned for her but couldn’t find anything either. He suggested you might be able to help. He said you have... special talents, for this sort of thing.”

Jared unlocked his office and turned on the light. “Did he?” he paused briefly. “What kind of *special* talents did he say I had?” He washed his hands and reached for a towel.

“He didn’t elaborate.”

“That was wise of him. I’m already more involved with Triplet International, than I care to be.”

“I understand that Jared, and if I had been put in your position, I would probably feel the same way. We can’t always anticipate our enemy’s next move. I’m no different. I never intended for things to turn out the way they have.”

“Yeah – well – that’s not very comforting. Each day is like hell for me, but at least the two people I care about most are alive and safe. She is... *safe*, isn’t she?”

“Safer than where she was. Gary said he spoke to you about the Bluetooth virus. I wish he’d checked your cell phone before you used ‘Dessert’ on it.”

“So do I,” Jared groaned. “It would have been useful to know whether or not I was a target in the BSV link. It might

have given us an idea how long the virus has been bouncing around and where the source computer might be located. I believe it might have happened when the computer in my car was bugged.”

“That’s a possibility. It would explain how Forrest got the video of you and Donna.”

“Yeah, but not the footage taken at Wisteria Hall. Let’s don’t go down that lane. My people are still looking for that leak. So far, they haven’t found anything. Does Gary have any idea where Missy might be?”

“Since he can’t pick her up at all, he thinks she might be in one of the black-out areas at D’Netics.”

“There is one other possibility – his fortress over the hill. If she’s there, it won’t be easy to get her out. Getting into that fucking place is like trying to walk in a terminator-version of Fort Knox.”

“So, you’ve been inside Forrest’s Cross Lake mansion?”

“You haven’t?” Jared countered with a grin. “I’m gonna put you on hold for a second.” Jared knocked on Alan Standing Deer’s office door. “Al, need a favour.”

“What’s up?” his business partner asked.

“I need you to hold the fort down for a while. I’ve got something I need to do in Shreveport.”

Alan grinned. “You want half the profits, but you love running out on me – don’t you?”

One corner of Jared’s mouth turned up. “There are lots of things I’d rather be doing, and they don’t include looking at your ugly face.”

Alan softly chuckled. “Is this about her?” he asked, his voice serious.

“In a round-about way. It’s to do with Triplet International. Sir Richard needs a favour. I’ll get back as soon as I can.”

“Yeah, sure, Jared. Take all the time you need. Do you think there’s any chance you’ll see her?”

Jared slowly exhaled and shook his head. “I can’t Al. I can’t risk it. I’m gonna lock up and leave. I’ll see you when I get

back.” He went back to his office and activated the speaker phone on his desk. “Mother, I’ve got to go to Shreveport. Remember what I said about keeping an eye on Beth.”

“Is it Donna?”

“No, thank goodness. Sir Richard has got one of his people in a tight spot, again. I guess he’s gonna expect me to be his lap dog from here on out. I don’t suppose you’ve picked up any vibes about this...?”

Nadine looked at Tom, who shook his head. “Just hurry, Jared,” she sighed.

“So, you have, then?”

Nadine locked her eyes with Tom’s and swallowed hard. Tom narrowed his eyes. He knew his wife wasn’t going to say too much, but sometimes he had to remind her. “Not directly, Jared.” Tom frowned.

“Has Dad?”

Nadine sighed. “That’s all I can tell you, Son. Just be careful and hurry. *Time* is of the essence.”

“See you when I get back, Mother.”

“Be careful, Jared.”

“I will Mother...” he hung up the phone. He took his car keys out of his pocket, shut off the light and locked his office door. Tapping his ear bud, he took Sir Richard off hold. “I’m back.”

“There for a minute, I thought you’d hung up on me.”

“You may not be my best friend, Sir Richard, but I won’t take that out on Missy. I’m on the way to the airport. Tell Tim to be ready. If Forrest has Missy and she’s still alive, we go with my judgement call – agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“One other thing, I’m going to contact Juanita – Dr. Walton. Since she moved back in the building, she can check a few things out for me before I get there. I’ll need a nurse, and other than Donna, Juanita is my second choice.”

“OK, Jared. I haven’t told John yet.”

“You do like keeping people in the dark, don’t you?”

“And you don’t?”

Jared chuckled. “What is the French word you big wigs use? Ah – yes, touché, Sir Richard. I’ll ring you when I get to Wisteria Hall.”

“I’ll tell Gary to add you to our phone list.”

“You’ve switched over to your phones?”

“Gary told you that too? Remind me to box his ears.”

Jared chuckled. “Too bad I don’t have one of those gadgets. Gary says they’re the ultimate. Three different network settings – right?”

“Be careful, Son.”

“Will do, *Dad*.” Jared laughed and disconnected the call. “As if you’ll ever be that to me,” he scoffed.

Jared parked his car and paid for a long-stay ticket. He popped his Bluetooth ear bud in and selected Juanita’s number. “Hi, sweetheart. It’s Jared. Remember me – guy with the red face and sexy smile?”

“You’re full of yourself, Jared. Hi. How are you? I haven’t heard from you in months.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve been... coping. I need a favour. You still living at the same apartment complex, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I do. Hang on Jared. Let me switch over to my hands free. You caught me in my car.”

“Sorry about that, sweetheart.”

“OK, I’m back. What kind of favour do you need and is it legal?”

Jared laughed. “You Little Smart Ass. That’s one thing you and my honey have in common. I’ll be in Shreveport in a couple of hours. Remember Missy from D’Netics?”

“Funny, Jared. I still work there part-time. Somebody had to fill in for Donna. Have you heard from her?”

“No, sweetheart. No contact – remember?”

“I just figured since you were talking to Sir Richard, you might – never mind. What about Missy?”

“You didn’t by any chance work at D’Netics yesterday, did you?”

“No, Jared. I’m there from Wednesday to Friday and sometimes on weekends if Forrest is feeling particularly shitty.”

“Hang on a second, sweetheart,” Jared said as he neared the plane.

Timothy McGowan stood in the entrance. He shook Jared’s hand. “Welcome aboard, Dr. Thundercloud. We’re ready to take off when you are.”

“Thanks, Tim. I assume Sir Richard has briefed you on what’s going on?”

“He has, yes.”

“Then I guess I’ll get buckled up.” McGowan nodded and went back to the cockpit. “Juanita, you still there, sweetheart?”

“Yeah, Jared...”

“Here’s what I need you to do. I need you to check Missy’s apartment, and if she’s not there, find a reason to drop by D’Netics. Can you do that without getting into trouble?”

“Oh, yeah. Forrest is always willing for me to work extra hours – the bastard!”

“I need you to do a little undercover work, but I don’t want you to get caught. Ask around. See if you can find out if anyone knows where Missy may be. Sir Richard thinks her cover might be blown. If that’s the case, there’s no telling what that asshole might have done to her. Are you still working part-time with Terry, too?”

“That’s where I was headed. Do I need to call him and tell him I’m not coming in today?”

“I’ll call him and tell him what’s going down. If you will, sweetheart, start checking out those places. Also, pack some bags. After this, you won’t be safe staying at your apartment, so you’ll be moving into Wisteria Hall.”

“You want me to move in with you?”

Jared chuckled. “Don’t get excited, sweetheart. We’re not pickin’ out silverware. I’m hardly there anymore. I’m sure Donna wouldn’t mind us hanging out together when I am.”

“I miss her.”

“Not nearly as much as I do, sweetheart. Carl and the band come around to use the studio from time to time. That won’t be a problem for you since you guys split – will it?”

“Oh no – we’re fine, Jared. Carl and I are still good friends. It just didn’t work out. One thing, I couldn’t put up with his housekeeping habits and he didn’t like Nano.”

Jared laughed. “I did warn you. Carl wasn’t too big on animals.”

“Are you OK with Nano coming with me?”

Jared cleared his throat. “I don’t have a problem with the cat, but... he might not like me. Go ahead and bring him. We’ll manage. Like I said, I’m not at home a lot. Listen, sweetheart, this thing is starting to crackle, so I’d better go before I lose you. See you soon, and be careful. If you get in a tight spot before I get there, call Joe Islington. He’s heading Sir Richard security team in Shreveport.”

“OK, Jared. Oh! Do you want me to pick you up at the airport, or have you made arrangements with Gerald?”

“It depends on what time you get finished. I’ll call you when we get close to the airport, and we’ll go from there. If you can’t come get me, I’ll call Gerald or one of Sir Richard’s men can pick me up. I should be there at one.”

“If I see I’m gonna have time, I’ll grab us some lunch – pizza OK? I’ll pick one up at Dominoes. You are coming in at Barksdale, I assume?”

“Yes, we are, and pizza is fine. Thanks, sweetheart,” Jared said and ended the call. “Terry, it’s Jared. Got some problems – need some favours....”

Chapter 32

Juanita turned her car around and headed back to her apartment. She quickly packed a bag and put Nano in his cat carrier. She went to Melissa's apartment and rang her doorbell several times. She tried calling out, but no one came. Scrolling down to Melissa's number on her cell phone, Juanita pressed the button and waited. Melissa's voicemail came on. Juanita left a message, but didn't have any hopes of getting a response. Melissa always answered her cell phone. Juanita rang the number for Wilson's office.

"Kevin Wilson's office, this is Karen."

Juanita arched an eyebrow. "Karen, where's Missy?"

"Is that you, Dr. Walton?"

"Yes, it is. Has Forrest moved Missy again?"

"I don't know Dr. Walton. I was asked to come and fill this position permanently."

"Permanently? Why did - never mind." Juanita shook her head as she stepped in the lift. "Just transfer me to Mr. Wilson."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Walton. Mr. Wilson is away."

"For how long?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, Dr. Walton."

"OK, then transfer me to Mr. Forrest's office."

"Hold please...."

"G.W. Forrest's office, this is Haley, how may I help you?"

Juanita furrowed her brow. "Haley, where's Missy?"

"I don't know, Dr. Walton. She was gone when I got here. Can I help you with something?"

"Yes, you can transfer me to Mr. Forrest."

"Sorry, Dr. Walton. Mr. Forrest cancelled the rest of his appointments and left for the day. He won't be back until tomorrow."

"So... Mr. Forrest *and* Mr. Wilson are gone?"

“I don’t know about Mr. Wilson, Dr. Walton. Was there anything else, another line is ringing.”

“No, Haley. Thank you. Oh – I’m coming in to check on something, so don’t send security after me.”

Laughter. “OK, Dr. Walton. I’ll let them know. Sorry I couldn’t help.”

Juanita stepped out of the lift and went to the office. The manager’s comments didn’t make her feel any better. The manager said Melissa left for work at her normal time. Juanita told the manager she was going to stay with a friend for a few days. Not knowing if this move was permanent, she didn’t feel the need to elaborate. She fastened Nano to the passenger seat and headed for Wisteria Hall. Juanita didn’t think it would be a good idea to risk taking Nano with her while she looked for Missy because she didn’t know what kind of situation she might get in, and Forrest would have a cow if he knew she brought him to work. Forrest hated all animals.

She pulled up to the security gates at Wisteria Hall. Once she identified herself, the guard opened the gates, and she drove along the dirt road. She thought about Donna as she drove through the fragrant tunnel of cascading purple blossoms. Donna had loved Wisteria Hall, but then anyone would. It was like walking onto a ‘*Gone With The Wind*’ movie set.

Gerald opened the door and greeted her with a smile. “Welcome back, Dr. Walton. Dr. Thundercloud said you would be coming. I didn’t expect you so soon. I’m afraid your room is not ready, yet,” he said, reaching for her suitcase.

“That’s OK, Gerald. I won’t be here for long, this time. I’m just dropping my things off. I have some errands to run, and I didn’t want to take my cat with me. I was hoping you and Cassie might look after him until I get back. I have food and fresh litter in the trunk.”

“Yes, of course we’ll look after him,” Cassie interjected, hugging Juanita. “Welcome back, Dr. Walton. I’ll take the little kitty.”

“His name is Nano,” Juanita smiled. “Thanks a bunch. I’ll be back later.”

“You run along. We’ll have your room ready by the time you get home.”

“Thanks, Cassie,” Juanita said and left.

The intercom on the plane beside Jared buzzed. “Dr. Thundercloud, we’ve got clearance to land, and we’re approaching Barksdale.”

“OK, thanks Tim.” Jared pressed Juanita’s speed number. “Hey, sweetheart. We’re just about to Barksdale. Do I need to call someone to come get me?”

“I’m parked just outside the North Gate, next to the guard shack.”

“Have you had any luck?”

“No, Jared. I haven’t.”

“What about D’Netics?”

“I’m sorry. I haven’t been there yet, but I did get quite a surprise when I called and told them I’d be coming in today.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mr. Wilson is away – no idea how long he’ll be gone. Mr. Forrest cancelled his appointments for today and went home, and Missy wasn’t there or at Mr. Wilson’s office. Haley – that’s the girl who is filling in as Forrest’s secretary – said Missy was gone when she got there.”

Jared grinned. “So, neither one of the top brass are at D’Netics?”

“No, Jared. When I talked to Karen – the girl who’s now Wilson’s secretary – she said personnel told her the position was permanent. I don’t know what’s going on. I told Haley I would be in the research department working, later on today.”

“Do you think you could get me in?”

“At D’Netics?”

“Yeah....”

“Yeah, sure. It would be a lot easier if I had some help from across the pond, though. Our problem is going to be the damn security cameras.”

Jared chuckled. “Did you grab the pizza?”

“Yep, and two extra-large Dr. Peppers.”

“Good. We can eat on the way. We’re landing. I’ll see you in a jiff.”

Jared popped in his Bluetooth ear bud and pressed Gary’s speed number. “Gary, it’s Jared. We’ve landed at Barksdale. Where’s Donna? Can you talk?”

“Oh, hi, Babe.”

“Babe! I’ll take that as a no. At least for your sake, I hope that’s what you meant.”

“Yep.”

“Can you get away from her? I need to talk to you. It’s kind of important.”

“Yeah, hang on a second. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Jared slung his laptop strap over his shoulder and headed for the North Gate. “OK, Jared. I’m back. Sorry I kept you waiting. I thought you were going to call Sir Richard.”

“I didn’t need to talk to him. You can let him know I’ve arrived. Was Donna close by?”

“Yeah. We were playing a game of Trivial Pursuit. I don’t think D is enjoying it. It’s the UK version. Apart from the music questions, she’s not doing very well. What’s up? Have you found Missy?”

“No. I may be fast, but I’m not that damn fast. I just stepped off the plane. How would you like to help me get into D’Netics and leave them a little surprise?”

“Jared if you go up on the top floor, or in Forrest’s private parking lot, I can’t help you. VICi’s sensors can’t scan those areas. I can help you in the other areas, though.”

“Have you worked out a new version of ‘Acid Rain’?”

“As you say, I may be fast, but I’m not that fast. No, I haven’t had time. Been busy working on our death gene project.”

“Well, I have a cute little gal who’s gonna get me in. I thought maybe you could satisfy Forrest’s sweet-tooth if you catch my drift? Would ‘Dessert’ be enough protection for me?”

“Would it ever!”

Jared winced. “Easy Pal. I’ve got very sensitive ears. Remember? You don’t need to shout.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to shout. It’s just – man - would that be a break for us! If you could load ‘Dessert’ from one of the lower level computers, I could then target it at D’Netic’s mainframe firewall alarm and basically re-open my back door.”

Jared frowned. “You mean you don’t want to wipe the whole fucking thing?”

“That would draw too much attention. I may, however, be able to figure out how they’ve been blocking me out. It would also give me a chance to see if Forrest was behind the BSV. This pretty little gal you’re talking about. That wouldn’t be my ex-fiancée, would it?”

Jared sighed. “It’s Juanita, Pal. She’s gonna help me but don’t worry. Unlike Sir Richard, I won’t get her shot.”

“Does she know you’re talking to me about this?”

“It was her suggestion. Well... she didn’t come right out and say it, but I read between the lines.”

“I see....”

“What do I need to do? Before I forget it, Forrest’s penthouse is one of the places I want to check. I have a gut feeling that’s where we’ll find Missy. Either there, or at his Cross Lake fortress. Personally, I’d prefer the penthouse.”

“Give me an hour and I’ll tweak ‘Dessert’ and then I’ll send the updated copy to your cell phone.”

“An hour! I would have thought you’d be able to do it in a few minutes.”

“This kind of hacking takes time Jared,” Gary groaned.

“Why? I thought it was the ultimate file killer.”

“It is, but I need to make it a little more obscure. Once it’s loaded to the mainframe, I’m going to tell it to go into stealth mode. They’ll never know it’s there.”

“I’ll give you an hour. That gives us time to have lunch and decide how we’re going to do this. There’s a park not too far from D’Netics. We’ll go and wait there, but if I haven’t heard from you within one hour, we’re going in. If Forrest has Missy, we have to get to her as soon as possible. Mother wouldn’t tell me everything, but she did say time was of the essence. I won’t see innocent blood spilt so you can re-open your back door. One hour, Gary!”

After missing three questions in a row, Donna decided Trivial Pursuit was not her game of choice, especially not the UK version. Richard and Sam were winning, with one wedge to go. Gary needed two wedges and Donna – destined to be the loser – still needed four. She did OK with questions on science, food and music, but UK history was a mystery to her. She sighed. “Whose turn is it?”

“Mine,” Sam spoke up, reaching for the dice. He rolled a three and landed on a green square.

Donna groaned and drew a card. “Great. Science and Nature.” She paused. “All right Einstein here goes. What number is represented in Morse code by five dashes?”

Sam leaned his head back and looked toward the ceiling. “Let me see....”

“Oh come on Mate,” John encouraged. “Surely you know this!”

Richard glared at John. He was determined to beat Sam, but the victory wasn’t coming easy. Sir Richard softly smiled, more concerned with finding out whether or not anyone had located Melissa, than concentrating on the game.

Sam narrowed his eyes; one corner of his mouth turned up. “I’ll try five,” he said, giving the correct answer. He was now lined up for the last turn.

Donna threw the dice and got a question about a female British Prime Minister. She didn't know the answer despite Sam giving her hints about alternatives to slate roofs. "I give up!"

"It's Margret Thatcher, sweetheart," Sam grinned.

Donna's mouth gaped. "Damn! I should have known that!"

Alan walked next to Sir Richard and whispered something in his ear. Sir Richard stood to leave. "Excuse me a moment." He motioned to John to accompany him. "Carry on with your game. You're doing brilliantly, petal."

"Sure I am," Donna groaned. "As long as the question is about music. Whose turn is it now?"

"Mine - when Sam decides to stop cheating." Richard reached for the dice.

Gary and John followed Sir Richard into his office. Sir Richard closed the door and sat in his chair. John began without prompting. "Any news on Missy?"

"Not yet, John, but we may be well on our way to finding her," Gary smiled. "I just got off the phone with Jared. Together, we come up with a brilliant plan to get rid of our black-out areas at D'Netics and re-open my back door to their mainframe."

Sir Richard leaned forward. Gary started explaining. "Have you tweaked 'Dessert'?"

"No. Like I told Jared, I need at least an hour. He said if he hadn't heard from me by then, he was going in anyway. He said he wouldn't see innocent blood spilt just so we could re-open our back door."

Sir Richard grinned. "Neither would I. Get busy Gary. We need to meet that deadline. John call Jared and the team and get this coordinated. Since Jared and Juanita are going to be tiptoeing through the lion's den, go with Jared's judgement on this. I'm going to see if I can find out where Wilson went. He may have had a change of heart."

John raised an eyebrow. "If he has, are you going to listen?"

“Depends on what he has to say.”

Chapter 33

Wilson checked his watch. Within minutes, they would be landing at St. John's to refuel. If he was going to do something, it had to be then. Wilson knew Forrest had Melissa. That's why she wasn't at her desk. Like him, her cover had been blown. Melissa would have stood a better chance at getting close to Donna, but she would never agree to help Forrest. She would die first, which was probably what was going to happen if it hadn't already. It had been four hours since Wilson left D'Netics. From experience, he knew what Forrest did to dissenters, but he couldn't risk helping Melissa until he could find a non-traceable hotspot.

The guard sitting beside Wilson was fast asleep, but Wilson knew if he tried to use his cell phone to send a message to Sir Richard, Forrest would find out. But... if he used his cell phone to type out a draft email and sent that to his Nexus, via his Bluetooth connection that obstacle could be avoided. Once they landed at St. John's, Wilson had to come up with a reasonable excuse to get inside the terminal. The question was what. *Think old man! Think!* His eyes twinkled. *That's it! Use your old body and your age to your advantage.*

Wilson quickly typed out a short email and sent it to his Nexus, concealed in his inside pocket. He set his tablet up so all he would have to do was get to a free hotspot and hit send. His only hope was that Sir Richard would get the message and take him seriously. If he didn't, they were all doomed. Wilson was not going to betray Donna or the promise he'd made to her mother. The only loose ends were Linda and the diary. At this point, his life didn't matter, but Linda's and the diary did. It would speak beyond the grave, revealing the nasty dark secrets that few knew.

“So it’s settled then,” Jared prompted. “After this, no more D’Netics for you?”

“I can’t see that I have a choice, especially if Mr. Forrest finds out I helped. I’ll have to leave the country,” she laughed.

“You don’t need to leave the country, sweetheart. You just need to move to Wickenburg with me.”

“And what am I going to do about Mama? Jared, she’s confused enough as it is.”

Jared finished his pizza and cleaned his hands. He checked the time on his cell phone. “It doesn’t look like our friendly hacker is gonna deliver this time. He’s got fifteen minutes, and I’m going in whether he’s sent the program or not.”

Juanita studied Jared’s eyes. “With what you showed me back at my apartment, I doubt we’ll need Gary’s help.”

Jared smiled his sexy smile; the one that made women’s hearts melt. “You certainly took that better than I’d expected you to. Now do you understand why Nano and I may have problems?”

Juanita chuckled. “If he senses what’s inside you, he’ll shit himself silly. Nano hates dogs. You’ll never see him. He’ll cower in my room for the rest of his life. Donna is really a lucky woman to have someone like you.”

Jared tucked his chin and swallowed hard. “She’s not too lucky sweetheart. According to what Gary said, she’s found the strength to move on. Anyway... even if she does, I’m not giving up. Not until I’ve had a chance to explain and she tells me to my face to go away. *Then*... I’ll give up.”

“Sir Richard sat back in his chair and sighed in exasperation. “No one knows *anything* about Kevin Wilson. He could be anywhere. The idea of him having a change of heart was just wishful thinking.”

There was a knock on the door. “Dad... it’s me. Are you guys in there?”

John glanced at Sir Richard, who nodded. “Yeah, Ricky. Come on in. What’s up?” John responded.

Richard pushed the door open. “Have you had any luck locating Missy?”

“Close the door behind you,” Sir Richard said. “Where are Sam and Donna?”

“Cuddled up on the settee, reading. They’ve done a lot of that recently.”

John grinned. “What? The cuddling or the reading?”

“Both,” Richard sighed.

Gary softly chuckled. “Do I detect the green-eyed monster?”

Richard slumped in the chair next to John. “It looks as if I’ve lost this battle. She obviously finds Sam more to her liking than someone who could give her everything.”

Sir Richard raised an eyebrow. “Sometimes everything to one is nothing to someone else. There are more important things than money and power, Ricky.”

Richard snorted. “Yeah – well – I’ve never had this problem before.”

Sir Richard’s email notification chimed. He glanced at the subject and the sender, narrowing his eyes. “Is this a prank?”

Gary turned in his chair. “What is it?”

“An email Kevin Wilson sent a few seconds ago.”

John’s attention peaked. “What does it say?”

Sir Richard read it out. ““Forrest has Missy. Her time is running out. He wouldn’t risk taking her to his Cross Lake mansion. Check penthouse first, but be prepared. He’ll have guards. Forrest knows where Donna is. He sent me to bring her back. She has what he needs. I’m willing to help, but I need Linda out of the country. I have to be at the Savoy in six hours to answer the phone or else. If you don’t want to help me, fine. Just get Missy and Linda out. Once Forrest realises I’ve betrayed him, he’ll go after Linda. Trip, he has drugs. Drugs that will destroy Missy’s mind, if they haven’t already. Ask Donna about EIA.””

John clenched his teeth. “The fucking bastard!” he hissed. “What in the hell is EIA and why don’t we know about it?” he asked, turning his attention to Sir Richard.

Sir Richard groaned and shoved a hand through his thinning hair. “I guess we’ll have to follow his advice and ask Donna about EIA. We need Jared’s help too, but how do we keep Donna from finding out Jared and Juanita are involved?”

Richard frowned. “*Jared* is involved? I thought he wasn’t allowed to have contact with us.”

“Not us, Ricky – Donna.”

“Well, I would have preferred he stayed out of our affairs,” Richard grumbled.

Sir Richard held up a hand. “I made the decision to ask Jared for help. Now, if you want to be involved, stop beating your chest, Ricky. John get some people over to Wilson’s house. Have them go in under the assumption that Forrest has already moved in on Linda. If we play this right, we can kill two birds with one stone. While one team is working on the problem at D’Netics, the other team can be dealing with Linda Wilson. With any luck, we can get them both out on the same flight. Gary, is our new version of ‘Dessert’ ready?”

“Just sent a copy to Jared.”

“Has he got it?”

“Yes, but I would have felt a lot better if he had one of our phones. At least we would know the line was secure.”

“He’s not even part of Triplet International,” Richard responded. “Jared didn’t *want* to be part of Triplet International! I tried to recruit him when I was there. He flat out refused. Do you think it’s safe to give him a piece of our advanced technology? Especially technology we plan on using when we move to the complex?”

“Ricky, for Gary and Donna’s sakes, I think we should start trusting Jared more. He can be an arrogant asshole at times, I will admit, but he’d never let us down. He walked away from Donna to protect her. Would you have done that?”

Richard opened his mouth to speak, but stopped, sighed and tucked his chin.

“That’s what I thought,” Sir Richard continued. “Find a way to get one of our phones to Jared, and possibly Juanita, too. Arrange the thing at the Savoy.” he said, turning to John. “Gary, since Jared feels more comfortable talking to you, tell him our plans. If he’s willing, we may be able to use some of his security to help with getting Linda Wilson out. I’m going to go talk to Sam and Donna and see if I can find out if she knows anything about EIA.”

Not knowing what to expect, Sir Richard loudly entered the lounge. Just to be sure he didn’t catch them in a compromising position, he paused at the doorway. Sam was stretched out on his back with Donna’s head resting on his shoulder. One hand gently stroked the back of her head; the other held his Kindle. Donna was on her side with her back against the sofa, and her Kindle in her other hand. Both were engrossed in their reading; not the scene Sir Richard expected to see. He cleared his throat and tapped on the doorframe. “Excuse me,” he said, stepping into the room. Sam and Donna sat up. Sir Richard sat beside Donna and turned to face her. “Petal, what can you tell me about EIA?”

Donna’s mouth dropped open. Her eyes widened. “A drug, Sir Richard, an inhumane monster. It was one of Forrest’s mind control projects that I refused to help him, and the government develop. Mr. Wilson assured me it would be scrapped. Originally, it was supposed to be controlled by the Department Of Defence. They planned to use it to extract information from terrorists. I rejected it after I saw how unpredictable and unstable, the results were.”

Sir Richard let out a long sigh of exasperation. “Unless Wilson is lying to me, the project wasn’t scrapped.”

“What?”

“Kevin Wilson has confirmed that Forrest has Missy. He also mentioned EIA. Donna, what does EIA stand for?”

Donna's face paled. "Is Mr. Wilson implying that Forrest used EIA on Missy?"

"If I'm to take his email seriously – yes. It seems that's what he's doing. What does it stand for, petal?"

Donna swallowed hard. "Euphoric Induced Amnesia."

Sam frowned. "Would that be something like a super version of MDMA?"

"Yes," Donna replied, "Methylenedioxymethamphetamine."

Sir Richard looked confused when Donna spouted off the scientific name for the psychotropic drug Ecstasy. Sam chuckled. "Now you know why we use acronyms."

Donna softly smiled. "They do come in handy."

"If Forrest has used EIA on Missy, what will it do to her and how would you treat it?"

"The name is a little misleading. EIA can be used two different ways. One way, as Sam has suggested is through extreme pleasure. The other puts the test subject through a living nightmare – literally. If you can imagine a recurring dream of your worst fears – mine, of course being spiders – that's what the person experiences. So, if you take that into account, you can imagine what the test subject would experience through extreme pleasure."

"One *hell* of an orgasm," Sam chuckled.

Donna's cheeks showed some colour. "That's one way of putting it. While the test subject is – so to speak – high, one way or the other, their frontal lobe is wide open to whatever information you choose to embed there. It goes way beyond the effects of LSD or cocaine. If you were to expose someone repeatedly, it could lead to madness and permanent brain damage."

"You said the results were unpredictable, sweetheart," Sam spoke up. "What did you mean by that?"

"In a few rare cases, residual engrams caused the test subject to develop schizophrenia. Those particular test subjects could be coned into believing anything. With most people, the

effects were temporary – wore off – but with a few, they became permanently locked in a state of subliminal suggestion. They would kill without question. They had no morals. I don't know who did it, but someone put it in Forrest's head that it was possible to genetically collect these residual engrams and implant them into compatible hosts. He wanted to create mindless killing machines and sex slaves. I think that's one of the reasons he took such a dislike to me. I said no! It seems he found someone who said yes."

Sir Richard studied Donna's eyes. "What about the death gene project? If Forrest has used EIA on Missy could it reverse the damage?"

"Yes, if I get what I need to develop a vector," she responded without question. "Richard and Gary were on the right path. They just used the wrong vector."

"What vector do we need?"

Donna looked at Sam and swallowed hard. "HIV1," she said, turning her attention back to Sir Richard. "I need an active sample of the HIV1 virus, Sir Richard. The HRV-A virus, better known as the common cold, is never going to serve as a suitable vector. To make this work, we have to insert two genetic sequences at the same time. Either of these on its own could be detrimental. HRV-A will only infect, at most, thirty percent of the cells it comes in contact with. Of this thirty percent, some cells get only one of the sequences and either dies or develops into carcinoma."

"She's right about that, Sir Richard," Sam interjected. "Our experiments were only successful when we did them on simpler animals. When we tried them on vertebrates, our success rate dropped to near zero."

Donna frowned. "Well what did you expect? According to my calculations the best you could hope for is a twenty-seven percent cell success rate. In more complex organisms, such as vertebrates, it's more likely to kill the cell, or trigger rapid cell growth. The HRV-A virus simply cannot withstand the vertebrate immune system. It has proven to be one of the most

successful viruses only because it mutates so rapidly and doesn't kill its host. To accomplish our aims, we need something much more deadly which infects more of the cells *before* the immune system can identify it. We need a retro-virus."

"HIV1? Wouldn't that be too risky, Donna?" Sir Richard was incredulous.

"If you don't know how to handle it, then yes. I'm not saying we use it live, per say. I'm talking about a genetically altered version. One in which the dangerous parts have been removed and reprogrammed. It would attack the entire body not just part of it. HIV1 can disguise itself against T-cell immunity. We use it to carry the code we want to modify. It enters the bloodstream, attaches itself to the cells with CD4 receptor molecules thereby entering the cell, and injects *its* genetic programming."

Sir Richard scratched his head. "AIDS?"

"No, Sir. AIDS is actually a set of symptoms and infections resulting from the damage to the human immune system *caused* by HIV1."

"See, that's what I believe happened to me," Donna continued. "When Gary examined the DNA sample I sent him from Arizona, he found some extra code attached to a leg of one of my X chromosomes. He compared it to his, and it turned out to be the maternal X chromosome we shared. He then compared that to earlier samples of my DNA, and it was the only difference he could find. I believe that's the answer. At the moment, our virus is about as unstable as EIA. It's only going to work on genetically compatible hosts. For others, it could be a death sentence – a *rapid* death sentence. If Forrest has used EIA on Missy, and she turns out to be one of these rare cases, it wouldn't make much difference either way. Without something like this virus we're developing, the effects of EIA are irreversible. One thing is for certain, Forrest never intended EIA to be used to heal anyone. He wanted it as a weapon of war, and it seems that's what he's got."

Silence filled the room as they waited for Sir Richard's response. "Is there *any* other way?"

Donna breathed a long sigh. "Not if you want results in this century, and certainly not if you hope to use this on Missy."

"Donna, I have no doubt you know what you're talking about but, if it were to get out that we're using HIV1 to do this, the public outcry, regardless of the outcome, would be devastating. You want to use AIDS as a delivery system? Won't that just kill whoever is exposed to it?"

"Like all research of this nature, there would be risks," Donna replied. "The ideal situation would be to have a separate place, a remote place away from the Centre to do the actual work and testing," she suggested.

Sam shared a knowing glance with Sir Richard. "That would be the ideal situation."

Sir Richard sighed. "All right Donna, you've convinced me. Start setting up your tests, and expect to get underway after the New Year. I know that's not what you wanted to hear, but I'm afraid that's the best I can offer you. As far as Missy's concerned... we may have to find another way."

Donna paused in thought. She looked at Sam and back to Sir Richard. "I suppose, we might be able to expand on my CTZ5 method. By using G-CST¹ or VEGF² or in combination, we might be able to increase stem cell production to a more acceptable level. If that works, we could try using CTZ5³ as a vector. It could work, but I don't believe it will give us the lasting results we're looking for. It's worth a try unless you tell me you can't get that either."

Sir Richard softly smiled. "I'll find a way to get your HIV1, but I'm afraid I can't get it in time to use it for Missy. How long would it take to develop something using your CTZ5 method?"

Donna paused again. *It would mean Richard and Sam working side-by-side.* "If we started right now, with all of us working *together...*" she said, glancing at Sam. "Possibly by morning."

Sir Richard stood to leave. "Get ready. I'll talk to Ricky."
He went back to his office. "Is Wilson set up at the Savoy?"

"Yes, Sir," John responded. "But how do you know Wilson will take a shower when he checks in?"

Sir Richard grinned. "Because he's a clean freak."

Chapter 34

Gary, John, Jared, Juanita, and Sir Richard's team in Shreveport engaged in a conference call to discuss their plans. Gary and John in the UK; the rest in Shreveport. *"Either way we do this, our timing has to be exact,"* John said.

"Absolutely," Joe Islington agreed. "We don't know what precautionary measures Forrest has taken. He may have alarms set up to go off if anyone breathes too hard."

"Agreed," Jared said. "I say, our first move should be for me and Juanita to get into D'Netics and use one of the computers in the mailroom to upload 'Dessert' to their mainframe."

"That would be the safest place," Gary responded. "That way, I can use VICi to monitor the rest of that level and let you know if someone is coming."

"If you could cut the security cameras in the mailroom, I would only need a couple of seconds – assuming it doesn't take all day for your virus to upload."

"I got your back Jared," Gary laughed. "It will take about ten seconds to upload 'Dessert'. I think I can safely create that much static without drawing attention."

"You'll need to wear some latex gloves or spray on some liquid glove," John said.

"Got 'em in my back pocket," Jared chuckled. "Before you ask, Gary, I have an untraceable micro USB pen drive. I've installed a text file of some corny jokes and some fleshy shots. I figured when it was uploaded, you could delete your program, and all that would be left behind would be junk files from the Internet."

"God, I love this guy!" John interjected.

"He was taught by the best," Gary added.

“Yeah – right,” Jared snorted. “In your dreams, Pal. I’ve lived my entire life glancing over my shoulder. It seems when people want to take potshots, they pick me as a target.”

“So, what you need to do baby, is get Jared in D’Netics.”

Juanita tightened her jaw and frowned. “How many times do I have to tell you? Don’t call me baby! I don’t need you to tell me what to do. Jared and I have already discussed what we’re gonna do. You just worry about your end of it, *baby!*” she snapped.

Jared cleared his throat. “I think you’d better go light on those endearments and be thankful she’s not standing in front of you. If looks could kill – anyway – let’s do this. One other thing, I don’t want Donna to know I’m involved. It might be a good idea not to let her know Juanita is involved either.”

“Yeah...” Gary sighed. “We’ll do the best we can from this end. Once you’ve uploaded ‘Dessert’ to D’Netics mainframe, I can find out what I need to do to disable security on the top levels. The ones that concern me most are in Forrest’s private lift and apartment. We may have to kill the bastard.”

Jared narrowed his eyes. “I’m praying he’s there. Ripping that fucker apart would be the icing on the cake for me. Just get rid of security – I’ll do the rest.”

“That’s just it. I can’t get rid of their security. I’ll have to find a way around it. If I disable it Forrest will know, and our element of surprise will be gone.”

Jared’s top lip curled; he growled low in his throat. “Fine - I don’t care,” he grinned, patting his top pocket that contained an EpiPen full of Propofol. “Just leave the goons and the asshole to me. When I’m done, the goons will be taking a nice long nap. As for the asshole – if he should be there – it depends on what he says and how much he pisses me off.”

“OK, Joe,” John said. “It looks as if Jared has D’Netics covered. Is our Wilson team in position?”

“Yes, Sir. Waiting for your word.”

“OK, Jared. Put your ear buds in and I’ll let Sir Richard know we’re ready.”

Jared stood and tucked his long hair behind the collar of his lab coat. “OK, sweetheart...” he said, studying Juanita’s eyes as he clipped on his fake D’Netics ID badge, “...it’s showtime. Are you nervous?”

Juanita swallowed hard as she stood beside Jared. “A little,” she sighed.

Jared wrapped an arm around her waist; Juanita stiffened. “Relax, sweetheart. This is just for show. We have to make it look good.”

Juanita drew in another deep breath and nodded. Jared grinned. “Is my touch *that* appalling?”

“No! Knowing how you feel about Donna, it’s just a little uncomfortable.”

“You’re beautiful, Juanita, but my heart still belongs to one woman – even if I can’t be with her. No offense, but touching you means nothing to me,” he said seriously. Juanita nodded again as they approached the entrance to the building.

Sir Richard sent Richard, Sam, and Donna to the Centre. Sam and Donna rode in Sam’s new upgraded BMW; Richard took his black Mercedes. The team were told to start working on the CTZ5 treatment. Sir Richard needed Gary to help coordinate the operations in the States. Donna was a little reluctant, but truthfully, she didn’t need Gary to start the tests. She’d been working on her own at D’Netics for several years. She said they could manage until he got there. As far as Richard was concerned, his drama classes paid off. He acted as if seeing Sam and Donna together didn’t affect him. By doing things this way, at least for the moment, Sir Richard solved the problem of Donna finding out about Jared and Juanita.

John, Sir Richard, and Gary used the chopper and flew to the complex so Gary could use VICi directly, increasing her response time. While Jared and Juanita were making their way to the mailroom, Gary scanned Kevin Wilson’s house to see how many of Forrest’s men he’d left in place there. Joe Islington was in position with the rest of his team a short

distance away from the house. “What are we dealing with, Gary?” Islington asked.

“According to VICi’s scans, there are three people in the house. VICi’s sensors are picking up some metallic readings on two of them, so I assume those will be Forrest’s men. As far as I can tell, there are no alarms in place.”

Islington grinned. “Then this will be a piece of cake. We’ll wait for Jared’s signal. As soon as he’s got Miss Hart, we’ll move in.”

“Gary... are you there? Are you communicating with the security cameras here?”

“Yeah Jared.”

“How are we doing? Anyone around?”

“No, Jared. Get ready – wait! Someone is headed that way. Hold off.”

Jared pressed his back against the wall and pulled Juanita into his arms, kissing her thoroughly. She gasped when he cupped her bottom and pressed her body hard against his. Juanita’s heart pounded. She felt as if she might faint, but Jared showed no sign of arousal. Juanita’s eyes were closed, but Jared kept a wary eye on the middle-aged woman, using the copy machine next to them.

Jared pumped up the passion, moaning and rubbing against her, sliding his hand up the back of Juanita’s lab coat.

Gary listened and decided he was glad he couldn’t see anything, but his imagination told him enough.

Juanita couldn’t fight it any longer. She gave in to his kiss as her body responded to his touch. Jared stopped kissing her and moved his lips to the side of her neck. Juanita groaned as he kissed a trail up to her ear. “You’re enjoying this too much, sweetheart,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered back. “I can’t help it.”

“Just remember what I said.”

Juanita nodded. Finally, the woman prepared to leave. She gave them a disgusted look. “You’re on company time,” she growled. Jared flipped her off. “Pervert,” she hissed and left.

Jared immediately broke the kiss. Juanita’s face was flushed. “Sorry, sweetheart,” he said, studying her wide eyes. “Maybe that wasn’t such a good idea.”

Juanita cleared her throat. “I’m fine.”

Jared grinned. “Yeah – OK. Come on Gary, let’s get this done,” he said, slipping on his latex gloves. “Am I clear?”

“OK, Jared – go – now!” Gary said.

Juanita’s breath caught as Jared disappeared beside her and appeared next to the computer across the room. She blinked and jumped when he reappeared beside her. He slipped off his gloves and stuffed them in his back pocket. “OK, Gary, get at it. We’ll head for the elevator. I assume you’re going to take care of the camera feeds. It would be better if no one could prove we were here.”

“Of course, Jared!” Gary snapped. “I wouldn’t want to relive the mailroom incident.”

“I might,” Juanita softly chuckled.

“Damn! This is going to be harder than I thought,” Gary announced. “I’ve found out why VICi can’t scan the top levels. Forrest has used something to erect an EMP shield around those areas. Electrical signals can’t penetrate it.”

“Shit!” Juanita hissed.

“Change of plans – go to the cafeteria and give me a minute to figure this out. I’ll let you know when we can proceed. This is going to be tricky.”

“Gary, we can’t wait. Mother says time is of the essence. That means Missy is still alive. I want her kept that way.”

“I have a suggestion,” Juanita spoke up. “If it’s an EMP shield, then we won’t be able to get a signal through it.”

“That’s right.”

“Forrest is a miser. Despite the amount of money he has, he hates spending it. When he took over as CEO at D’Netics, he replaced all the fluorescent lights with LED bulbs. We should

be able to use modified LED bulbs to capture our signals. We could then modulate the light output of the bulbs. Switched on or off they would emit infra-red light carrying the signal. We could pick that up from miles away - anywhere in line of sight.”

“That’s true, baby, but unfortunately we would need time to set this up. It’s a brilliant idea, but we just can’t use it this time.”

“Time is something Missy doesn’t have,” John agreed.

“*What do you suggest, Jared?*” Sir Richard asked, speaking up for the first time.

“Will you trust my suggestions?”

“That’s why I’m asking, Jared.”

“First off, no cameras. I know it’s possible without them. You can have cell phones, but no cameras. Do we agree?”

“Jared, we won’t be able to help as much.”

“I don’t *need* help, Sir Richard. Do we have an agreement? One way or the other, whether you’re part of this or not, I’m going in to get Missy. This is what I suggest....”

Chapter 35

Once they arrived at the Centre, Donna, Richard, and Sam went straight to the genetics lab and started working on the CTZ5 treatment. Richard started growing stem cell cultures. Sam set up the tests, and Donna worked on the genetic marking system. Each understood this was not going to be an easy job. Donna knew most of all.

She knew the CTZ5 would be less effective, and would only be a temporary fix, but maybe they could at least use it on Missy to fix whatever damage Forrest had done. Donna knew it was possible to heal the physical wounds, but healing the mental ones would be the hardest and take much longer. If Sir Richard couldn't obtain permission to use HIV1, it would create a substantial set-back for the death gene project.

After setting up the electron microscope, Donna started looking for compatible genetic markers. She tried several with minimal success and was beginning to get discouraged. It was possible for her to find a match for part of the lesions but not for others.

Gary, Sir Richard and John were at the complex using VICi to help coordinate the operations in Shreveport. Once Jared had finished explaining his plan, he sent Juanita to the research lab to gather information, but mainly to get her out of harm's way. "Gary is she there yet?" he asked as he slipped on his latex gloves and headed for the lift.

"Yeah, Jared. Clever move, by the way."

"I couldn't risk her getting caught in the cross fire," he chuckled as he stepped inside and pushed the fifth floor button. "All right, I'm in the elevator, Gary. I need a vacant office with a balcony. Which way do I need to go?"

“When you step off the lift, turn right. There’s a short corridor to your left. The last office on the left is vacant, but I can’t guarantee whether or not the door will be locked.”

“And that’s going to be a problem for me?”

Gary laughed. “I guess not. Just try not to break it.”

“Ha ha – you’re funny. I trust you’re taking care of the cameras.”

“I’m using the same method we did at the hospital in Arizona, Jared.”

Jared grabbed the door handle and gave it a firm jerk. There was a snap and the lock released. “I’m in. How are you going to explain the opened window? If I’m successful, you know I won’t be coming back this way.”

“I don’t think we’ll worry about it, Jared,” Sir Richard chuckled.

“OK. Until I’m in and have handled whoever is guarding the apartment, I’m not going to say anything. I don’t want to risk blowing my cover. So, I’ll be back with you in a few minutes –depending on what’s up there.”

“Good luck, Son, and be careful,” Sir Richard said. “If anything happened to you Donna would never forgive me.”

Jared grinned. “That’s why nothing is gonna happen to me.”

Jared took his boots off and stuffed his socks in them. Holding them in one hand, he glanced up, judging the distance to Forrest’s penthouse balcony. He glanced over his shoulder, crouched and sprang to the next level above him. He landed with catlike prowess and zipped to the side, out from in front of the glass doors. He leaned his back against the wall and put his socks and boots back on. *I could have used Donna in a situation like this. She would have been able to relay messages for me – if Sir Richard knew about our telepathic link. Then again, if she and I were together, I probably wouldn’t be standing on this balcony either.*

Zippering into view, Jared tapped on the glass and stayed there, long enough for one of the men sitting on the sofa to see

him. He waved and zipped back out of view again, springing to the roof.

“What the fuck?” One of the men jumped to his feet and grabbed his gun off the coffee table in front of him. “Check on the woman. I just saw what looked like either a woman or a fucking Indian on the balcony!”

The other man glanced up from his crossword puzzle, giving his partner an incredulous look. “A woman or an Indian,” he echoed. “On a sixth floor balcony? I think you’ve been drinking too much of Forrest’s expensive vodka.”

“I’m telling you, I saw someone on the balcony with a wide grin on their face. They waved at me.”

The other man groaned and leaned to the side. “There’s nothing out there,” he grumbled and went back to his puzzle.

“Oh, so we’ve got to do this the hard way,” Jared said. “By the way, as I can tell, there are two of them sitting on the couch. I don’t know if there are any more. I suspect Missy will be in the bedroom, wherever that is.”

“Probably so, Jared,” John responded. “Where are you?”

“On the roof.”

“How in the hell did you....”

“Keep it down, will ya? I’ve got sensitive ears. Going silent again. They didn’t take the bait.”

“*Bait? What bait?*” Sir Richard asked.

Jared groaned and tapped his ear bud, putting them on mute. “What part of be quiet don’t you understand?” he mused. He stepped off the roof; his boots made a clicking noise as the heels made contact with the concrete floor of the balcony. Jared loudly tapped on the glass to get their attention. As soon as the man doing the crossword puzzle looked up again, Jared smiled, waved and sprang back up on the roof.

The second man slung his magazine on the floor, drew his gun and crouched. “I told you I saw someone,” his partner insisted.

“Yeah, I saw them that time. Check the front door and make sure it’s locked,” he motioned with his head. “Then check on

the windows in the bedroom and bathroom. Someone may have found a way on the roof.”

A few seconds later the man came back. “Door and windows are locked.”

“OK. Let’s do this together. You get the door, and I’ll get whoever is out there.” He silently counted. The other man jerked the sliding-door back while his partner charged onto the balcony, scanning for intruders.

“What the fuck is going on? There’s nobody here!”

The other guard shook his head. “I don’t know, but we’re both not seeing things. Someone or something was on this balcony.” He turned around and leaned back against the rail, looking toward the roof. Jared leaned back, just out of view. As soon as they turned to go back inside, Jared sprang behind them, whipped out his EpiPen and injected both of them in the jugular with a full dose of sedative. Before they could see what happened, he sprang back on the roof.

“What the shit? Something stung me,” he said, holding his hand over his neck.

“Yeah, something got me, too,” the other one said. Within a few seconds, both men were feeling the effects of the drug.

Jared waited about ten or fifteen seconds more and peeped over the edge of the roof. He softly chuckled. “OK, these two are counting sheep. I’m going in, so I’ll probably lose you because of this damn EMP shield,” he said and stepped off, landing on a spot to the side of the two sedated men’s bodies. Using his enhanced speed, he did a quick check of the rooms. When he found the one where Melissa was in his face creased with sympathy. “You poor baby. What the fuck have they done to you?”

Bright red soaked through the sheet that had been thrown over her body. Her face was cut and bleeding. From the way it was blue and swollen, Jared guessed her jaw was broken. He took the IV out of her arm and checked her pulse. Lifting the sheet to do a quick examination, Jared could see her clothes were in shreds. She wasn’t wearing a bra; her breasts and chest

were covered with bruises. Judging by the hematoma on the side of her chest, Jared guessed she had some broken ribs and possibly internal injuries. Looking down, he could see she wasn't wearing any panties. He swallowed hard and checked her eyes. Her pupils were unresponsive. "Missy, honey, I'm so sorry. I got in here as fast as I could."

Using his enhanced speed he gathered a thick towel and a curtain pull from the bathroom. He rolled the towel and laid it to the side. Without lifting her head, he slipped the curtain pull under her neck and then gently pushed the towel under on top of the curtain pull. "Missy, I'm gonna get you out of here, but first I need to stabilise your neck."

He wrapped the towel around her neck, under her chin and secured it with the curtain tie. He broke the legs off a wooden chair and set her arm as best he could; securing the splint with pieces of towel he'd ripped into strips. "OK, Missy, we're getting outta here." He gently scooped her into his arms. He kicked the apartment door down with one foot, stepped into Forrest's private elevator and pushed garage. "Gary, are you with me yet?" he asked as soon as the elevator had dropped below the fifth floor.

"Yeah, Jared. What's going on? Have you got her?"

"Take me off speaker now, or get John out," he growled.

"Is it Missy?" John spoke up.

"Do it Gary!" he forced through his teeth. "I'm not talking until he's out."

"OK, Jared, it's just us. John can't hear."

"Sir Richard get Linda Wilson out as soon as possible. I've got Missy, but I didn't want to say anything in front of John. The fucker messed her up something fierce. I need an ambulance here now! I'm taking her to Willis Knight," Jared said and started explaining.

"No, Jared!" Sir Richard interjected. "It's not secure enough."

“Sir Richard, we’ve already had this conversation. You seem more concerned about your secrets than saving lives. This woman is going to die if I don’t do something fast.”

“It’s not secrets I’m trying to protect, Jared, not in this case. If we don’t get Missy and Linda Wilson out of the country now, Forrest’s men will be on us like flies. I have special arrangements with the people at Barksdale.”

“I’ve got a better idea. If it’s so important to get them out of the country, then get me the equipment I need on that fucking plane, and Juanita and I will stabilise her on the way to the UK. I’m not sure Missy can wait nine hours for your magic witch doctor to come to the same conclusion I have. Get me that fucking ambulance. I’m one floor from Forrest private parking lot!” Jared growled.

“One of my choppers is en-route there now, Jared. How long will it take you and Juanita to stabilise Missy?”

“I don’t know for sure.”

“Can you do it in half an hour?”

“I can get her ready to travel in half an hour, but I’ll need longer to stabilise her.”

“Then do it in the infirmary. The team at Barksdale will fit the plane with whatever you need. Give the list to Gary and it will be ready for you by the time you’ve got Missy ready to travel. My head doctor will have a medical team ready and waiting.”

“Missy is my patient, and I’m not leaving her until I see to her care. Donna being there will make this difficult. I’d like to assist in Missy’s surgery, but if the doctor and his team can handle it, I’ll be happy to observe. I trust you have a way of doing that?”

“We will have,” Sir Richard responded. “I’ll keep Donna at the Centre and send Sam to meet the plane. You will need to talk to him and let him know what’s going on. When it lands, be quick about getting Missy on the chopper. We’ll have seconds before D’Netics alarms will light up light Christmas

trees. Gary is going to create a diversion. We've already notified Juanita, she'll meet you in the parking lot."

"What about the men with Linda Wilson?"

"They'll be dealt with quickly and efficiently. There will be no trace left behind. You just worry about yourself, and Missy and Juanita."

"Where are you setting the chopper down?"

"The helipad on the West side of the building, next to the car park. Do you see Juanita? She should be there by now."

"She's here and so is the chopper. Let your people at Barksdale know. If the equipment I've asked for is not on the plane, Missy will not leave the ground."

"Jared, I need to ask a favour. Linda Wilson is pregnant. She may require some special care. Can I depend on you to see to her as well?"

"Sir Richard, I'm a doctor. I heal the sick, no matter who they are. I'm hanging up now. I would suggest you explain things to John. He needs to understand Missy may not make it to the UK, alive, but I will do everything in my power to see that she does."

"Thank you, Son."

Jared shook his head. "I'm not your – never mind," he snorted. "You're welcome."

Chapter 36

Once John had given the word, with stealth and proficiency, Joe Islington and his team approached the Wilson's home. By use of a small aircraft camera drone, they assessed the situation. Linda was being guarded by two men, both equipped with guns.

Linda was sitting on the sofa. Complications with her pregnancy were making it hard for her to get comfortable. Due to her condition and constant need for the toilet, her captors were agitated and losing their patience with her. She glanced at her watch.

"I need my medication."

"Where is it?" one of her captors growled.

"In the kitchen, above the stove, on the second shelf next to the...."

"I'm not scrambling through your cupboards," the man interjected with a sneer. "If you want it, you'll have to get it yourself. Go with her!"

Without any assistance, Linda managed to wobble off the sofa and into the kitchen. Her captor followed close behind her. *Such a gentleman!* She opened the refrigerator and took out some bottled water. Filling a glass from the cabinet, she shook two capsules in her hand and popped them in her mouth.

As her guard passed through the doorway to the kitchen, one of Sir Richard's men clouted him at the base of the skull with a cosh. He went out like a light. Linda was quickly ushered out the back door and to safety. The rest of the team moved in and finished the job.

Linda was put in a waiting van and rushed to Barksdale Air Force Base.

Working together, Jared and Juanita had managed to stabilise Melissa. While the teams were getting ready to leave for the UK, Jared made a quick inspection of the plane. To his surprise, every piece of medical equipment he'd asked for was

on board and firmly secured in place. The Cessna jet had been transformed into an air ambulance. Even if the pilot ran into turbulence, there would be little movement on the plane.

In some things, Jared still didn't agree with Sir Richard's methods, but he was impressed at the amount of influence Sir Richard had with people in high places.

After a brief explanation, Jared managed to get Linda to let him examine her. As soon as Linda, Jared, Juanita and Melissa were on board, the plane taxied down the runway, lifted off and disappeared into the clouds.

Once they levelled off, Jared and Juanita did as much for Melissa as they could. Juanita made a trip to the toilet at the back of the plane and checked on Linda in passing. Jared had given her a mild sedative to help her relax, and she was sleeping peacefully. Juanita took her seat, beside Jared. He was sat, blankly staring out the window, lost in thought.

"Jared... are you all right?" she softly asked.

He turned to face her. "No, Juanita. I'm not all right. It was hard enough to deal with Donna being on the other side of the Atlantic. I don't know what I'm going to do when she's a few feet from me, and I can't let her know I'm there."

"I can't see her either."

Jared frowned. "Yes you could, sweetheart. Your situation is different from mine. There's no earthly reason why you shouldn't see your best friend. Given your opportunity, if I were in your place, I wouldn't hesitate. Except for Gary, and possibly Richard, Donna is among strangers. She may welcome, or even need that familiarity. If I were you, I would be more concerned about seeing Gary."

"Jared, I don't *want* to see Gary. I have nothing to say to him. I outgrew him, just like he outgrew me. Our relationship was a mistake, but Gary seems to think because we were engaged once that he has some kind of claim on me. As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing there. There hasn't been for years. Unlike you and Gary and Donna... I don't believe in perfect matches."

Jared grinned. "Neither did Donna."

As soon as the teams in Shreveport left, John, Gary and Sir Richard flew back to the Centre. Gary headed straight for the genetics lab. Time was running out for Melissa, and they needed to figure something out fast. Since Sam was helping Donna, Gary started helping Richard with the stem cell cultures.

Sam sat on a stool and worked at the electron microscope next to Donna. His task was to help her find a genetic marker to identify the specific gene sequence they needed to aim the CTZ5 at. Two hours later, Donna completed her task. "This looks like a match," she said, comparing the two paper readouts. "Sam, check this. See if you get the same thing. I want to make sure I'm not making a mistake." She rubbed her eyes and moved aside so he could see.

Sam stepped closer and wrapped an arm around Donna's waist. He tilted her chin up and softly kissed her. "What do you have, sweetheart?"

"What we're looking for - I hope. My eyes are starting to cross."

Sam looked in the microscope and checked her readouts. He smiled. "Congratulations, sweetheart."

"Positive match made. Genetic marker found," she said and handed Gary the results. Richard looked up.

Gary glanced at the graph. "Already? Remarkable!"

Donna raised an eyebrow. "You doubted me?"

Gary grinned. "Oh no, but I *had* expected it to take more than two hours!"

"Well..." she said indecisively. "I've only been able to achieve a compatibility rate of sixty-five percent. Still, it should be enough for the stem cell cultures."

Richard took another culture disc from cold storage. "Let's see what we can come up with. Shall we?"

Sam glanced at his watch. "Gary, while you and Richard test the cultures, Donna and I are going downstairs and catch a

few winks before Missy gets here. There's no telling how long we'll be in surgery with her."

"OK, Sam. I won't disturb you unless we have a major breakthrough."

"See you later, then." Sam led Donna toward the door.

"Call me if this works," she said to Richard.

Richard smiled. "I will pet. Sweet dreams."

Sam led her into the lift. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Donna softly smiled. "I hope you have something more comfortable than a couch in your office."

"I have a single bed in my quarters behind my office," Sam responded and kissed her again. "It will be a tight squeeze, but no tighter than it was on Sir Richard's settee."

Donna furrowed her brow. "Settee?" she prompted.

"It's what we call a couch over here. You didn't seem uncomfortable on the settee."

The lift doors opened. Sam led her to his sleeping quarters and turned on the light. "It's not the honeymoon suite, but I think we can manage," he said, closing the door and locking it.

Donna grinned. Sam watched as she slipped out of her jeans and took her bra off. She crawled under the sheets and gave him room. "I hope you don't mind. I sleep better this way."

Sam stripped down to his T-shirt and underwear. One side of his mouth turned up. He switched off the light. "I don't mind if you don't," he said and crawled in beside her. He kissed her.

Donna laid her head on his shoulder and pressed her face into the side of his neck, breathing deeply and pulling his scent into her lungs. Sam shivered; his body responded. She grinned and moved her knee off his throbbing erection. "Sorry," she whispered.

Sam cleared his throat. "Oh, I'm not sorry. I'm just sorry I don't have time to do anything about it. Can I ask you something about what we're doing with the CTZ5?"

Donna draped her arm over his waist. "Sure. What do you want to know?"

“How do you plan to use it to treat Missy?”

“Well, we’ll administer two separate proteins, which have been successful in increasing the natural production of stem cells, and suppressing malignant growth. What we’ll be attempting to do is ‘wake up’ the latent stem cells in her brain. To aid in this process, we’ll need to administer an injection of CTZ5 directly into the arachnoid mater⁴. Theoretically, it should aid in the transportation of new stem cells being stimulated by our prote in solution.”

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Are you planning on using an epidural catheter?” His voice held a slight edge.

Donna lifted her head and studied his eyes. She tenderly kissed him. “You don’t need to feel threatened by me,” she whispered. “You’re the head doctor here. I’ll do what you tell me, but yes, I was going to suggest using an epidural catheter to administer the CTZ5.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” Sam sighed. “I didn’t mean to seem snooty. Until you and I started working together, I preferred working alone. I’m – so to say – at the top. People seldom challenge my professional judgement. I’m not used to having someone who in many ways is my equal.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?”

“You most definitely should. I think we make a good team.”

Donna smiled and laid her head back on his shoulder. “So do I,” she murmured as she drifted off to sleep.

Forrest’s private jet circled Heathrow airport until the runway was clear, then slowly made its descent. Wilson’s bodyguards stood. One of them dropped the door while the other one grabbed Wilson’s forearm and escorted him off the plane. Once more, Wilson’s feet touched British soil. He breathed in and sighed. *Home at last. If only the circumstances were different.*

It had been a long time since Wilson had been in his homeland. Since he moved to the US to become head of D’Netics, he’d had little opportunity to come back. Now, even after all this time it still felt like home. A black cab pulled up to

the curb and waited. Wilson and his bodyguard crawled in the back.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

“Savoy Hotel,” one of Wilson’s guards responded.

On the way to the hotel, Wilson was tense. He hadn’t heard from Sir Richard. Did that mean he hadn’t received Wilson’s email or that he’d received it and had no intention of responding? If things had gone to plan, the person sitting beside Wilson would have been his wife; the reason he stayed in the States.

Even though, he knew it wasn’t true, Wilson had tried hard to think of the child as his own. Thank goodness he decided to hide that truth from Linda and the rest of the World. Now, if anything happened to him, even his diary couldn’t reveal those little dark secrets. He wondered how his life got so out of control. He had grown tired and old, and all he wanted was to come home and settle down.

The taxi driver pulled into the entrance of the Savoy. Wilson got out. One of the guards escorted him to the reception desk while the other one paid the taxi fare. Forrest had made certain Wilson didn’t have a moment alone; escape next to impossible. Once they were given their room cards, the clerk handed the two guards a small glossy gift bag with blue rope handles.

“What’s this?” one of the guards asked.

“It’s your VIP gift bags,” she responded with a smile and reached below the counter again. She brought out another bag; the only difference being the colour of the rope handles. Wilson’s was pink. “Oh... I’m sorry, Sir. I’m afraid that was my last blue one.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The – ah – the ones with the pink handles are for ladies. The soaps and shampoo have a flowery fragrance, I’m afraid.”

The two men burst out laughing when Wilson pulled out a pink shower cap. “Oh, it doesn’t make any difference,” Wilson groaned and stuffed the cap back in his bag.

After settling in his room, Wilson went into the bathroom for a long hot shower. He opened his gift bag and started taking the items out. To his surprise, at the bottom of the bag was a paper napkin with nothing on it but a QR code, and the words ‘Enjoy your stay.’ Wilson shook his head. QR codes were everywhere these days. He tossed the pink shower cap in the bin and took out two white boxes; one labelled shampoo and cream rinse, the other soap.

He tore open the one labelled soap and tapped it against his hand. To Wilson’s surprise what fell out was what appeared to be a small cell phone about the same size as the bar of soap. Out of curiosity, he switched it on and found that it wasn’t a cell phone. It was a QR code reader – nothing more.

Wilson checked the bathroom door to make sure it was locked. Using the reader he scanned the QR code he’d found in his VIP gift bag. His mouth dropped open. It was a message from Sir Richard:

‘An eye for an eye - Kevin. Follow my instructions exactly. Betray me again and you’re finished. Go ahead and take your shower. I know you’re a clean freak. When you get out, ring room service and order a snack. Shortly, you will get a call on your cell phone. Pretend that it’s Donna. I’ve kidnapped her, and she needs your help to escape. Play the part Kevin.

Forrest should be calling you at 1:30am. Make sure the call is short. When you’re done, celebrate your good fortune with the guards, but don’t trade drinks – theirs is spiked.

You have a quarter of an hour to get to the pickup site. Strapped to the underside of your bed is a laptop case. It’s locked. Bring it with you and walk down the Thames embankment to Cleopatra’s Needle. Find a place to sit within sight of the needle and wait.

Flush this note down the toilet. Put the QR reader in the sanitary napkin bag and dispose of it. Remember, Kevin, follow the instructions exactly or else.’

Chapter 37

Wilson sat on the wall of the Thames Embankment with the laptop case resting beside him. He glanced at his watch. It had been thirty-five minutes. He was getting worried. Had Sir Richard lied to him? Twice, people had stopped near Wilson, but no one from Sir Richard's organisation.

Wilson watched as a police officer, and his dog walked up the path towards him. The dog stopped, sniffed at the laptop case and started whining and pawing at it. Wilson picked the case up and put it on his knee. The dog barked furiously and reared up on him. "Sir, open your case please."

"Why?"

"If you don't, I'll have to take you to the station."

"I can't open it. The case is locked, and I don't know the combination. It isn't even mine."

"Well, Sir, these combination locks aren't usually that secure. I'm sure I can open it for you."

Within seconds, the officer had picked the lock, unzipped the case and lifted the cover. Bemused, Wilson's eyes widened as he stared at two large bags of white powder. *He's double crossed me!*

"Sir, I have reason to believe you are in possession of a quantity of narcotics," the officer said. "I am, therefore, placing you under arrest. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you fail to mention when questioned, something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do or say will be given in evidence."

"There's been a mistake!"

"Sir, please have a seat and wait, while I arrange transport. I would advise you not to run; my dog won't take kindly to that."

Wilson sat on the wall and buried his head in his hands. *What am I going to do?*

A few minutes later a patrol car stopped nearby. “This way please,” the officer said, taking Wilson by the arm.

“But you don’t understand. I had nothing to do with this. I’ve been framed. I was supposed to be meeting someone.”

“That’s what they all say, Sir. Into the back of the vehicle, please.”

Wilson crawled in the back seat and sighed deeply. He felt sick.

The dog patrol officer had a brief conversation with the driver of the car. Wilson’s laptop case was passed to the driver. Wilson was curious to see the driver hand his arresting officer an envelope, which he quickly tucked away.

The driver pulled onto the main road and started meandering through the surprisingly busy London traffic. At this point, there was little Wilson could do but cooperate and get this over with as soon as possible.

They drove past the Whitehall Police Station on the Victoria Embankment. Wilson’s palms began to sweat. They’re not real policeman. Where are they taking me? Maybe Sir Richard didn’t set me up. Maybe he didn’t even get my email. Forrest – he set me up!

Wilson’s disquiet was justified when the police officer turned around and headed northeast out of London.

“You’re not taking me to the station, are you? Who sent you? Who are you working for?” Wilson’s questions were unanswered.

In Epping Forest, they pulled onto the verge at Coopersale Common. The road was deserted and surrounded by trees. Wilson swallowed hard. *Ok – this is it – this is where it happens - in the middle of nowhere.*

The driver turned on the interior light. Wilson’s chest began to ache. He watched as one of the men produced a flask and poured steaming liquid into a cup. The man then opened one of the powder packets from Wilson’s case and spooned two heaped measures into the cup of steaming liquid.

“I’m *not* drinking that!”

The driver grinned. “Yes you will, Mr. Wilson.” He offered Wilson the cup. “I believe you take two sugars in your cuppa?” he asked rhetorically. “Sir Richard sent us. Sorry for the theatrics, but we had to be convincing.”

Wilson shook his head and sighed as he sipped his tea. Ten minutes later he boarded one of Sir Richard’s choppers and was on his way to the Centre.

The chopper landed on the Centre helipad on top of the building. Wilson jumped out, and the chopper took off straight away to make room for the other chopper that would be arriving five minutes later. John and two of his security guards met Wilson. He didn’t get the type of welcome he’d expected, but he wasn’t accepted with open arms either. He was escorted inside the building to Sir Richard’s office and told to wait there. Sir Richard still hadn’t told Wilson anything about Linda, or the fact that she was about five minutes away.

Gary rang Sam and woke him up. “Sam, you need to get ready. Missy and Linda’s chopper will be here in about five minutes, but I need to tell you something first. Donna can’t know what we’re talking about. Got that?”

Donna woke up yawning, stretching catlike against Sam’s body. “Is it Gary?”

Sam cleared his throat and reluctantly eased off the bed. “Hang on, Gary. Yeah, it’s him,” he said to Donna. “Missy and Linda will be here in about ten minutes. I’ll be with you as soon as I’ve nipped to the loo.” Sam shut the toilet door. “All right - talk, but you’d better give me a damn good reason why I just lied to her.”

“What has Donna told you about what happened to her a couple of months ago in Louisiana?”

“I know she went through a bad breakup and was deeply hurt from it. I suspect it was with that Native American she sang with in Raging Storm, but she never mentioned his name.”

“Yes, it was Jared Thundercloud, but he’s not just a singer, Sam. He’s a doctor, and he and my ex-fiancée are on the chopper with Linda Wilson, and Missy. We need to keep Jared and Donna apart. Once Missy is in the operating room, it won’t matter. Sir Richard had the glass in front of the observation area changed out. It’s now a one-way mirror.”

“I’ll go for that,” Sam said.

“You need to find a reason to keep Donna away from the chopper and the operating room.”

“That’s not going to be easy, but trust me, if Jared Thundercloud is on that chopper – I’ll find a way.”

Donna studied Sam’s eyes. “Sam, I know Linda has been having complications with her pregnancy, but don’t you have an ob-gyn? Why do I get the feeling you don’t want me with you?”

Sam swallowed hard and pulled her into his arms. “It’s not that at all, and no, at the moment, I don’t have an ob-gyn. I just thought Mrs. Wilson might feel more comfortable to see a female doctor, especially one she’s familiar with. Besides, I’ll have my full surgical team with me. You’d just get in the way.”

“Oh... right. I wouldn’t want to... get in the way.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. Look. You could be *more* help to me by taking care of Linda. If I need you, I’ll send for you. I figured you might want to monitor our first set of tests with the CTZ5 vector.”

“I would like to make sure the vector works, and I understand where you’re coming from, as far as Linda Wilson is concerned, but I’ve never treated her, Sam. I wasn’t her doctor.”

Sam glanced at his watch; time was running out. “OK, well, whether you were her doctor or not, as your boss, I’m pulling rank. I think Linda would feel more comfortable seeing you than me. Sometimes I rub people the wrong way. Anyway, I need you to do this for me. I’m *asking* you. Will you do this for

me?" His voice was like silken honey as he danced his aqua eyes over hers.

She sighed resolutely. "Yeah – sure. Fine - whatever."

"Good." Sam kissed her. "Don't put Mrs. Wilson in a consolation room. Put her in a patient care room. Joyce will help you."

"OK..." she answered. Her eyes widened. "Sam – wait! Joyce doesn't like me."

Sam turned and walked back to her. "You're a doctor. She'll do what you tell her to."

Joyce stood just outside the doorway. She saw Sam kiss Donna. She stepped out of earshot, bracing her back against the wall. "If Joyce gives you any grief, I'll wring her bloody neck. See you soon – gotta run – love you," he said as he dashed through the doorway, nearly knocking Joyce over. "Geez - watch it honey!" he said, turning to leave.

"The chopper from Shreveport will be here in a few minutes," she said, falling in step beside him as he trotted toward the private lift.

Sam stopped and held up his hands. "I know, but you're helping Donna. I mean Dr. Rigden. She'll tell you what to do."

"You want me to work with Donna?"

"Yes Joyce - now!" Sam snapped and jumped in the private lift; leaving Joyce standing with her mouth gaped. "Shit! What did I just say to Donna?" He banged his head against the wall. "Maybe she didn't notice."

Sir Richard and Gary were already on the roof when Sam got there. He walked next to them. "So what did you tell Donna?" Gary asked, catching Sir Richard's attention.

"I convinced her to take care of Linda Wilson while I dealt with Missy." He groaned. "I did something stupid, Gary."

"What's that?"

"I said something to Donna that I shouldn't have. I was in a hurry to get up here, and I just – well – I blurted it out as I was leaving."

Gary narrowed his eyes. "What did you say to her?"

Sam winced. "I kind of said I loved her, but she didn't respond. So maybe it didn't register. I was in a hurry."

The chopper lights came into view; everyone stepped back. "Trust me, Sam," Sir Richard interjected. "Donna heard you."

Gary nodded. "Just because D didn't respond, don't assume it didn't register. She never misses anything."

"Fuck! Do you think I've messed up?"

"Probably," Gary responded honestly. "Donna said she wasn't ready for anything serious. I told you, she broke up with Jared a couple of months ago. Donna is on the rebound. I tried to warn you. If she sees Jared..." Gary broke off.

"She won't," Sir Richard shouted above the noise of the descending helicopter. "Gary, you and Joe can take Linda Wilson, downstairs to Donna. Sam, you, Jared and Juanita can deal with Missy. From what Jared has told us, you'll need to get her into surgery as soon as possible. Behave yourself Sam. Jared and Donna were engaged, so don't make any smart cracks to him."

"He'll rearrange your face if you say anything about what happened between him and Donna," Gary warned.

"That goes both ways!"

"Sam, Jared is not what you think," Sir Richard added. "Don't cross him!"

The chopper landed. Joe Islington slid the door open and jumped to the roof, grabbing one end of Melissa's gurney. On the other end of it was Jared. Sam stepped forward and reached for the gurney handle.

Jared's voice was low and threatening. "I've got this!" he snapped. "Help Juanita out."

"Well, hello there cupcake," Sam said, helping her to the roof.

Juanita frowned. "You must be Sam." She groaned and handed him the two medical charts.

“In the flesh,” he grinned, giving her the once over as he scanned through the information. “You must be the lovely Juanita.”

“My *name* is Dr. Walton, Dr. Kaliea,” she said, taking her hand back as he lifted it to his lips. Sam made Juanita nervous. She didn’t like the way he looked at her.

Sir Richard cleared his throat and stepped forward. “Welcome to the UK, Jared. I’m Sir Richard.”

Jared narrowed his eyes and glanced at Sir Richard’s outstretched hand. “I’m a little busy right now, Sir Richard. My patients come first. Introductions can come later. Where do I need to take her?”

“Sam will show you. Juanita, you’ll need to go with them. We can’t risk Donna seeing you or Jared. Joe, you and Gary take Linda downstairs. Donna is waiting to examine her.”

As Juanita passed Gary Linda Wilson’s medical chart, Gary and Juanita’s hands briefly touched, but neither initiated conversation. Sir Richard watched them with curious eyes. For a man who had been engaged to her; Gary had seemed mildly annoyed, when Sam flirted with Juanita. All Gary had done was tighten his jaw and glare at Sam.

When Jared and Juanita were preparing to rescue Melissa from Forrest, at D’Netics, Gary and Juanita had talked as old friends - apart from when Gary had referred to Juanita, as baby. Juanita had set the record straight. At least from her point of view, Gary was just another man, a friend at the most. Now that they were face to face it was as if they didn’t know what to say to each other.

“Grab the gurney and let’s go, Bushman!” Jared growled. “I stabilised her, but there wasn’t a lot I could do on a plane. She needs immediate care.”

Sam sneered, tucked Melissa’s medical chart under his arm and grabbed the gurney handle. “This way Geronimo!”

Jared narrowed his eyes and growled low in his throat. “I’m not Apache!” he forced through his teeth.

“Yeah? Well I’m not a Bushman, either, so let’s layoff the name calling.”

Sir Richard shook his head. “Well, this is off to a nice start,” he groaned and followed them into the building.

Chapter 38

“I was told to help you,” Joyce said as Donna approached her in the hall, outside Linda Wilson’s patient care room.

“I’d like to see you in Sam’s office first,” Donna responded.

Joyce locked her eyes with Donna’s for a few seconds before making a move. Donna groaned inwardly and raised an expectant eyebrow as she motioned to Sam’s office. She closed the door behind them and sat behind the desk. Donna held out her hand. “Joyce, may I see Mrs. Wilson’s medical chart, please?”

Joyce sighed and slid the chart across the desk. Donna picked it up and glanced through the notes. The handwriting looked familiar. Donna didn’t know many doctors that wrote legibly – herself included - but it didn’t dawn on her who it was until she read the attending physician’s signature, dated ten hours ago; Jared Thundercloud. Her eyes glossed, and she swallowed hard. She cleared her throat and pushed the chart aside. Joyce raised a curious eyebrow at Donna’s reaction.

“Before we go in to see Mrs. Wilson, there’s something I’d like to get straight with you,” Donna said, her voice calm and professional. “I know you don’t like me, and I have to be honest, I don’t particularly like you, but when we work together, and we go into a hospital room, we go in as doctor and nurse. I will expect you to honour that difference. If you want to have it out with me – fine – I’m game, but, *not* in front of my patients. Are we clear?”

“Is this... off the record, or are you running to Sam with everything I tell you?”

“It’s off the record right now, Joyce.”

Joyce frowned. “It’s obvious you could have Richard, or Sam, but you chose Sam. Why? I don’t understand that. Only a fool would pick a sack artist like Sam Kaliea, over Richard Triplet.”

“Pardon?” Donna arched an eyebrow. “What is a sack artist?”

“A womaniser, Donna. Sam has probably slept with every woman in this Centre at least once.”

“Are you including yourself?”

“That’s none of your business!” Joyce snapped.

“You’re exactly right,” Donna softly chuckled. “And what I do, or who I do it with, is none of yours. Sam may be a womaniser, Joyce, but at least he’s not a liar, and he doesn’t go around spying on people. Before you put Richard on such a high pedestal, maybe you should make sure you know what you’re worshipping. Richard is handsome, and he’s sweet. He knows just what to say, but he uses his status and his money to get what he wants. I love Richard. He’s a dear friend to me, but he’s not the angel you’re making him out to be. Now, do you think we can go in and attend to Mrs. Wilson?”

“You’re the doctor,” Joyce snorted.

“Yes, Joyce. While I’m in this infirmary, I am a doctor, and you’re a nurse, but outside this centre, I’m a woman, just like you. If you have a problem with me, you take it *up* with me, and I’ll do the same with you.”

“Yeah, I heard what Sam said before he darted out of here. *‘If she gives you any grief, I’ll ring her bloody neck’*,” Joyce said, mimicking Sam’s accent.

Donna stood. “Well, let me set the record straight, then. I do not need Sam, or any man to fight my battles. I’m with Sam because I want to be, not because I’m so infatuated by his sex and charm. He reminds me of something I lost – something I threw away for a chance to save the World, Joyce. I don’t love Sam. I am just surviving day to day. I don’t even consider my future. You want Sam? Take him. If he wants you, I’m not going to try and hold on to him. I learned how to make lemonade with lemons a long time ago because sometimes the apple is just as sour as the lemon,” she glanced at her watch. “If you want to continue this, let’s do it outside the office.

Linda Wilson is probably scared out of her wits. She's my concern. Not you or your green eyes."

Joyce frowned. "My eyes aren't green."

Donna tucked Linda's chart under her arm and headed for the door. "Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

Sir Richard approached his office door. The two men guarding Wilson stepped aside. "Stay here," he said and entered the room. Wilson started to stand. Sir Richard held up an imperious hand. "Don't bother, Kevin," he growled. "This won't take long."

"It's been a long time, Trip," Wilson said.

Sir Richard sat behind his desk and leaned back in his chair. "Not... long enough. I've pulled your arse out of the fire, now what do you want from me, Kevin?"

"I told you. I wanted Linda out. You did get her out, didn't you?"

"Missy is in that fucking operating room fighting for her life. She trusted you, and you betrayed her. Just like you betrayed me. Why would I help you do *anything*?"

"Obviously, you still haven't forgiven me."

Sir Richard was shocked. "What did you expect, Kevin? That I would welcome you back with open arms. Slap your hand a couple of times for being a bad boy and then just forget everything that you've done?"

"No, but I had expected you to be more reasonable about this, especially where my wife was concerned."

"Like I told you in my note. An eye for an eye, Kevin. I forgave Martha. I haven't forgiven you."

"Oh come on, Richard! We both know this is not about Martha. This is about Marie, Donna's mother, your lover. I told you before, and I'll tell you again. I did not know Marie or Kenneth would be in the plant. I was told to blow the fucking thing up so Forrest could collect the insurance money. It was supposed to be empty. That's what this is all about. It's not about Martha. You didn't care about her, so don't try to make

me believe that you're letting Forrest get his hands on my wife because I took yours."

"You didn't *take*... my wife, Kevin," Sir Richard forced through his teeth. "You *murdered* her, just like you murdered Donna's parents. Forrest might have pronounced the sentence, but *you* executed his judgement. Because of you, I was forced to walk away from a nine-year-old girl, my godchild."

Wilson looked surprised. Sir Richard grinned and continued; never missing a beat. "Did you think I stopped searching for evidence, simply because The Order said so?"

Wilson sighed. "This isn't getting us anywhere."

"No, you're right. It isn't. Maybe I should just throw you in one of my holding cells for the rest of your miserable life. Maybe, by the time you draw your last breath, you'll have understood what it feels like to lose something precious. And then, just when you think you couldn't lose any more, the woman you grew to love is taken from you, as well."

"Does Richard know about your dark secrets? Does he know that there was a time when you thought Donna might be your daughter? I was there before you, Richard, but I wasn't worthy enough for Martha. My blood wasn't blue enough. The World doesn't know you like I do Richard. Even your own son doesn't. What about Donna? Does she know you're her godfather, or are you keeping secrets from her too? You blame me for walking away, but I don't think it was me, Richard. I think it was guilt. You are the reason Marie and Ken were at the sewage plant that night. Don't forget that."

"Go to your wife!" Sir Richard growled.

"What do you mean?"

"You don't know me as well as you thought you did, Kevin. Forrest lied to you. Two of his men picked Linda up at her doctor's office. There was nothing wrong with your car. It was a set-up. Your wife is in our infirmary. Donna, the other person you turned your back on, is examining her. Just answer one question for me. What were you talking about when you said

Donna has what Forrest needs? I assumed it was for her stem cell research.”

“No. It has nothing to do with her research. Dr. Mobley, his doctor at Willis Knight Cancer Centre said Donna could save Forrest’s life if she agreed to give him a bone marrow transplant.”

“If that’s the case, why hasn’t Forrest approached Donna about this before now? Knowing Donna, she probably would have helped him.”

“I don’t know. That part was puzzling to me, too. You see, when Forrest found out for sure he had CML, every single person at D’Netics was screened as a possible donor, but there were no matches. This last time, when Dr. Mobley put the information through the database again, Donna’s name came out.”

Sir Richard frowned. “But, in order to be a donor, Donna would have to be related to Forrest, and she’s not. Forrest’s doctor was lying to him, probably because he threatened his life like he does everybody else’s. Was Forrest responsible for the shooting at the cemetery in Louisiana?”

Wilson furrowed his brow. “What shooting? When? Who was shot?”

Sir Richard’s lip curled. “Are you going to sit there and tell me you didn’t know about that?”

“No, Richard. Who was shot?”

“Donna. John and Richard took her to the cemetery to say goodbye to her parents and grandparents. While they were there, someone held them under gunfire. Donna was shot in the arm when she was trying to get to the car.”

“Is she all right?”

“Obviously, or she wouldn’t be examining your wife. Don’t look so concerned, Kevin. You don’t care what happens to Donna, any more than you cared about what happened to Missy. When your wife is released from the infirmary, you’re moving into my guest house so I can keep an eye on you. You make one wrong move, and I will throw you in a holding cell,

and your child will never know its father. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Now let me ask you a question, Richard. In return for this generous offer of living under your rule, what do you want from me?"

"When I think of something, I'll let you know," he said, jerking the door open. "Take Mr. Wilson to see his wife. Do not let him out of your sight."

"You trusted me once, Richard."

"Yeah – well – that was a long time ago. If you want my trust again, you'll have to earn it, and it won't come easy. Go to your wife, Kevin. I have other things to do."

While Sir Richard was debriefing Wilson, Jared and Juanita sat side by side, in the observation area of the Centre's operating theatre. Twenty minutes later, someone entered the theatre. Jared grinned and pointed. As he'd predicted, Donna hadn't followed Sam's instructions. When she'd finished examining her patient, Donna had scrubbed, suited-up and come to join the action. "I told you she wouldn't listen," Jared chuckled. "That's Donna!"

Juanita furrowed her brow. "How can you tell, Jared? In scrubs, from this distance, they all look the same."

"If you don't believe me, watch. She'll position herself next to Sam. Whoever that person is will be asked to move."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's what I would do if I were in Sam's position," Jared responded.

Sam glanced up, grinned and shook his head. "Come to get your gloves dirty?"

"That's why I'm here," Donna responded.

"Bunk along, honey," Sam motioned with his head. "Dr. Rigden will take over." The nurse gave Donna a cold stare and moved down. "I had a feeling I'd see those pretty brown eyes in here," Sam said, leaning close to her ear.

"You didn't expect me to sit and twiddle my thumbs while you had all the fun, did you?"

Sam studied her eyes. “As your superior, I expected you to follow my orders.”

Donna softly chuckled. “That’ll be the day. Besides, Dr. Kaliea, you’re not officially my superior. Other than Sir Richard, I don’t have a superior, as such.”

“I’ll sort you out tonight, Little Miss Delinquent.”

She softly chuckled again. “I’ll look forward to it.” Donna looked up, scanning the full length of the tinted glass with her eyes. She fixed her vision at the exact spot where Jared’s eyes were; he could feel the connection. “What’s up there?”

Sam held out his hand. “Clamp,” he ordered. “Up where?”

Donna slapped the instrument in Sam’s hand. “Up there,” she motioned with her head, toward the tinted glass wall.

Sam glanced up and went back to his work. “It’s the observation area.”

Donna kept her eyes focused on Jared’s. “Is anyone in there?”

Sam groaned inwardly. “No, sweetheart,” he lied. “We’re not being observed. If we were, you’d be able to see whoever it was.” He glanced at her. “Why, what’s wrong?”

Donna shook her head. “It’s nothing – never mind.” She sighed and focused her attention on following Sam’s instructions.

Jared swallowed hard and sighed. Even, through the wall of glass, Donna sensed she was being watched. Were her affectionate feelings toward Sam a direct result of Jared shouldering the majority of Donna’s pain and guilt? If so, he may well have permanently pushed her into the arms of another man.

“It feels funny, watching her like this,” he commented. “It’s almost more than I can stand, especially seeing her with that womaniser. I want to pick him up by the scruff of the neck and shake him good. Then I want to hold Donna in my arms and tell her how much I love her, and how sorry I am for what happened between us.”

“Then do it,” Sir Richard said as he sat on the other side of Jared. “Hello again, Son.”

“I can’t tell her, Sir Richard,” Jared responded, firmly shaking Sir Richard’s outstretched hand.

“Hello, Juanita,” he said, shaking her hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you both. Jared, there’s nothing stopping you from telling Donna how you feel. Having feelings for someone does not necessarily mean you’ll act on those feelings. I’m sure if she understood why you did what you did; Donna would wait for you, for however long it took.”

“Yes, Sir. I’m sure she would, too, but in the meantime, Donna wouldn’t have a life. There’s no guarantee we’ll ever be able to be together, Sir Richard. Not as long as Forrest is a threat.”

Juanita groaned. “As long as he’s breathing, Forrest is a threat to the entire planet!”

“Yes, Juanita, he is, but Forrest is not going to be around much longer. Unless he gets what he needs, at the most, Forrest has six months left. I’m sure both you and Juanita know the quality of life he’ll have in the final stages of CML.”

Jared swallowed hard. “What do you mean, unless he gets what he needs?”

Juanita’s eyes widened. “Is there something out there that could save him?”

“Not something – someone – Donna. Unless, of course, Wilson was lying.”

Juanita cocked her head to the side. “Why does Mr. Wilson think Donna can save Forrest?”

“Do either of you know a Dr. Mobley, from Willis Knight Cancer Centre?”

“I know of him – yes,” Jared nodded.

“I’ve heard of him, too,” Juanita agreed. “He’s supposed to be a reputable physician.”

Jared narrowed his eyes. “Is he involved with Forrest?”

“Dr. Mobley is the one who diagnosed Forrest. He’s been discreetly treating him, over the years. We’ve suspected

Forrest was dying, long before we knew the cause. Dr. Mobley ran Forrest's information through the donor database, and Donna's name came out, as a compatible match."

Juanita shook her head. "I'm sorry, Sir Richard, but that's not possible. In order for Donna to be a compatible match, she would have to be related to Forrest. I grew up with Donna. I knew both her parents and her grandparents. Donna is *not* related to Forrest," she declared with certainty. "Wilson is lying to you."

"According to Wilson, this wasn't the first time Forrest information had been put through the database. The first time, there were no matches. Then this time Donna came up as a donor. I'd like for you to stick around for a while, so we can discuss this in private," he said, turning his attention back to Jared and glancing at Juanita.

"I'm curious myself, Sir Richard..." Jared responded, "...but I can't hang around. I can't risk Donna finding out I'm here."

"What if I could put you in a place, where I could guarantee that Donna would never know you, or Juanita were here?"

Jared and Juanita frowned. "Sir Richard, I have a little girl. And since Donna and I split up..." he paused and snorted. "Let me rephrase that. Since I had to walk *away* from Donna, Beth doesn't like me to be gone too long. I think she's afraid I won't come back either."

"Does she know what happened between you and Donna? Does your family?"

"Beth doesn't. She knows Donna had to leave. I figured the circumstances were a little complicated for a child her age to understand. My parents know. They've been extremely supportive through this."

"Although I'll likely find myself on the run when Forrest finds out I was involved, I couldn't stay either, Sir Richard."

"If you and Jared will work with me, we can beat Forrest. I need people like you and Jared, Juanita." Sir Richard held up a

hand. “And, before you ask, this has nothing to do with Donna or Gary. Will you at least listen to what I can offer you?”

Jared glanced down at the surgical scene again. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. He knew Donna sensed his presence. He swallowed hard and studied Sir Richard’s eyes. “I’ll listen, but if it puts anyone I love at risk....”

“I will make sure your family in Arizona, as well as your family in Shreveport, are protected. Same goes for you, Juanita. Join me and I’ll see your mother has the best possible medical care available. I’ll give you the same salary and deal I gave Donna.”

“And exactly what do you want in return?” Jared asked.

“The same thing you did tonight, only with a bit more advanced planning. This was kind of on the hoof.”

“You promise Donna won’t know?”

“Jared... you have my word, son.”

“Can I talk to my daughter and let her know this is temporary, and that I’ll be coming back soon?”

“Of course you can Jared,” Sir Richard smiled. “Where possible, I don’t split up families. You can talk to Beth on the most secure network available. Everyone in your family will get a new cell phone – one of *my* cell phones. When you go back to America, we can communicate with each other and know for *certain* no one can listen in.”

“How do you know it’s that secure of a network?”

Sir Richard grinned. “Ask me that again, when you’ve seen it. Do we have a deal?” He offered his hand.

Cautiously Jared took it. “We have a deal. I’ll *listen* to your offer, but I won’t guarantee I’ll take it. Is that good enough for you, Sir Richard?”

“What about you, Juanita?”

Juanita smiled and shook his hand. “Sir Richard, the only family I have is my mother. As long as she’s taken care of, I’ll gladly help you bring Forrest down, but I don’t want Gary or Donna to know I’m involved, either. It would cause too many complications – at least for the time being,” she added.

Sir Richard turned to face the operating room. “We’ll sort the contracts out later. How’s Missy doing?”

“Unless Donna pulls a magic rabbit out of her hat, I’m afraid it doesn’t look promising.” Jared sighed. “I have to give the devil his dues. Sam might be an arrogant asshole, but he and Donna work well together as a surgical team. She seems to have worked through some of her emotional issues.”

Sir Richard groaned. “She’s worked through a lot of things, Jared. I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but what she went through with you has made her stronger. Donna stands on her own two feet now.”

Jared smiled. *Maybe my parents were right....*

Chapter 39

Two hours later, Sam and Donna left the operating room and met John and Sir Richard in the medical conference room. Sir Richard sat at the head of the table. Sam and Donna sat to his left while John sat on his right. “How did it go, Sam?” Sir Richard asked.

“About as well as we expected. Due to the trauma and repeated blows to her head, there was some cerebral haemorrhaging. As a result, this caused the brain to swell. If it had been treated sooner, we might have been able to limit the amount of damage done to her neurological system. Had it not been for the immediate care of her attending physician, we probably would have lost her on the operating table. However, Missy is in a coma.”

“When can I see her?” John asked.

“She’s on the respirator, John,” Donna added. “Although she’s breathing on her own, Sam and I decided it was best.”

“She’s on assisted breathing,” Sam said. “What that means is this. If Missy can pull enough oxygen into her lungs, the machine allows that, but, if for some reason, she can’t, that’s when the respirator breathes for her.”

“How long will she be on the machine?” John asked.

“That’s hard to say. Missy’s trachea was crushed, John. From the markings on her neck, it was probably due to strangulation. However, there are also indications that she may have been hit in the throat, by the same object which caused her head trauma.” Sam glanced down at her chart, sighed and continued. “Her left mandible – her jaw bone – has been badly fractured. In order for that to heal properly, her teeth have been wired shut to prevent movement. Missy’s right forearm had to be set and casted. She has some cracked ribs on the left side. One of which perforated her lung and will also cause her some breathing difficulties and considerable pain, if she were

conscious. Another major factor is blood loss. Missy's face and throat were sliced with either a razor or surgical scalpel. I did my best, but I'm afraid there will be scarring."

"Not necessarily," Donna interjected. "We can use my CTZ5 treatment, but, I'd rather use it as a last resort."

John frowned. "Why is that?"

"Although I'm confident of my CTZ5, I'm not confident enough of the enhanced healing gene or EHG as we've decided to call it. The way Jared explained it to me...."

Sam glanced at Sir Richard. "Jared Thundercloud? The Indian from Raging Storm?"

Donna frowned at the interruption. "Yes, Sam. That Jared Thundercloud." She opened her mouth to continue, but was again interrupted.

"What does he know? He's not a specialist."

"Yes Sam!" Donna snapped. "As a matter of fact he is, and a damned good one, too. He's also an extremely talented artist and carpenter. Now will you stop interrupting me?"

Sam swallowed hard and arched an eyebrow; taken aback. "Please, continue, *Dr. Rigden*."

"Thank you. I will. As I was saying," she said, turning her attention back to John and Sir Richard. "The way Jared explained it to me, the mother's milk, which is what I believe altered my DNA, doesn't work for everybody. In fact, if the person is not genetically compatible, it can kill. That's not a chance I'm willing to take, at this stage. Not until we've had a chance to run some more tests."

"You didn't say anything to me about this," Sam forced through his teeth. "It sounds to me like this stuff could mean a death sentence, for Missy."

Donna rolled her eyes and groaned. "Yes Sam. That's exactly what it could mean. That's why I want to do some more tests and make sure Missy *is* genetically compatible. I have to warn you," she said to John. "Unless Missy has Native American ancestry, there's an extremely strong chance she won't be."

“This Native American gene you’re referring to, that’s Jared’s bloodline – correct?”

“Yes, Sir Richard. Mine, and Jared’s, and Gary’s bloodline.”

“Then what do you suggest we do, Donna?” Sir Richard asked.

“I suggest we monitor Missy’s condition and keep testing the CTZ5 with the EHG. If Missy progresses, we may not need to take the risk. If she gets worse or we see there’s no other alternative, then we risk using it.”

“Can I go and see her? I mean even if she doesn’t know I’m there, I’d like to sit with her.”

Donna glanced at Sam and studied John’s eyes. “I don’t see that there would be any harm. I know if I were in her condition, hearing the voice of a loved one would help to keep me from crossing over.” She closed Melissa’s folder.

“Could I just point something out here?” Sam interjected, irritated. “If any of you had bothered to look, you would know that Missy has a living will. She doesn’t want to be kept alive by artificial means.”

Donna frowned. “Sam, why are you talking about something like this now? Missy may very well pull out of this. John already has enough on his mind. He doesn’t need to think about something like that!”

“I’m just stating the facts, Donna, but since you or nobody else here seem to be interested in my opinion, I’m going to get a cup of coffee. If you need me,” he said, shoving his chair under the table. “I’ll be in the cafeteria.”

Donna stood. “Sam!” she called out as he slammed the door. “Come on,” Donna sighed. “Let’s go check on Missy.”

As soon as Donna read over Melissa’s chart, she and Sir Richard left the room so John could have some time alone with Melissa. “So how was Linda Wilson?” Sir Richard asked as they walked down the corridor.

“I’m not an obstetrician, Sir Richard, nor am I neonatologist. I don’t mean to offend you, but I find it unusual that a facility, such as yours, doesn’t have at least one of these, if not both.”

Sir Richard stopped and turned. He studied her eyes. “Donna... has Sam, or Gary, or maybe even Ricky explained our reasons for wanting to identify and eradicate the death gene?”

Donna leaned her back against the wall and folded her arms across her chest. “Not entirely, no,” she sighed. “I assumed it was to extend the human life span.”

“What was the purpose of your research at D’Netics?”

“I was using stem cell therapy to cure fatal and debilitating diseases, such as...”

“...Alzheimer’s and others that affect older people,” he interjected. “Am I right? Your aim was never to eradicate death, but to make it less painful and less feared.”

“Yes, but you already know that. I don’t understand.”

“Let me put it another way. Do you believe it’s *possible* to stop the aging process and end death altogether?”

“Well, yes, I believe it’s possible, but...”

Sir Richard held up a hand. “...But you don’t believe we should.”

“Sir Richard, I’ve already had this argument with Sam and with Gary. If people stopped dying, our economic system would break down. We would suddenly find ourselves dealing with overpopulation and famine. Nobody wants to die – *I*... don’t want to die, but until we can better manage our resources, I’m just not sure immortality is the answer. I certainly wouldn’t want to know someone like GW Forrest was going to be around forever.”

Sir Richard softly chuckled. “I can’t say I would either. OK, let’s leave that discussion for another time. I’ll talk to Sam about your recommendations. We don’t deal with everyday medical conditions at the Centre – pregnancy being one of

them – but it doesn't hurt to be prepared. We will eventually have to deal with it, and a lot of other things," he mused.

Donna furrowed her brow. "Pardon?"

Sir Richard waved a dismissive hand. "Never mind," he sighed. "I knew Linda Wilson had been having complications, but I never bothered to find out more. What kind of complications is she having?"

"As I've said, I'm not a neonatologist, but I believe there's something seriously wrong with this baby. The ultrasound, to say the least, was disturbing."

"In what way?"

"The foetus's structural development is out of proportion to its internal development."

Sir Richard arched an eyebrow and scratched the back of his neck; clear hints to Donna that he didn't understand. She softly chuckled. "I'm sorry. I'm going over your head. What I'm trying to say is the baby's body appears to be growing at a much faster rate than it should be in comparison to its brain, heart, lungs and other internal organs. Sir Richard, I haven't mentioned this to Sam or the Wilsons because I'm waiting on the test results. I don't believe in abortion, but if I'm right, Linda's doctor has deliberately put her life in danger. This baby should have been aborted, long before now. In fact, I'm surprised Linda hasn't had a spontaneous abortion, already. I think Linda's doctor has been giving her drugs to keep her from aborting, but I don't know why."

"And you *haven't* discussed this with Sam?"

"No. I was going to, but he stormed out of here before I got a chance to bring up the subject. Hopefully, I'll be able to do that tonight, when he's cooled off. I've never seen this side of him. Unless it's because I challenged his professional judgement, I don't know what's brought this on."

Sir Richard suspired. *This is probably because Jared is here.* "Sam certainly doesn't like to be challenged."

Donna looked surprised. "Really? Sam said he liked challenges."

“Who knows? Sometimes Sam can be a bit... perplexing.”

Donna sighed and shook her head. “Tell me about it, especially when it comes to the opposite sex. He seems to know them all. There was something I meant to ask you. Were you in the observation area during Missy’s surgery?”

Sir Richard softly cleared his throat. “I was there for a while.”

Donna pressed her lips into a thin line and forced air through her nose. “That must have been what it was, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I walked in the operating room, I couldn’t shake the feeling I was being watched. It must have been because you were there.”

“Does being observed bother you?”

“Oh no – it doesn’t bother me at all. It’s just – well. When I asked Sam, he said – oh never mind. It was probably just my sixth sense. Have you had any luck with the investigation?” she asked, changing the subject.

Sir Richard frowned. “Investigation?”

“You said you’d help me look into my mother’s...”

“...Oh – yes – that. No, I’m sorry petal. With everything that’s been going on lately, I haven’t had a chance.”

“I see. Well, I’ll see you later then,” she smiled. “I think I’ll go to the cafeteria and check on hothead. Maybe I shouldn’t have been quite so forceful.”

“OK, petal. Don’t worry. I haven’t forgotten about helping you. I’ll look into it, as soon as I have a free moment.”

“Thank you, Sir Richard. I’ll see you later,” she said as he stepped into the private lift.

Sir Richard walked into his office. “Jared. Juanita. I was hoping to put this off for a while, but I’m afraid we need to move you to the complex.”

Jared grinned. “She knows, doesn’t she?”

“She suspects something is up. She asked if anyone was in the observation area. Sam lied because he didn’t know I was in

there, so I don't think that scored a lot of brownie points for him. Donna disagreed with his professional judgement, and he took it kind of hard. I don't know what's going to happen between them about that."

"Knowing Donna, she'll apologise even if she knows he was wrong," Juanita said.

"No, Juanita. I don't think she will. I think it's likely they'll have a row. Knowing Sam, he may come home tonight, and then he may not. We'll just have to wait and see."

"Where is Donna now?"

"I left her in the infirmary. She said she was going to the cafeteria to talk to Sam. Anyway... we need to get you two back up to the roof. Tim is flying you to the complex. He'll give you your new cell phones and show you how to use them. I've assigned you quarters next to the infirmary. Jared, yours and your daughter's are across from Sam's at the moment. If you'd like to be somewhere else, in case Donna decides to move in with Sam, that's fine. We'll move you to another area, but since you won't be joining us permanently for a while, we won't worry about that right now."

Jared chuckled. "I can take being next door to Sam and Donna, but I'm not sure that Sam can. If things work out the way I'm hoping, it won't matter anyway."

Sir Richard smiled. "No, I don't think it will, but you never know. Juanita, yours, and what will eventually be your mother's are on the other side of Jared and his daughter's. Just in case Donna wants her own quarters, I'm keeping the one next to yours open. I figured you two might want to be neighbours again."

Juanita smiled. "Yes, Sir. I'd like that. I miss her."

"Well, maybe you won't have to miss her much longer. All that's left for you to do now is sign the contracts. Once you've done that, Mildred will give you your black Triplet International MasterCard, and then you and Jared can find out how deep the rabbit hole goes."

"What about clothes, Sir Richard?"

“That’s already sorted. Jared, I tried to match your black BMW as closely as possible, but I’m afraid you’ll have to get used to getting in on the opposite side. Until you make the permanent move, and unless you object, you and Juanita will have to either ride together or share the same vehicle.”

Jared laughed. “Gary was right. You do cover all the bases, but I haven’t agreed to a permanent move.”

Sir Richard grinned. “After you see the complex, I think you will.”

Jared picked up the pen and glanced at Juanita. “Sir Richard, before I sign this,” he stalled, glancing at Juanita again. “I think there’s something I need to... show you. I’m not exactly what you would call, normal.”

Sir Richard laughed. “Jared, not many people in my organisation would be considered normal. When you see the complex, you’ll understand. It’s... very remote.”

“Yeah – well,” Jared snorted. “That’s not exactly what I was talking about.”

Sir Richard studied Jared’s eyes. “Son... I know you’re different. I just don’t know how. Right now, I think the important thing to do is get you and Juanita out of here, before Donna figures this out. John and I will make a trip to the complex, and we’ll discuss this further. Since he’s my head of security, I think he should hear what you have to say. We can discuss your uniqueness then.” He stood. “You’ve signed your contracts. Get to the roof! Consider that my first order, as your new boss.”

Jared raised an eyebrow. “Um, Sir Richard...” he paused and cleared his throat. “I’d prefer to think of us as business partners if you don’t mind.”

Chapter 40

Donna hesitated at the lift, turned and walked down the corridor. Without realising it, she wandered back to the operating room. Reading the nameplate on the door - observation area – she placed her hand on the door handle. For a few seconds, she paused in thought. Donna wanted to go in, but she was afraid. Would it lead to regret or resolution? One way or the other, she had to know. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and opened the door. She switched on the light. Her stomach roiled; the smell of his cologne filled her senses, but it was different this time.

She rested a hand on the back of the first soft theatre chair and slowly slid her hand down the line. Toward the centre of the line, she stopped. Her eyes glossed. The smell was too strong and too familiar, but how could it be. She slowly sank into the chair. It was almost as if she could feel his toned body behind hers. Donna closed her eyes again and pulled in a lungful of air. The sensation was overwhelming. It filled her mind with warm memories and sharp pain.

“No!” she forced through her teeth. “You won’t do this to me. You’re the one who walked away. You don’t get to hang on to me like this. You can’t just pop in my thoughts whenever you feel like it and keep me blocked out.”

Despite her anger, she couldn’t leave. After she had finished playing with the remote control on the one-way glass, she curled up in the same chair that Jared had sat in and drifted to sleep.

John sat in a chair beside Melissa’s bed and held her hand. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “Missy, honey, I don’t know if you can hear me but, I’m here. I’m so sorry I didn’t see you when I had the opportunity. I was less than half an hour away from you, but my stupid pride wouldn’t let me. I’m here

now, though, honey. I know we went our separate ways, but I still love you Missy. Don't let it end like this. Please, Missy, please... don't leave me."

John and Melissa had been divorced for a number of years, but, as far as he was concerned, she never stopped being his wife. He still loved her. Their breakup wasn't Melissa's fault. John wrecked their marriage. He'd let work come before her, and he'd paid the price. If she survived, maybe they would get a second chance.

Sam sat at his usual table in the back of the Centre's cafeteria, next to the tall glass windows. He'd been sitting, mulling things over, and staring out at the busy morning traffic while he finished his second cup of coffee. The whole wheat bran muffin with unsweetened apple sauce he usually had no trouble putting away was still sitting on the saucer in front of him.

"Why did I get so upset?" he mused. "Donna didn't actually *question* my professional judgement, per se, did she?" Sam let that question roll around in his head for a couple of minutes. "No – she didn't. You idiot! All she did was share her opinion, and she has every right in the World to do that. Doesn't she?"

He'd never had anyone question his orders, but Sam knew that wasn't the reason he got so upset. It had nothing to do with Missy's treatment or Donna disputing his medical expertise. It was a battle between his ego and his heart. The catalyst in this internal war was wandering somewhere in the Centre.

Even though, Jared had ripped her heart apart, without cause or hesitation, Donna had come to Jared's rescue. Sam had been called many things, but never a Bushman and hearing it from a man that could probably steal his girl in the blink of an eye had made it worse. "But she's not your girl," he groaned. "She's made that perfectly clear – no strings. What am I going to do? Stick to my guns or grovel at her feet?"

Joyce walked up to his table. "Mind if I join you?"

Sam didn't respond. "This isn't just any woman we're talking about here."

“Doctor?”

“She made you look like an idiot, Sam!”

Joyce frowned and raised her voice. “Sam!”

“So what? I’m definitely an idiot if I let her slip away!”

“Sam, are you OK?”

Sam jumped to his feet and downed the last of this coffee. “I will be when I find Donna.” He headed for the door.

“What am I going to do?” Joyce groaned and buried her face in her hands. “Maybe I should take Richard up on his offer and move into one of his apartments, or tell him about the voicemail.” Joyce’s cell phone rang. Caught up in her thoughts, she accepted the call without seeing who it was. “Maybe you should let Sam cover his own ass.”

“Maybe you should pick out matching caskets and start planning your funerals. That way you could at least be buried beside him.”

Joyce’s heart jumped to her throat. It was that same strange robotic voice she’d heard before. Self-consciously she glanced around the cafeteria; there was no one there. “Where are you?” She swallowed hard. “Who are you?”

“I’m running out of patience. You... are running out of chances.”

Joyce’s eyes glosed; she felt sick. “Are you real or just a stupid recording?”

“Get Donna away from Sam, or watch him die!”

“Why are you doing this to me? I have a friend who can help me, and when I find out who you are, I’ll have you arrested!”

“Two chances left, Joyce.”

“You can’t go around harassing and threatening people like this! Talk to me you son of a bitch!” The call ended.

Sam tapped on the door to Melissa’s patient care room. John eyed him over the top of his newspaper. “Hello, John,” he said and closed the door.

“Sam...” John cordially responded and focused his attention back on his paper. “Looking for Donna?”

“Yes,” he said glancing over Melissa’s chart. “Do you have any idea where she might be?”

“No, Sam. I don’t,” he responded tersely, shook his newspaper and went back to his reading.

Sam put Melissa’s progress chart back in the rack. “Look, John. I’m sorry for my behaviour, earlier in the conference room. I was out of line.”

“Yes Sam – you were – on both occasions.”

“I know,” Sam sighed. “I made a complete ass out of myself. It’s just that, well, when Donna and I first got together, she told me someone had hurt her. Until today, that person – Jared - was simply a digital image on a music DVD. Now he’s real, and here, in the same building as she is. After telling her how I felt about her, and her defending him like that, I guess I ... got a little concerned.”

“He’s not in the same building, Sam. Jared and Juanita aren’t here anymore. Sir Richard had them flown to the complex.”

Sam frowned. “Why in the hell would he do that?”

“He’s the boss. I suppose if you want to know, you’ll have to ask him.” John motioned with his head. “How is she doing?”

“John... considering everything that’s happened to her, she’s doing about as well as I expected. The fact that we didn’t have to put her on full life support is a good sign. Donna’s right. Missy may well pull through this. I’m going to see if I can find Donna and patch things up before it’s too late.”

“You might try checking with Sir Richard. They left out of here together.”

Sam smiled. “Thanks John, I will.”

Sam stepped out of the private lift and approached the glass doors to the genetics lab. Since he had to walk past to get to Sir Richard’s office, he decided to check there first. Gary and

Richard looked up as he entered the room. "Hey Sam," Gary said. "Have you seen my wayward genetic engineer?"

"No," Sam groaned. "Not since our misunderstanding, in the conference room."

One of Richard's eyebrows shot up. "Misunderstanding," he echoed. "What happened?"

Sam narrowed his eyes. "Don't get your hopes up. She hasn't kicked me out yet, at least I hope not."

Gary put the next set of samples under his electron microscope. He glanced at Sam over the rim of his glasses. "You had a row with D, and you don't know where she is?"

"I guess you could call it that," Sam said with a sigh. "I just came from Missy's room. John said she left with Sir Richard. I thought I'd check here first."

"Well, I haven't seen her," Gary responded and started scanning the first sample. "I'm sure she's here somewhere."

"Try finding Jared," Richard growled. "I'm sure that's where you'll find Donna."

"No, you won't!" Gary snapped. "Jared walked away from her. Donna thinks their breakup was her fault. She'll wait for him to make the first move, and he's not going to do that. Besides, she doesn't know him or Juanita are here. When she needs to work something out, she usually goes off by herself. Look for D somewhere quiet."

The helicopter hovered over a derelict area of wet moorland. McGowan's voice hissed through the overhead speaker. "*Welcome to the future.*"

"Huh?" Jared arched an eyebrow and incredulously glanced at Juanita. "Future of what?"

Juanita leaned across Jared, so she could see out the window. There was nothing, but a pile of rubble, and a rough looking road. She shrugged and held her hands out. "Maybe we're supposed to jump?"

Jared grinned. "Sweetheart, it wouldn't be a problem for me, but you'd probably bust your ass." He walked to the front

of the helicopter. “Tim, if this is Sir Richard’s idea of a joke, you can tell him for me, I don’t find it funny.”

McGowan chuckled. “Unless you want to suffer vertigo, you’d better go sit down and buckle up, again. We’re fixing to drop into the hangar.” A red light flashed on a panel above McGowan’s head. “If you want to know what’s going on, look out the window.”

Jared set back beside Juanita and fastened his seat belt. “I’m beginning to think the whole damn bunch is mad. Tim said if we wanted to know what was going on, to look out the window.” Jared scooted over and gave her some room. Again, she leaned across him and looked down.

The water in the centre of the muddy pool drained away, revealing what looked to be the bottom of the pool. It parted in the centre and slid to the sides, revealing something similar to be an aircraft carrier hangar deck. Juanita glanced at Jared with wide eyes. “Hang on,” McGowan said. “Here we go.” He lined the chopper up with one of the lit helipads and started descending.

Jared grinned. “OK. Now, this looks like it could be fun, after all.”

“Yeah,” Juanita commented. “As long as you don’t mind being underground.”

Jared laughed. “Don’t tell me you suffer from achluophobia?”

Juanita frowned. “I didn’t say that.”

“Do you sleep with a night light on, sweetheart?” he teased.

Juanita narrowed her eyes. “I refuse to answer that question!”

He smiled. “I’ll take that as a yes, then.”

Instead of ringing Donna’s cell phone, Sam used her tracker signal to find out where she was. He pushed the door open to the observation area above the operating room. Donna was curled up with her side resting against the back of the chair. Sam used the dimmer switch and turned the lights down. He knelt in front

of her chair and brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek. He softly smiled, leaned over and tenderly kissed her lips.

Donna slowly inhaled, deeply pulling the scent into her lungs. She recognised the subtle difference in the way his cologne mingled with his chemistry. The scent on the chair had faded. She no longer felt Jared's presence. She uncurled, resting her feet on the floor. Framing his face with her hands, Donna held his lips to hers, kissing him back. Slowly, she opened her eyes and gazed at him impassively. One side of Sam's mouth turned up. "Hi sweetheart," he softly said. "Did you have a nice nap?"

Donna nodded, kissing him again, sliding to the edge of the seat. She wrapped her legs around Sam and pulled him closer, deepening the kiss, sweeping her tongue over his. "Where were you?"

"Cooling off in the cafeteria, like I said I would be. Why did you come in here?"

Donna pushed her fingers into the hair at the back of Sam's neck. "Does it really matter?"

Sam softly smiled and slowly shook his head. "No, it doesn't. There's something I need to ask you. Earlier, in my sleeping quarters, did you hear what I said?"

Donna pressed her lips into a thin line and nodded, holding Sam captive in the smouldering gaze of her dark eyes. "I heard you," she softly whispered.

"And...?"

"It's OK..." she smiled, "...but please, don't push. I need more time," she said and covered his mouth with hers. "There is something I'd like you to do."

"Anything, sweetheart."

She leaned close to his ear. "Lock the door," she whispered.

Chapter 41

A neighbour of Wilson's dropped by to have coffee with Linda. When Linda didn't answer the door, the neighbour walked around and tried the kitchen door. She peeped through the window as she knocked. Seeing a man's body, lying on the floor, she'd panicked and used her cell phone to call 911. Within a few minutes, the morning air was split by wailing sirens and bright flashing lights. Three white Shreveport Police cars screeched to a halt in front of the Wilson's two-story house; several uniformed officers bailed out with orders to surround the building.

Through bleary eyes, Liu glanced at the time on his cell phone, pinched the bridge of his nose and accepted the call with a sigh of exasperation. "Aren't you up a little early, Sir?"

"When was the last time you checked on Hart?"

"Last night, before we left your penthouse at D'Netics, Mr. Forrest."

"Why haven't you checked on her since?"

Liu sat up on the side of his bed. "There's no need, Mr. Forrest," he yawned. "Miss Hart was dying last night. Unless the Almighty has intervened and sent an avenging angel, I doubt Miss Hart has had a miraculous recovery. Besides, if there had been any changes the guards would have alerted me."

"Hold on a minute..." Forrest broke out in a coughing fit. "I'm back," he wheezed and coughed a few more times.

Liu furrowed his brow. "Are you having trouble breathing, Sir? You sound out of breath."

"I'm fine! I don't care about a fucking avenging angel, or what the Almighty might have done. Call the penthouse. If Hart is alive, let me know. I want to question her again. With a steady drip of EIA, she should be more cooperative, this morning."

“Just to satisfy you, I will call the guards as soon as I’ve had...”

“...You will call the guards now!” Forrest interjected, wheezing and gasping for breath again. “I will be at my penthouse in one hour. For your sake, dead or alive, Hart had better be there!” he roared and ended the call.

Liu clenched his teeth and growled. He knew Melissa was dead. In her deteriorating condition and the amount of morphine he put in her IV, there was no possible way she could have survived for more than an hour or two after they left. There was absolutely *no way* she could have survived the night. “But... why haven’t the guards called to confirm her death?” Liu asked himself. “Your paranoia is rubbing off on me old man.” Groaning in exasperation, he pressed a button on his cell phone.

Several rings later, one of the guards shook his head, blinked and grabbed at the coffee table for his cell phone. “Hello,” he yawned.

“It’s John Liu. What is Miss Hart’s condition?”

“Dead... I would imagine.”

“Go and check. If she’s still alive Mr. Forrest wants to question her.”

“Hold on a minute, but I’m telling you, the bitch is dead.” The man staggered, bracing himself against the seat of the sofa and made a feeble attempt to stand. Wobbling, he groggily focused his attention on the open glass door, to the balcony. He reached for his gun, but it was no longer tucked in his belt. He shook his partner awake and pointed to the balcony.

Liu could hear shuffling and muffled voices, but he couldn’t make out what was being said.

“What the fuck is that doing open?”

“I don’t know. Did you leave the door open?”

“Hell no! Did you?”

“Check the front door. I’ll check on the bitch!”

“Oh fuck! She’s gone!”

“The door has been kicked out!”

“Kicked in - don’t you mean in?”

“No – I mean out. Somebody must have come in from the balcony, grabbed the bitch and then busted the door down.”

“Why in the hell would they do that when all they had to do was unlock the damned door?”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know? What are we gonna do? Forrest will slit our throats.”

“I’ll tell you what we’re gonna do. We’re gonna get the fuck outta here right now!”

Liu’s eyes widened. “What’s going on? Hello! Are you there? Hello!” No reply. The shuffling and muffled voices faded, and then there was nothing but silence. Liu clenched his teeth and swore as he headed for the door. Jumping in his car, he peeled onto the highway and headed for D’Netics.

Liu parked his car in Forrest’s private parking lot and made a run for the lift. As soon as he saw what was left of the apartment door outside the penthouse, he knew what to expect. He clenched his teeth and drew his gun, bracing it in his palm. Knowing the frightened guards had fled for their lives, Liu didn’t bother calling out. Cautiously he crept through the foyer and into the living room, glancing up, at the open door to the balcony as he scanned the rest of the room. He headed for the bedroom.

Upon entering his mouth gaped. The half-empty IV bottle hung from the rack. Dangling below it was the clear tubing. All that was left to show Melissa had been there was a bloody sheet. In the corner, next to the bathroom was a wooden chair with two legs broken off. Liu scratched his head and sighed. The only thing he could do now was check the security cameras.

He rode the lift down and used his key to get into Forrest’s office. A few clicks later, Liu started watching the penthouse feeds, on the sixty inch flat screen monitor, hanging on

Forrest's office wall. He stared in bemusement – nothing but white noise. He switched to the other cameras. Apart from the middle-age woman talking to herself in the mailroom next to the copy machine, nothing seemed unusual. Just ordinary everyday office scenes.

Liu backed the feed up and watched the woman talking to herself again. He froze the image and studied it through narrowed eyes. There was something odd about that, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He glanced at his watch and unlocked his cell phone. "Mr. Forrest, I'm in your office. I have no idea how this happened, but Miss Hart is gone."

The image of the white wolf with glowing crimson eyes, from his dream came back in a flash. Forrest remembered the white wolf snarling over his prostrate body. The low, rumbling growl reverberating around razor sharp teeth dripping with saliva as the wolf pressed its weight down, burrowing all eight claws into the flesh of Forrest's chest. Forrest shuddered, remembering the burning rage that danced in the wolf's eyes as it stared back at him. He grabbed at his aching chest and slumped to the chair next to his bed.

"What do you mean gone?" Forrest hissed.

Ten minutes later Forrest's chopper touched down on the helipad, outside D'Netics. Liu met him at the penthouse. Forrest was fuming. "I want those two men found and dealt with," he forced through his teeth and turned his attention to Liu. "How in the hell does somebody get into my penthouse apartment, through the most advanced security system in the country, waltz out of here carrying a dead woman and nobody sees a fucking thing? Oh," he snarled. "I almost forgot. They also managed to wipe all the security cameras, and kick down my apartment door. Have I missed anything?"

Liu cleared his throat and swallowed hard. "I'm afraid it's worse than that. While I was waiting for you to get here, I did

some digging. I found out how this happened, but I don't know who could have caused this much damage."

Forrest slowly forced the air from his lungs. "What kind of damage are you talking about? If you tell me that Melissa Hart is not the only thing I've lost I'll rip your fucking balls off!"

"I do not know what has taken place with your other operation," Liu said slowly. "I was assigned to Miss Hart. If something has gone wrong you will have to take that up with the responsible party."

Forrest narrowed his eyes, grabbed the front of Liu's shirt, and yanked, putting his face inches from Liu's. "You did not *take* care of Miss Hart. You *let* her get away."

"Yes, I *did* take care of Miss Hart. Unless she has an extremely high tolerance for strong narcotics, no matter where she is, Miss Hart is dead!"

"What do you mean? EIA does not kill. It might have driven her to madness, but it would not have killed her. How can you know she is dead?"

Liu groaned. "Your bed is soaked with Miss Hart's blood. Your men beat her to a pulp. When I checked on her, she was barely breathing. Since you can't remember where you obtained the working serum, and we have very little of it left, I didn't see any need of wasting it on a dead woman. Unlike you, I took mercy on Miss Hart. There was no reason for her to be in excruciating pain until she drew her last breath. I gave her enough morphine to knockout a horse. She will have died in her sleep, Mr. Forrest."

"Maybe... I *wanted* her to suffer until she drew her last breath. She is responsible for all of this. She and Wilson are the moles who have been feeding information to Triplet International since Rigden started working here. *That* is why Hart lived in the same apartment complex as Rigden, so she could keep an eye on her!" He sneered and pushed Liu away.

"Speaking of Wilson, what have you done to him?"

"I have sent him to the UK to find Rigden."

"What makes you think he won't run straight to Triplet?"

“I sent two of my best security guards with him. If he makes a wrong move, they have orders to take him down. When Wilson leads us to Rigden, they have orders to take him down.”

Liu sighed deeply and slowly shook his head. *More useless killing* “Why does it always end at the grave?”

“Because his wife is extremely important to me, especially if we can’t get Rigden back. Without one of them, I am going to die. I do not intend to die, Liu. If this experiment works with Linda Wilson, I won’t have to die.”

Liu arched an eyebrow. “What experiment with Linda Wilson?”

The corners of Forrest’s mouth turned up. “You should have been paying more attention at our staff meetings, Mr. Liu.” Forrest walked out onto the balcony and pressed a button on his cell phone. He waited - no answer. “Fucking moron,” he muttered and pressed another button. He waited – again, no answer. He growled and rang Wilson’s house phone.

Several rings later someone picked up. “*Wilson’s residence*,” a dry male voice said.

“Who is this?”

“Shreveport Police – who is this?”

Silence – Forrest ended the call. A sharp pain went through his head; the familiar metallic smell filled his nostrils. He wiped the back of his hand under his nose. His vision blurred as he stared in horror at the blood on his hand. “Liu!” He winced and grabbed at the rail as he slumped to his knees.

Upon hearing the shout, Liu ran from the bedroom where he had been examining the broken chair. He saw Forrest collapsed on the floor of the balcony. He unlocked his cell phone.

“911, where’s your emergency?”

“2100 Fairlane Drive. It’s the penthouse apartment above D’Netics Research Facility. I need an ambulance sent immediately. Mr. Forrest has collapsed.”

Chapter 42

Tina Phillips, one of the lab technicians at Newcastle Stem Cell Research Centre grabbed a carrier bag and headed for the door.

“Wait!” Ian called out. “Where have you been? You’ve missed all the fun.”

“Out of town. I got back to Newcastle about half an hour ago.”

“Did Sam know?”

“Yes. I told him about a week ago I wasn’t planning on coming in today. I only came in because I forgot something. What did I miss?”

“It must have slipped his mind then because he tried calling you first. He told me to come in around six. A chopper brought Linda Wilson and Melissa Hart in this morning. Melissa is in critical condition. She’s in ICU. John Sherriff hasn’t left her room since she got out of surgery. I need to go to the loo, but I’ve got to get this to the nurse’s station first.”

“What is it?”

“Linda Wilson’s amniocentesis.”

“Linda Wilson, as in Kevin Wilson’s wife?”

“That’s the one.”

“What is she doing here?”

“Tina, I’m a nobody. I’m told on a need to know basis, just like you. All I can tell you is that Linda Wilson and Melissa Hart were admitted to the infirmary early this morning. Sam and the surgical team spent hours working on Miss Hart.”

“Why happened to Miss Hart?”

“Don’t know.”

“Boy! You’re just full of information, aren’t you? Well, have fun. I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ll pass by the nurse’s station on my way out. Why don’t you give that to me and you go to the loo before you have an accident?”

“Oh – Tina – you’re a lifesaver. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. It must have been something I ate at lunch, but I’ve got the worst case of...”

Tina twisted her nose and held up her hand. “...That’s enough information. Just give it to me and go,” she said, holding out her hand.

“Here. Make sure you tell them to page Dr. Rigden. She may be on the upper level in the genetics lab.”

Tina sighed, glanced at the slip of paper and shoved it in her front jeans pocket as she left the lab.

As soon as she was in the privacy of her car, Tina popped her cell phone in the car cradle and put in her Bluetooth ear bud. She tapped it twice and waited. “It’s me. What in the hell is going on over there?”

“Tina, I’m at the hospital. He collapsed. What do you want?”

“Oh, I’m just wondering what Melissa Hart and Kevin Wilson’s wife are doing in the UK.”

Liu’s voice was anxious. “Hart and Wilson are there - both of them - alive?”

Tina turned on her indicator and changed lanes. “Yes. Both here and both alive.”

“Fuck! That must have been why Forrest collapsed. He rang and found out things fell through at the Wilson’s house, as well. What is Miss Hart’s condition? Tina, she should be dead!”

“I don’t know. I haven’t had a chance to look at her chart. According to Ian, she’s critical, though.”

“But, she’s still alive – you’re certain of it?”

“Yes! What do you want me to do?”

“It shouldn’t take much to finish her off. She can’t regain consciousness, Tina! Understood?”

“Yes, but...”

“You’re still sleeping with Dr. Browne – right?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” Tina groaned. “What has my assignment got to do with it?”

“If my suspicions are right, your boss will be behind this double rescue.”

“Sam!” she scoffed. “The only thing he’s behind is Rigden.”

“No, Tina – Sir Richard. Forrest wants Wilson’s wife for some reason. He’s been doing some kind of experiment on her that’s supposed to save his life. I don’t know what it is, but I suspect it has something to do with her baby. I need you to keep a close watch on Linda Wilson. Be nosy. See if you can uncover anything that might tell us why Linda Wilson is so important to Forrest. In the meantime... silence Melissa Hart.”

“How... important is this information on Linda Wilson.”

“Very, especially if Forrest dies before he names me as his heir.”

“What makes you think he’ll do that?” she hedged.

“Do you know anything about Forrest’s interest in Linda Wilson?”

Tina narrowed her eyes and fingered the paper in her front pocket. “No, John, but if the price is right, I might put forth a special effort to find out, for you.”

Gary looked at his watch. “Ok you three, let’s wrap it up and head for home.

Donna looked at Sam. “We’re not going home tonight, Gary,” Sam spoke up. “Donna and I are spending the night here.”

Richard frowned. “Why? We won’t know anything until morning.”

“We’re going to hang around in case anything goes wrong with Missy,” Donna said. “Besides, I’m still waiting on the test result for Linda Wilson’s amniocentesis. I’d really like to know if I’m right about that. If I am...” she broke off and shook her head. “It just doesn’t make sense why her doctor put her life at risk like this.”

“If you’re right, what are you going to do?” Gary asked.

“I’ll talk to Mr. Wilson first, and see what he knows about this. He and Linda wanted this baby badly. She’s been trying to get pregnant for several years now. Under the circumstances, I dread telling them their baby would be better off not being born.”

“There’s nothing we can do? What about what we’re working on? Could that be used to help her baby?”

“I don’t know, Gary. My research was never intended to be used for something like this. It was geared more toward older people and the terminally ill.”

“Well, if you’re right about their baby, and they agreed, what could it hurt to try? Assuming, of course, that it wouldn’t put Linda’s life at risk.”

“I suppose it might be worth a try, but even with my CTZ5 and marking system, we haven’t gotten very far. I need that HIV1 vector. Using the CTZ5 is going to take too long. The EHG just doesn’t seem to want to work on anyone, but me. Every animal test we’ve tried has failed, especially the ones we did on primates. It doesn’t make sense. The CTZ5 should be working.”

“Try not to worry about it too much D. Richard has another batch of stem cells lined up for tomorrow’s tests. I know what you’ll do. Sam, you’ll have to watch her. If she gets a free moment, she’ll be back in this damn lab.”

Sam grinned and wrapped an arm around Donna’s waist. “Don’t worry Gary. I’ll keep her distracted when nothing is going on. What are your plans for tonight, Richard?”

“Date with a hot little thing out your way. Well, what used to be your way until you moved in with us? Enjoying the luxuries of life, Sam?”

“Richard, I assure you if there were no threats, living under your roof is the last place I’d want to be with Donna.”

Richard grinned. “In that case, I guess you’d better get used to seeing my face. The threats will probably get worse, instead of better. Especially when Forrest finds out his bargaining

chips just got spent. Goodnight pet,” he said, kissed Donna’s cheek and left.

Sam glared at Richard’s back and kissed the side of Donna’s neck. “Come on, sweetheart. Let’s go check on Missy and see if we can’t chase up a salad, or something. I’m starving.”

Donna turned and wrapped her arms around his neck, looking up into his aqua eyes. The corners of her mouth turned up. “That wouldn’t have anything to do with our little encounter earlier, would it?”

Sam wrapped his arms around her waist and pressed her against his body. “It would have *everything* to do with our little... encounter... as you put it,” he responded and kissed her.

Donna tapped on the door and stuck her head in. “Hi John. Want some company?”

John smiled. “Sure, Donna,” he said sitting up in his chair. “Where’s your sidekick?”

Donna chuckled. “Gone to get us some salad,” she said and quietly closed the door behind her. “We thought we’d eat with you if that’s OK?”

“You and Sam can eat in here with me, but I’m not hungry, Donna,” John responded. “Especially not for salad.”

Donna grinned and pulled a chair next to his. “I figured that’s what you’d say, so Sam is getting you a turkey sandwich and a cup of tea. Don’t be surprised if it’s on whole wheat bread with spinach instead of lettuce – more vitamins.”

“I’ll try to eat it, Donna, but like I said, I’m not hungry.”

“You have to eat to keep your strength up, John.”

“I will, as soon as I know Missy is going to pull through this. I don’t know what I’ll do if she doesn’t. I should have went and seen her before we left America. Have you had any luck with your vector problem?”

Donna sighed. “Not a lot, John, but don’t worry. I’m not giving up. I have more tests lined out for tomorrow.”

“Ricky told me you and Sam were staying here tonight, because of Missy. I appreciate your help, Donna, yours and Sam’s.” The words were out of John’s mouth before he could stop them. “No wonder Jared was so upset over losing you,” he softly mused.

Donna’s head jerked up; she frowned. “What?”

Two taps on the door. “Knock, knock,” Sam said as he stepped into the room. He handed Donna the bag of food and picked up Melissa’s progress chart. “Let’s see how she’s doing, sweetheart, you want to serve the food while I give her a quick look.”

Donna took the food out and put it on the small table next to the wall. “Did you think to stop by the nurse’s station, on your way back and see if Ian got around to Linda Wilson’s amniocentesis?”

“No, but I’ll go see as soon as I’ve finished this.”

“I’ll do it,” Donna said and stood. “You two go ahead and start without me. I noticed you forgot the drinks, too.”

Sam glanced up from the chart and grinned at her. “I guess I had something else on my mind.”

“More like *someone*,” John chuckled.

Sam studied Donna’s eyes; the corners of his mouth turned up. “You know, you’re probably right, John.”

Donna rolled her eyes and slowly shook her head. “I know what I want, and I know what John wants to drink, but what do you want?”

Sam smiled wryly. “If I tell you, can I have it?”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “To drink, Sam!”

Sam chuckled. “Whatever you’re having is fine, sweetheart.”

Donna smiled and left. John blew air through his parted lips catching Sam’s attention. He turned. “What’s up?”

“There for a minute, I thought I’d put my foot in my mouth.”

Sam frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I said something about Jared, but I don’t think she noticed. At least, I hope she didn’t notice.”

“What did you say?”

“I commented on how upset Jared was over losing her.”

“Losing her? Sam arched an eyebrow. “I thought Jared left her!”

“He did Sam, but not willingly. He made a bad choice and Forrest blackmailed him, although I haven’t figured out why. What happened didn’t make sense.”

“Since when has anything made sense, where Forrest was concerned,” Sam scoffed. He glanced back at the door. “So, let me get this straight because Donna told me a different story. Forrest *blackmailed* Jared to leave Donna?”

“Something like that,” John responded. “He threatened to make Jared choose, between Donna and his daughter.”

“Sir Richard couldn’t do something about this?”

“He could have, but at the time, he and Jared didn’t exactly trust each other. That’s how Forrest got to Jared. In case you haven’t noticed, Donna is a workaholic.”

“I had noticed that....”

“When Donna was in America – still under Forrest’s rule – or so he thought, she was under a lot of pressure. Forrest had lengthened her work hours, cut her pay, and completely changed the direction of her research. Richard and Gary – mainly Gary were pressuring Donna to leave D’Netics and come over here. Of course, you know why.”

Sam glanced at the chart and looked back up. “Right...?”

“Donna was almost to the point, of telling Forrest what he could do with himself, but then Jared came back into the picture.”

“Came back?”

“Apparently, Jared and Donna met several years ago – the day before Gary came over here, to work for Sir Richard. Jared was already engaged to another woman – Sara Foster. They married and had a daughter, but Sara died about two weeks after Sarabeth was born.”

“How old is Jared’s daughter now?”

“Seven – I believe.”

Sam furrowed his brow. “And Jared waited seven years before he contacted Donna, again? Why?”

“Jared didn’t exactly contact Donna. If you believe in fate, they just happened to be at the same doctor’s convention at the same time. In fact, according to Jared, he came with another woman because he said he’d do her a favour. I don’t think Kim Gentry planned on Donna being there.”

Sam held up a hand. “Hang on – Kim Gentry? Where have I heard that name? Oh yes – wasn’t she the one they laid the explosion on?”

“Yeah,” John scoffed. “I don’t believe her or Jared had anything to do with it.”

“Jared? I’m confused now.”

John waved a dismissive hand. “It’s a long story Sam. One we’ll have to continue another day. I don’t want Donna to catch us talking about this.”

Sam sighed. “OK – fine - getting back to Jared. Are you saying he’s still in love with Donna? He’s not mad at her for giving away his ‘witch doctor’ secrets?”

“No, but I swear, if you repeat *any* of this to Donna, I’ll castrate you.”

Sam whistled; both eyebrows shot up. “That’s a pretty strong motive for silence – especially now,” he grinned.

“I’m not kidding, Sam. Besides, if Donna knew how Jared really felt, you wouldn’t know which way she went. So, it’s in your best interest *not* to say anything.”

Sam pursed his lips. “You’ll get no arguments out of me. When did you say he was leaving?”

John chuckled. “I didn’t. Changing the subject, how is Missy doing?”

“I have to admit, John, I feel more confident than I did when we brought her out of surgery.”

Donna tapped on the door and stuck her head in. “Sam, could I see you out here, for a second?”

Sam stepped outside in the corridor. “What’s up, sweetheart?”

“I stopped back by the nurse’s station after I got our drinks. I checked Linda’s chart. The amniocentesis results weren’t there. The lab is closed. Do you think Ian was too busy to finish it?”

Sam unlocked his cell phone. “Let’s find out. Ian, it’s Sam. Did you get a chance to do Linda Wilson’s amniocentesis?”

“Yeah – Sam. I gave it to Tina.”

“Tina? When in the hell did she come in? I’ve been trying to reach her all day!”

“That’s funny. She said you’d given her the day off. She said she told you about it sometime last week. You didn’t give her the day off?”

“Hell no, I didn’t give her the day off! Did she say where she was?”

“Only that she’d been out of town. She said she would be back tomorrow. Anyway, she offered to deliver Linda Wilson’s test results, on her way out. After she had gone, I realised I’d given her the entire form. It’s not the first time I’ve made that mistake,” he chuckled. “Tina usually brings our copy back, but she probably thought she could bring it back in the morning.”

“Donna was waiting for those results. Did you record them?”

“Oh yeah. They’re on the system. That much I did remember to do.”

“OK. I’ll get them off there, then. Night Ian.” Sam ended the call and put his cell phone away.

“What did he say?” Donna asked.

“He said he gave the form to Tina, who was supposed to drop it off at the nurse’s station as she was leaving. But... apparently Tina didn’t do it.”

“Then, there shouldn’t be a problem – assuming you can get into the medical lab.”

Sam grinned. "I can get into any office in the infirmary, and since my security level has been recently upgraded, I can get into the genetics labs, as well."

Donna followed him to the medical lab. Sam switched on the lights and logged onto medical records. Keying Linda Wilson's information in, they waited. The list of completed lab tests for that day came up. Sam glanced at Donna and frowned. "Where are Linda Wilson's records, Sam?"

Sam stared at the screen and shrugged. "Computer glitch?"

Chapter 43

Forrest lay in his hospital bed, at Willis Knight Cancer Centre, in Shreveport, La. watching a news report on KLSA. Despite the fact that he'd put forth considerable effort; his voice was no more than a weak hiss, much like that of a snake. "Fucking reporters," he forced through his teeth.

Slowly, Forrest curled his weakened hands into fists; his left hand wouldn't respond. He flexed his right fist, but his left remained immobile. He attempted to lift his left hand, but he couldn't move it. He stared at it for a few seconds, confused as if he couldn't decide how to handle the situation. Finally, he reached across and grabbed his left wrist with his right hand, lifting it a few inches. Upon releasing it, his hand fell limp to the bed beside him. His face contorted and reddened with rage.

The constricted blood flow caused his head to pound with each beat of his labouring heart. For a few seconds, he stared at the room through a fish-eyed lens. Sounds from the reporter and the constant blip of his EKG monitor started to fade. Wheezing for breath, Forrest twisted his head to one side. The oxygen tubing around his ears tightened, causing the nasal cannula to tickle the inside of his nose. Again he attempted to move his left arm to scratch it.

Sneering and glaring at the lifeless limb, with his functioning arm, Forrest grabbed at the rectangular slide bolo under his chin. After several failed attempts, at loosening it, with a sigh of exasperation he gave up. His blurred vision caught sight of the tubing taped to the top of his right hand. He followed the tubing up to the half-filled bag of what he decided was blood, hanging from a metal rack, above his head.

Dr. Mobley tapped on the door and entered the room. Forrest glared at him. "What's wrong with me? I can't move my left arm, and this fucking tube around my throat is choking me. What happened?"

“The same thing that happened before, only this time you didn’t get off, so easy,” Dr. Mobley responded, easily lessening the tension on the tubing to Forrest’s nasal cannula. “You’ve suffered a haemorrhagic stroke. A blood vessel has ruptured, and it’s leaked into the right hemisphere of your cerebrum. We’ve relieved the pressure, as much as possible, but I’m afraid it has affected part of your sensory and motor skills. That’s why you can’t move your left arm.”

“Is it permanent?”

“Possibly – time will tell. If it turns out to be permanent, we’ll set you up with some physiotherapy to help you deal with your disability.”

“I don’t have a fucking disability, and if you repeat this to anyone, I’ll rip your lying tongue out.”

Dr. Mobley pressed his lips into a thin line, suppressing a grin. “I’m sorry, Mr. Forrest, but unless you start taking my advice, this is only going to happen again. Next time, you might not be so lucky. By acting promptly, Mr. Liu saved your life. If you had been alone, you probably would have died.”

“Where is the fucking idiot?”

“Just down the hall, waiting to see you. Would you like me to get him?”

“No! I want to see my attorney, first.” Forrest grabbed for the TV control, clipped to the left side of the bed.

“Here, let me get that for you,” Mobley offered and fastened it to the other side. “Can you reach that well enough?”

Forrest narrowed his eyes. “I didn’t *need* your help,” he growled and started coughing.

Dr. Mobley increased the oxygen flow. “If you don’t stop exhausting yourself, I’m going to put the mask on you, and I know you don’t like that. Now lie back and breathe normally.”

Forrest jerked his head slightly, motioning with his eyes. “Is that the last of it?”

“Yes and I’ve given you the last of the healthy stem cells. I’m afraid until we can locate Dr. Rigden, I’ve done everything

I can to help you. There simply are no options left. Have your people had any luck locating her?"

Forrest glared at Mobley. "I had someone working on it, but like most people, he betrayed me. I'll see he pays, once I get what I need from him. If you betray me, I'll add your name to the list."

"Mr. Forrest, in your weakened condition, I doubt you could even write a list, and I don't like being threatened by my patients. However, I am your doctor, and I will continue to look out for your best interest, regardless of your temper."

"If I find a way out of this, I'll do more than threaten you. Where's my fucking cell phone?"

"Mr. Liu has your personal belongings. You're not allowed to use your cell phone here." Dr. Mobley sat the phone where Forrest could reach it. "Pick up and press nine to get an outside line. I'll see you when I make rounds this evening." Mobley headed for the door.

"I won't be here!" Forrest enunciated.

Mobley stopped and slowly turned. "Exactly where do you think you're going?"

"That is none of your concern. Arrange my release."

"Mr. Forrest, you're in no condition to leave this hospital."

"I said... arrange my release – now!"

"I will prepare your release papers, but they will say that you're leaving against my professional advice and of your own accord. I will no longer accept responsibility for your life, Mr. Forrest, which will not be much longer. Goodbye." He left the room.

Forrest flipped over to the New York Stocks Exchange. It seemed his secret was out. As a result of the reporter's story, Forrest Enterprises shares were steadily falling. Not in one area, but in all of his holdings. From his GM crops all the way up to his space travel investments. His credibility as an aggressive businessman would soon follow. He had to do something to improve his public image. Could he trust Liu to

give him sound advice? Would he even recognise whether or not it was sound advice?

Forrest's physical condition was not all that had been affected by his stroke. His cognitive reflexes were not as sharp as they'd been this time yesterday. If this continued, eventually, Forrest could lose everything, and he blamed it all on Donna Rigden. He'd decided; if he was going to die, she was going down with him.

Liu stood as Dr. Mobley approached. "What's going on? How is he?"

"He's committing suicide, Mr. Liu. I've been ordered to release him. If you'll follow me to the desk...."

"What? In his present condition, you're releasing him?" Liu followed Dr. Mobley to the nurse's station.

"The man is insane. He will be dead in a couple of months, but he knows best. He also asked me to send for his attorney. I'll leave that job to you. I wash my hands of this matter. I will advise you of this. If you hope to keep Mr. Forrest alive, for the foreseeable future, he will require constant care and supervision. His condition is affecting his judgment, and he should not be trusted to make any important business decisions. I assume that's why he's asking for his attorney."

"What will happen now?" Liu asked.

"As with the other times, the transfusion will help, but once that wears off his condition will plummet. Your only hope is to find Dr. Rigden and convince her to give him a marrow transplant," Dr. Mobley said. "Here are his papers and my instructions. Once he's signed that, bring a copy back to the nurse's station, and I'll arrange transport for him back to his apartment. I assume that's where he'll be returning. Don't forget to call his attorney. Mr. Forrest is not in a particularly good mood."

Liu scoffed. "Is he ever?"

Dr. Mobley lifted his eyebrows. "Good luck, Mr. Liu."

Liu walked out of earshot and unlocked his cell phone. "We need to talk."

"Where are you?"

"Willis Knight Cancer Centre."

"Be ready. I'm sending a car."

Liu locked his cell phone and headed for the lift. "If Mr. Forrest asks for me, tell him I had to go out. I will be back in half an hour," he said as he passed the nurse's station.

Forrest switched off the television set, picked up the phone and pressed nine. As soon as he had an outside line, he rang his contact with the local police. "It's Forrest. I trust you took care of that little incident at the Wilson's?"

"Yes Sir, I did. The officer who answered the phone assumed it was a wrong number and didn't trace the call."

"What about the other part?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Forrest, but I wasn't able to find out anything."

"What do you mean you moron?"

"The two men who were guarding Mrs. Wilson were dead. We've checked all the security cameras. There was nothing on them. The house showed no signs of forced entry, no alarms were set off, and no locks were broken. It was definitely a professional job. Mrs. Wilson is just gone, Sir."

"Professional," Forrest hissed. "Any evidence pointing to who *might* have done this?"

"No, Sir. The police dusted for fingerprints and took DNA samples. The only blood they found was from your two men. We checked all the closets. Nothing appeared to be missing, not even the medication Mrs. Wilson had recently been given by her obstetrician. The Wilson's car was still in the driveway."

Forrest slammed the receiver down and pushed the call button on his bed control. "Can I get you something, Mr. Forrest?" the nurse pleasantly asked.

"Send John Liu in here."

“I’m sorry, Mr. Forrest. Mr. Liu said to tell you he had to go out. He said he would be back in thirty-minutes.”

“Where are my fucking clothes?”

“Your *clothes* are in the closet, but I’m afraid you can’t leave the hospital until you’ve signed the consent form.”

“Then get it.”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to wait for Mr. Liu. Dr. Mobley gave the form with his signature on it to him.”

Forrest glared at her. “Get out!” he rumbled.

The nurse raised an eyebrow and turned on her heel. “Sorry Ole Geezer,” she muttered as she left the room.”

Forrest wriggled around on the bed and managed to get the Shreveport phone book out of the top drawer of his bedside table. He propped his knees up and rested the open phone book on his lap. With effort, due to the IV tubing taped to the top of his only functional hand getting tangled in the yellow pages, Forrest managed to find his attorney’s number. “This is Forrest. I’m at Willis Knight Cancer Centre. I need you to bring the papers to me now.”

“What room are you in, Mr. Forrest?”

“I don’t fucking know. I was unconscious when they brought me in. You’ll have to ask at the information desk. Be here in ten minutes or I’ll call someone else!” Again, Forrest slammed the receiver down. “I should have known not to trust Liu!” he hissed and glanced at the bag above his head. The red liquid inside had hardly dropped.

Forrest leaned over so he could read the front of the IV pump. It didn’t look much different from the portable one he had at his penthouse. He pressed the button and increased the millilitres per minute, watching the level of blood in the bag. It began to drop; he grinned and lay back on his pillow. “Make me wait? GW Forrest waits for no one!”

A couple of minutes later, Forrest began to feel tightness in his chest. It became difficult for him to breathe. First, the alarm on his IV pump went off. Then the blip on his EKG monitor went haywire. Within seconds, the nurse was in the room.

“What in the hell did you do?” Forrest lay gasping for breath. The nurse cleared the setting on the IV pump and put it back where it was. She narrowed her eyes and wagged a finger in his face. “You leave that alone. If you fool with the control again, I will restrain your right arm so you can’t even pick your nose!”

Forrest growled and sneered at her. The nurse stayed a few seconds more to make sure he was going to be OK and then left.

Liu approached his Master’s desk with a bow of respect, before slowly rising. “How much longer must I put up with this imbecile?”

“However long it takes.”

“Why don’t you just let me finish him now and get it over with? He’s sloppy, and he kills without cause.”

“You must be patient, Nephew! You sounded urgent on the phone. What has happened?”

“He’s asked for his attorney.”

“And have you called him?”

“I thought it best to speak with you first.”

“What is Forrest’s condition?”

“Deteriorating. I expect we will be leaving for the UK, as soon as Forrest has signed his consent form.”

“Consent form?”

“Forrest is leaving the hospital of his own accord, Uncle. It’s the only way Dr. Mobley would release him.”

“Carry on as normal, Nephew.”

Liu growled, bowed and turned to leave. His uncle called out to him, and he stopped.

“Do not let your ambitions overshadow your duty.”

“As you wish, Uncle,” Liu bowed and conceded.

“It has been decided. There will be no further interference!”

“What about Miss Hart and Mrs. Wilson?”

“I thought you silenced Miss Hart!”

“Someone got to her. My contact in the UK says Triplet has her. She will not regain consciousness. I am more concerned in

finding out what Forrest's connection with Linda Wilson's baby is."

"Linda Wilson is not your concern, nor is her unborn child."

Liu frowned. "But Uncle, she...."

The Weng Fe Tong leader pursed his lips and held up a hand. Liu sighed, bowed again and left the room.

"I trust you heard?"

"Yes I did. He's very ambitious. Are you sure he can be trusted?"

"He is my protégé. He is bound by the code as we all are."

"Just remember – he's expendable."

Forrest read through the revised copy of his amended will while his lawyer and two witnesses patiently waited. Forrest finished and looked up. "This will prevent anyone from denying me life support regardless of my condition or circumstances?"

"Yes, Mr. Forrest."

"And arrangements have been made for my cryogenic storage?"

"Yes, Mr. Forrest. I have spoken to your associate in Scotland. He confirmed that the cryogenic chamber had been completed, and your medical team are standing by. If your doctor in the UK decides that there's no hope for you, your body will be put into cryogenic stasis and kept that way until a cure can be found."

"And no one can prevent this process? Not even John Liu?"

"No one, Mr. Forrest. Dr. Ghana's psychological evaluation and sworn affidavit of your mental stability confirms your competence, at the time of this signing. His credibility will not be challenged. In the unlikely event that your wishes are not carried out, I will see that a full post-mortem is performed. The guilty party or parties will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. As you have so named John Liu, Sir Richard Triplet, Dr. Rigden, Dr. Thundercloud, and Kevin Wilson, as possible threats, those individuals will be investigated first. I will not stop until I find the person or persons responsible. As you have

provided me with this unique technology, I will personally keep an eye on John Liu.”

Having fallen short of red flag markers on contracts, Forrest peeled the tape off to see if anything was under it. Finding nothing, he grinned wryly and signed the will, taking up two lines as usual. “Then that’s it? We’re done?”

“As soon as the witnesses have added their signatures.” The lawyer stepped forward and retrieved the document. The last witness added her signature; the lawyer put the document in his briefcase and locked it. “The original copy will be put in my will safe...” the lawyer said, swinging his briefcase to his side, “Thank you ladies for your cooperation. You may go.” The lawyer turned his attention back to Forrest. “A sealed copy will be sent to you within the next two to five...”

Forrest held up a hand. “...Don’t spout me the standard two to five working day shit. As soon as Liu returns from whatever whore house he’s at, I will be leaving for the UK. I expect you to hand-deliver my copy before I leave.”

“How long will Mr. Liu be gone?”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know. He told the nurse at the desk he would be back in thirty-minutes. He has approximately five left.”

“I’ll be right back,” the lawyer said and left the room.

Using his teeth, Forrest peeled off the tape, yanked the IV from the top of his right hand and spat the tubing out on the bed. Blood started leaking out onto the clean white sheets.

The nurse at the nurse’s station handed Forrest’s lawyer the original and copied documents. She glanced at the flashing light below Forrest’s monitor screen. She groaned and rolled her eyes. “Good thing he’s making a will. I’m a mind to kill the Old Geezer myself. I have to check his IV pump. Would you like me to give him this?”

“I would appreciate that,” he smiled.

“It would be my pleasure,” the nurse responded, muttering as she headed down the hall to Forrest’s room. “If he’s turned that IV pump up again I’ll shove this will up his ass!”

The lawyer laughed and shook his head. The lift doors opened; John Liu stepped out. “I see you finally got here,” Liu said as he approached the desk. “Come on – let’s get this over with.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Liu, but my business with Mr. Forrest is finished. I was just leaving.” He grinned slightly. “Have a good day,” he said and stepped in the lift.

Liu narrowed his eyes, scratched the back of his neck and headed for Forrest room. “Something tells me I’m going to regret this arrangement,” he mused.

Chapter 44

Sam fiddled with the computer in the medical lab, trying various things to figure out what happened to Linda Wilson's medical records. Fifteen minutes later, neither he nor Donna were any the wiser. At this point, they had no other choice than to call in the expert. Donna unlocked her new Triplet International cell phone and put it on speaker. "Hey, it's me. Is Tina with you?"

"No D. I haven't seen nor heard from her since yesterday. She's not answering her calls or returning her messages. I'm starting to get concerned."

Donna frowned; she didn't like the sound of that, or the direction the evidence was pointing. "Do you have time to help me with a computer problem?"

"Sure, what sort of computer problem?"

"Linda Wilson's medical records seem to have disappeared from the infirmary's database. I need you to see if you can figure out what happened to them and get them back."

"Have you checked the recycle bin to see if they were accidentally deleted?"

"Yes," Donna responded. "That was the first place I looked."

"In that case, have you tried the access log? Does it show that an entry was made?"

Donna glanced at Sam. "How do we do that?" Sam asked.

"I'll do it from here. It's too complicated to explain over the phone. Give me a few minutes and I'll get back to you."

"In that case, in the meantime, I'll just take the sample out of cold storage and run the test again myself. I need to talk to the Wilson's, and I can't do it until I know whether or not I'm right about their baby."

Sam went in the back to get the sample for Donna.

Gary chuckled. "Do you still remember how to do such a menial task?"

Donna rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Ha, ha – Smart Ass,” she scoffed. “You do your thing, and I’ll do mine.” She ended the call.

Sam paused in the doorway and sighed in exasperation. “Sweetheart... there’s nothing in cold storage. Unless Ian disposed of the rest of the sample after he’d run the test, it’s disappeared, as well.”

“Oh come on, Sam!” Donna groaned. “This doesn’t make sense. I never dispose of amniotic samples. They’re an excellent source for harvesting stem cells.”

“I know, and Ian doesn’t normally do this. Maybe the sample became contaminated somehow.”

“I suppose it’s possible, but if we can’t get her records back, I’ll have to draw another sample. I don’t like causing my patient’s unnecessary suffering because of mine or someone else’s negligence – especially a pregnant woman.”

Sam turned off the computer monitor and took her hands, lifting her to her feet. “There’s nothing we can do until we hear from Gary. Why don’t we go back and finish our meal? By that time, we should have heard from Gary.” He cradled her face and kissed her. Donna wrapped her arms around Sam’s waist and pressed a kiss to the side of his neck. Sam closed his eyes and rubbed his cheek against the top of her head. “Come on.” Resting a hand at the small of her back, he guided her to the door, switched off the lights and locked the door.

Sam and Donna were on their way back to Melissa’s room, when her EKG alarm went off. John stepped out in the corridor. Sam and Donna took off in a run. John and two nurses followed behind them. Donna checked her vitals. “She’s arresting, Sam!”

Sam motioned with his head. The two nurses urged John back, out of the way. Sam held Missy on her side while Donna positioned the backboard. John stood and watched helplessly.

“Charge the defibrillator to 200!” Sam shouted and opened the front of her gown. “Clear!” he commanded. Melissa’s body jumped.

“She’s still throwing afibs.” Donna watched the monitor. “She’s slipping, Sam!”

“5mg atropine push, Donna!” Sam growled. “Charge to 360!”

“Charged!”

“It’s in, Sam!” Donna announced.

“Clear!” Sam warned and shocked Melissa again.

“She’s back,” Donna sighed. “We’ve got a weak, irregular sinus.”

Sam switched the respirator over to full assist and studied Donna’s eyes. “Call Ian back to the lab. Tell him I want an MRI and a full line of blood work including blood gases, and I want those results STAT!”⁵

Sam and Donna approached John. Sam rested his hand on John’s shoulder and guided him outside the room. John was shocked. “What happened to her?”

Sam drew in a deep sigh and exhaled. “John, until I get the test results, I really can’t say.”

“Is she going to be all right?”

“Again, I won’t know until I see the test results,” Sam said, offering little hope. “In the meantime, the respirator will breathe for her unless she runs into some other complication like renal failure. If that happens, the only option would be to put her on dialysis. I’m afraid at that stage, we would be forced to make a difficult decision,” Sam said, looking into John’s worried eyes.

Donna frowned and intervened. “Sam...”

Sam softly smiled and nodded. “We don’t need to worry about that right now, John.”

“Why don’t you go back and sit with her, while Sam and I talk?” Donna added. John nodded and went back in the room. Sam took Donna’s hand and led her down the corridor. She tucked her head and swallowed hard. “I think we should call Sir Richard and discuss the possibility of using my CTZ5 treatment.”

“I thought you were worried that Missy might not be genetically compatible with the EHG.”

“I am concerned, Sam, but I want to be prepared. I can run the tests for you. We don’t need to wait on Ian. It might save us some valuable time.”

“You know,” Sam grinned. “You’re coming in handy in more ways than one.”

John sat in the chair beside the bed. He picked up Melissa’s hand and gently caressed the back of it with his thumb. He studied the features of her face; the smile lines beside her mouth; the sharp angle of her brow; the edge of her hairline where her natural hair colour was starting to show. He smiled, remembering how embarrassed Melissa had been when he discovered she was not a natural blonde.

He traced her bottom lip around the breathing tube with his finger. He wanted to burn her into his mind as she was burned into his heart. “Come on Missy! Fight!” He rested his head on the bed. “Please fight,” he said in a forced whisper.

Jared, Juanita, Sir Richard, and Richard sat down at one of the tables in the complex cafeteria. Rita Holback, the assistant cook in charge approached. “Would you or your guests like anything else, Sir?”

Sir Richard wiped his mouth on a cloth napkin. “I wouldn’t mind another cup of tea, Rita,” he smiled.

“Coming right up. Dr. Thundercloud. Dr. Walton. Dr. Triplet, would you like anything.”

“I’m stuffed,” Jared responded, reaching for his drink. “I have to hand it to you, Sir Richard. This is a pretty impressive place, but what’s your purpose for all of this?”

Sir Richard studied Jared’s eyes. “The continuation of life on Earth, Jared, survival.”

Jared frowned. “From what? What’s the big threat?”

“An ELE – an Extinction Level Event.”

“You mean like the kind that killed the dinosaurs?”

“Something a bit bigger than that but you have the right idea. In the year 7141 a planetoid, a little bigger than the Moon will hit the Earth.”

Juanita’s mouth gaped. “But, that’s five thousand years into the future. Why should we be worrying about something like that?”

Sir Richard grinned. “Exactly! Because it’s so far into the future, our generation does nothing. And so does the next, and the next, and so on. Eventually, the last generation won’t have the time or the resources to solve the problem. Higher life on Earth will cease to exist. That’s the purpose of this biosphere. The complex is a pilot project for a self-contained environment used while we travel to a different solar system.”

“Why not some place closer, like the Moon, or even Mars?” Juanita asked.

Jared sighed. “Because, sweetheart, an impact, such as Sir Richard is describing, would scatter debris throughout our solar system. Nowhere would be safe,” he mused. “OK, apart from being able to absorb actual sunshine, living here would be tolerable. I can imagine Donna will enjoy the futuristic touches, especially the wallscreens.”

“I think she’ll be more impressed with the park and the genetics lab,” Juanita interjected. “I used to think we had advanced technology at D’Netics, but we’re still rubbing sticks together – no offense, Jared.”

Jared grinned. “Now all you’ve got to do is learn to send smoke signals, and you’ll be right up there with me,” he teased.

Sir Richard laughed. “I’m going to miss your sense of humour, Jared. Are you sure I can’t convince you to let me send for your daughter and your family? I’m sure we could find a remote corner to tuck you away in. If you’re worried about your daughter’s education...”

Jared held up a hand and glanced at Richard. “Sir Richard, if my daughter was here, I would not be hiding. I would be on my knees in front of Donna, begging for her forgiveness. If she

turned me away, I would simply live with knowing I would be close to her for the rest of my life.”

“That’s very noble of you Jared,” Richard scoffed.

Sir Richard frowned and cleared his throat. Rita approached and filled his cup with tea. He stood. “Why don’t we go to my office, Jared, and you can explain what you were talking about this morning at the Centre. Then you and I can have a chat about your mother,” he said, directing his attention to Juanita.

“If it’s all the same to you, Sir Richard, I just as soon have Juanita in there with us. She already knows how I’m... different,” he grinned and cut his eyes at Richard again.

“In that case, Ricky, why don’t you see how things are going with your entertainment project?”

Jared arched an eyebrow and directed his attention to Richard. “Entertainment project?”

One corner of Richard’s mouth turned up. “I’m building Donna a studio like the one you have at Wisteria Hall, only the technology will be a little more advanced, than yours.”

Jared stood to leave. “Really? Trying to make up for your lack of musical talent, Richard?” He leaned close to Richard’s ear. “Little pointer for you. When I come back to stay, none of this will make any difference – trust me on that,” he whispered and walked away. “You coming, sweetheart?” Jared turned and waited.

Richard tightened his jaw and pressed his lips into a thin line. “You keep unpredictable company, Juanita.”

“I’ll see you later, Richard,” Juanita softly said and stood beside Jared, who rested a hand at the small of her back and guided her as they left.

“Arrogant asshole,” Richard growled. To him, Jared was becoming more of a challenge than Sam. If there were no obstacles between Jared and Donna, Richard knew he or Sam wouldn’t stand a chance with her. Sam just didn’t know that yet. From Richard’s point of view, he would do everything he could to make sure Jared stayed on the other side of the

Atlantic – where he belonged. Sam would eventually slip up, but Richard feared Jared wouldn't. This made Jared a threat.

Donna looked over the test results a second time, just to make sure she hadn't missed something. "There is no visible reason why Missy should have arrested, Sam." Using a pen, she pointed. "If you compare this part of the ECG – recorded a few minutes after we left the room – to this part, taken shortly after she arrested, it doesn't make sense. Missy has a steady sinus rhythm here, and then, not long after we leave the room, nothing. If I didn't know better, I'd swear this was deliberate. She did fine until we left."

Sam frowned. "Sweetheart, you know that's not possible. John was in the room the entire time. Sir Richard's guards never moved from their position, outside the door."

"I know what you're saying, but the graph speaks for itself."

Sam sighed. "OK, what about the blood gases and chemistry? Did they show anything?"

"Yeah. They follow the same pattern that the ECG does. Her electrolytes were fine, and then..." she broke off. "Anyway, I followed my hunch and screened for possible toxins that could produce the same symptoms as cardiac arrest."

"And..." Sam prompted.

"It didn't turn up anything. I did, however, find something disturbing."

"What's that?"

Donna swallowed the lump in her throat and sighed. "Unless we risk using the CTZ5 treatment, I don't think Missy is going to pull out of this Sam. Her creatinine and BUN levels are up, and her GFR is down. Her renal system is failing."

"Any idea why this happened?"

"It's the EIA, the drug I was telling you about, plus there's no telling what other experimental drugs Forrest pumped into her. Did you tell John the other part?"

“You mean the signs of sexual trauma?”

“Yeah.”

“No. I hadn’t said anything, because, frankly, I didn’t expect Missy to come out of this. I figured John had enough on his plate already.”

“If the CTZ5 treatment works, John will have to be told because Missy will come out of this. Especially if the EHG transcribes into her DNA the way it did mine. Before my appendectomy, I tested positive for West Nile Virus. Two days later, there wasn’t a trace of the virus anywhere in my system. I saw the test results.”

Sam studied Donna’s eyes. “You know, if the treatment doesn’t work, we have to honour Missy’s wishes. She does not want to be left on life support, sweetheart. I know she was your friend. I know how hard it can be to make a decision like this for a total stranger, but it’s even harder, when it’s someone you care about.”

Donna’s eyes glossed. “Yes, Sam, it is, but before we make that decision, I think we should consider John’s feelings, as well. Put yourself in his shoes. How would you feel if it were me instead of Missy?”

Sam pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her hair. “I don’t even want to think about that because I don’t know what I would do. As Missy’s doctor, it is my responsibility to honour her choice.”

“Well... I can tell you this. I’m selfish. If it were you, I would do everything within my power to keep you with me. I’ve already lost too much. I don’t want to lose anything else.”

She unlocked her apartment door and jerked off her short blonde wig. She unlocked her cell phone and started peeling off her latex mask. “It’s done.”

“Good. Now they have no choice. They either use their experimental virus on her, or they let her die. If it works on Hart, it will work on Linda. Well done, Tina.”

Sir Richard stared at Jared as he shook his head in total bemusement. A slow smile spread across his mouth. “You are truly a unique person, Jared. This thing with your eyes is amazing, son, and the other enhanced abilities are almost unbelievable. I understand why you wouldn’t want this to go public, but tell me. How in the hell does it work? How do you keep it under control? Is it spontaneous? Is it a muscle or a reflex? Perhaps it has something to do with the amount of adrenaline or a specific hormone present in your bloodstream?” Sir Richard couldn’t contain his excitement. He’d witnessed Jared’s eyes change from their normal dark brown colour to a pair of glowing orbs, that had then gone from amber to so crimson they were almost black.

Jared grinned. “Sir Richard, I’m impressed. Most people, who see what you’ve seen, run away screaming. That’s one of the reasons why I don’t reveal this little secret, about myself to just anyone. Being underground, and around so many people could cause a few problems.”

Sir Richard nodded. “Seeing a pair of red glowing eyes at the end of one of the tunnels might make people start believing I’m harbouring vampires, down here,” he laughed.

Jared arched an eyebrow, snorted and cleared his throat. “Close... but... I don’t drink blood – of any kind. I don’t shape shift, and I’m not immortal – at least not yet.”

“Did Donna do a DNA profile on you?”

“It was in the cards, but no, she didn’t get around to doing one.”

“Juanita, you and Jared feel free to help out at the infirmary if there are any emergencies. It will save Sam a trip. We haven’t moved that many of our medical staff yet. I’m glad you two will eventually be part of it.”

Jared sighed. “I hope you’re right, Sir Richard. Oh, before I forget it. Since Richard is recreating my studio, mind if I tell him what he’s doing wrong?”

Sir Richard laughed. “By all means. What about the rest of your band? Do you think they would be interested in giving my

little project a go? I think Raging Storm would add to our family oriented environment. People will need things to do when they're not working."

Jared pressed his lips into a thin line. "Sir Richard, without Donna, I just don't have that much interest in the band. In fact, I'm not part of it anymore. I'm not even participating in our annual Country Music Convention, in Wickenburg."

"I see. I suppose I would be much the same. Unfortunately, like Ricky, I wasn't born with a canary in my throat. I'm afraid he gets that from me. Jared, I trust you spoke to your daughter and family in Arizona?"

"Yes Sir. I told her I would be gone for a few days. I thought I would at least enjoy your hospitality until we see what's going to happen with..."

Sir Richard's cell phone interrupted. "Sir, it's John. Missy isn't doing so well," he choked.

"What happened John?"

"She went into cardiac arrest. She – ah - she died Sir, but Sam and Donna brought her back. I need to go. Sam and Donna are coming in the room again."

"Tell them we're on our way back. Jared, Juanita, I'm sorry. I've got to get back to the Centre. Missy's heart stopped beating. Donna is working as hard as she can to find a way of using her CTZ5, but her vector isn't working out. She wants to use HIV1, but it's going to take time to get that. A lot of red tape. It looks like we might lose Missy, after all."

Jared narrowed his eyes. "I can help. If Missy is dying, it won't make any difference whether she's genetically compatible or not. Stop by the infirmary before you leave. I'll have what you need, but Donna must not know where this came from – Gary can, but no one else. I can't compromise on this, Sir Richard. This could very well come back and bite me in the butt."

Sir Richard nodded. "Let's go."

Chapter 45

Sam had glanced over Melissa's test results again before he and Donna entered the room. While John and Donna quietly talked in the corner, Sam checked Melissa's reflexes. There was no response. He then checked the urine level in her catheter reservoir.

"Well?" John prompted.

"Let's talk in my office." Sam reached for Donna's hand and guided John to the door. Donna sat in a chair next to Sam's desk. Melissa was Sam's patient, and unless Sam did something Donna disagreed with, her reason for being at this discussion was for moral support only.

John sighed, his voice laden with anguish. "It's not good is it?"

"Have a seat, John," Sam said.

John gripped the arms of the chair. "Just tell me, I can't take not knowing. Is she going to die?"

Sam drew in a sigh. "Well, John, I've never been one to 'give up hope' per se. The brain is a complicated and unpredictable piece of work. It seems, the more we learn about it, the less we know."

John furrowed his brow and tightened his jaw. "Sam...!"

Sam held up a forestalling hand. "John, she's not responding. There's very little brain activity. The parts of her brain responsible for important functions, such as the nervous and endocrine system, and other involuntary body functions indicate she's been subjected to some kind of inner-cranial electric shock." Sam paused and then continued.

"Because of the damage done to the medulla oblongata - the area of her brain responsible for involuntary functions, such as breathing and regulating body temperature, Melissa's body is slowly shutting down. Donna believes it has something to do with the EIA - the monster drug - as she refers to it."

John sighed and rubbed his forehead. His dark eyes glistened and burned with un-cried tears. “So you’re telling me…” his voice cracked. “…there’s nothing you can do?”

“John, I wish I could offer you more, but I’m sorry. Until we can get a working sample of the EHG virus, I’m afraid we’ve done all we can.”

John lowered his head. “So, what now? He looked back at Sam.

“John, as I told you before, Melissa didn’t want to be kept alive by artificial means.”

John’s heart all but stopped. “Sam she’s too young to think about that! Surely there must be *something* you can do to keep her alive until the virus can be used!”

“John…” Donna softly interjected, “…for the amount of damage that’s been done, even if she pulls through, Missy will probably be little more than a vegetable, unless I can perfect my CTZ5 treatment, soon.”

“I’ve checked the document Missy signed, John,” Sam added. “She left the final decision up to you, whether or not to take her off the machine.”

John tightened his grip on the chair arms more. He didn’t want to see Melissa suffer, but he wasn’t willing to let her go either. Still, he felt obligated to respect her wishes. Finally, he spoke. “Sam. Donna. I know this sounds extremely selfish of me, but I’m not ready to let her go. Don’t pull the plug, not until we’re sure that’s the only option.” John turned his attention back to Donna. “If the EIA has caused permanent brain damage, would your CTZ5 be able to reverse that?”

Donna studied Sam’s eyes for a few seconds; she turned back to John. “Yes,” she said with confidence. “If Missy is genetically compatible, this treatment will undo any damage Forrest has done. Unfortunately, we don’t know how long it will take to get something we can test.”

John swallowed the lump in his throat. “I’ll risk it.”

Sir Richard called Gary to his office. “How close is Donna to having something to test?”

“Convincing the EHG to transcribe. We’re still looking for a suitable vector.”

Sir Richard slid the cheek scraping and vacutubes across the desk. “These were given under the strictest of confidence, Gary. He said it was what Donna needed to save Missy and to use as a temporary vector. He stressed you would have to use it as a last resort because it has to be genetically matched each time it’s used. He also said she was right. HIV1 was the answer.”

Gary read the name on the label. “How long are they planning on staying in the UK?”

“Jared wanted to stay until Missy either recovered or...” he broke off and swallowed the lump in his throat.

Gary sighed. “Sir Richard... do you think Jared is being fair to Donna about this? When she sees the DNA profile, she’s going to know it’s from him.”

“That’s why he said for you to do the profile and culture the stem cells yourself. He said no one else could know these came from him, especially not Donna. It has something to do with influencing her choice. Whatever that’s supposed to mean. I assumed it had something to do with his secret.”

“Did he explain anything about himself to you?”

Sir Richard grinned. “Gary, we really don’t have time to exchange Indian legends. Get on this. I don’t want to lose Missy.”

Gary stood. “Until I can do the profile and start culturing the stem cells, you’ll need to keep Donna and Richard distracted.”

Sir Richard stood. “I think I’ll let Sam do that. How long will this take?”

“Since I know what I’m looking for, assuming the EHG is on the same chromosome as Donna’s was, I’d say about six to eight hours. The question is can Missy last that long?”

“I’m going to sit down with Sam, and Donna, and John, and discuss our options. I want to respect Jared’s wishes, but if Sam and Donna don’t think Missy can wait that long, I may not be able to. As I see it, saving a life is more important than keeping ancient secrets. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes Sir, I do. I’m not sure I agree with Jared about keeping secrets from Donna, in the first place. It’s only going to make matters worse between them. Especially if she finds out Jared was willing to risk Missy’s life just so she wouldn’t find out he was helping us.”

“Get started growing the protein crystals. We’ll decide what to do after I’ve talked with Sam and Donna.”

Sir Richard and John met Sam and Donna in the medical conference room. “Where are Gary and Richard?” Donna asked as they took their seats.

“Richard is sitting with Missy, and Gary is growing a new batch of protein crystals. Sam, I’m not here to order you to pull the plug. I’m here to discuss our options, and don’t tell me there aren’t any. What happened? I thought she was stable.”

“Sir Richard, it’s hard to pinpoint exactly what went wrong. I told you when we brought her in that her recovery was conditional. Donna, who has had some experience with EIA doesn’t even know what went wrong.”

“That’s not entirely true, Sam,” Donna interjected.

“Donna, there’s no way anyone could have got in the room, without John or the two security guards....”

Sir Richard held up a hand. “You think someone tried to kill Missy?”

Sam tightened his jaw. “Donna....”

“Shut up Sam!” John snapped. “Let her talk.”

“Sir Richard, Missy basically had a heart attack. Now I know her system has been weakened by the effects of the drug Forrest gave her, but it doesn’t make sense.”

“Donna, there are a number of things that could have caused this – brain herniation, a thrombus, a pulmonary embolism, cerebral pressure or infection.”

“Yes Sam, I know that, but her D-dimer was negative. There are drugs that can mimic a heart attack, digoxin, for example, which I screened for. Her Bilirubin was elevated, which suggests to me that there was some kind of toxin involved. This could have been what caused her to go into renal failure. The thing that makes poisoning or an overdose, so implausible is what Sam has already pointed out. John was in the room the entire time before Missy went into cardiac arrest. How could someone get in there, give her the drug and then get out without anyone, John least of all, seeing them?”

Sir Richard narrowed his eyes. “You’d be surprised what’s possible. You said you screened for drugs and toxins that could mimic cardiac arrest. Are there any you might have overlooked, or not known about?”

“Of course,” Donna responded knowingly. “People are finding new ways of killing each other every day, but if Missy was poisoned, it’s not something I’ve had any experience with.”

“What about you, Sam? Can you think of anything that you’ve had experience with that Donna might not have? Something that might not be easily detected?”

Sam sighed and pursed his lips. “There are two things, but I don’t know how in the hell someone in England would get their hands on either one of them – cerbera manghas or cerbera odollam. Both are basically undetectable by Western medicine, unless you were looking for it. Some people know it as the suicide tree because virtually everything about it – its seed, its bark, its root, you name it – is highly toxic and would cause the same effect as an overdose of digoxin. But, again, we’re back to square one – the when and how.”

“Find out if that’s what it was. Let us worry about the when and the how. My next question is how do we treat it?”

“If I had a stable vector, the safest and fastest way would be my EHG virus, but without a stable vector, I can’t guarantee it will affect Missy any more than giving her a hypo full of deionised water. The other problem is I don’t know if Missy can survive until I find another vector. I need the HIV1! Even on life support, Sam’s right. Missy’s dying, Sir Richard. I’m sorry, John,” she said sympathetically resting a hand on his.

“It’s not your fault Donna. I know you and Sam are doing everything you can to save Missy. I may just have to face the facts....”

“Sam,” Sir Richard sighed. “I need to speak with John and Donna alone.”

Sam stiffened and started to protest, but stopped; remembering how Donna had reacted to a similar situation, when he’d objected to her questioning his judgement. He didn’t like it any more now than he had then, but he didn’t want to risk driving her away. He bent down and tenderly kissed her. “Since I know what toxin I’m looking for, I’ll get another blood and urine sample from Missy and start looking for the cerbera.”

Donna waited until Sam had left the room. She slid to the edge of her seat and frowned. “Sir Richard, why are you trying to exclude Sam?”

Sir Richard drew in a deep breath and slowly let it out. “Because I was asked to by the person who donated the sample of DNA Gary is busy analysing.”

“What do you mean? He’s not still working with mine?”

“No, petal. The DNA profile Gary is doing now is on Jared.”

Donna’s eyes glossed. “I saw his name on Linda Wilson’s chart. I know he was the attending physician before Linda left the States. Jared was so secretive about that,” she mused. “Before we split up, he was going to let me do it, but only if I promised not to let anyone know where I got the samples. Why would he send samples back, so Gary could do it?” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “His blood is pure Dine’è

Kay-Yah, Sir Richard. I only carry the recessive gene, yet he left me because I risked exposing him. It doesn't make sense."

"Donna... Jared didn't send samples back to the UK. He gave them to us. John called me and told me Missy had arrested. I told Jared that you were afraid you were going to lose Missy because the EHG wasn't completely genetically compatible with your CTZ5 vector. Jared voluntarily gave us a cheek scraping and blood samples. He said in them, Gary would find what you needed to make the CTZ5 vector work with the EHG virus, but it would only be temporary. Jared agrees with you. In order to make the EHG do what we want it to you'll still need to use the retrovirus as your vector."

Donna tightened her jaw. "Jared said Gary was the *only* one who could work on this? That arrogant hypocrite! I risked everything for him. How selfish can he get?" She braced her hands on the armrests and shot to her feet. She glared at Sir Richard. Her voice rose in pitch. "He was in the observation area with you, when Sam and I were in the operating room, wasn't he? *Jared was there!* You lied to me! Sam lied to me! He said we were *not* being observed. Sam knew Jared was there too – didn't he?" Donna was fuming.

Sir Richard grinned and softly chuckled. "Calm down, petal, I..."

"Maybe you should tell me why you find this so funny!" she snapped. "And *stop* calling me petal. It makes me feel like a fragile flower."

Sir Richard pressed his lips together to suppress a grin. He swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, Donna."

"I hate lies, Sir Richard. I thought I could trust you, but Jared was right. There's very little difference – if any – between you and Forrest. Why didn't you tell me Jared was here? You men are all alike. You all lie to get what you want. Where is the coward? Where is Jared?" Her voice was so high pitched she was almost squealing.

Sir Richard fought harder to suppress his grin, but he couldn't hide the twinkle in his eyes. He swallowed hard again

to keep from laughing. “Jared can be an arrogant asshole, but he is not a coward, and there’s a difference.”

“Yes Jared is a coward! If he wasn’t he would have told me to my face that he hated me for the way I betrayed him instead of putting it in a ‘Dear John’ letter! And what do you mean there is a difference?” she scoffed.

Sir Richard sighed deeply and shook his head. “Same fire her mother had,” he mumbled. John softly smiled and nodded in agreement. “A difference between me and Forrest, Donna. Let’s get Missy taken care of and, we’ll sit down, and I’ll explain a few things to you. I think it’s about high time I did.”

Chapter 46

“Where is it?” Donna snapped as she entered the genetics lab.

Gary peeked at her over the top of his glasses. He could almost feel the heat radiating from her dark eyes. “What are you doing up here?”

“I work here, or has that changed, too?”

“No... but you were supposed to be....”

“Gary, cut the crap! I know, and he’s not my favourite person right now, so just tell me where the sample is, so I can get this done.”

“Are you talking about Sam or Jared?”

“Both! Sam knew Jared was observing us in the operating room, and he bold-faced lied to me. Oh, and let’s not forget the other guilty party – Sir Richard. About the only men, I know in this centre that I’m not pissed off with are John and Ian.”

“You’re pissed off with me? Donna, there are reasons for the way things have been done. I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you, and it’s not because I don’t want to. I *hate* keeping anything from you. For one reason, you’re like a damn billy goat. You’ll keep butting my ass until I give in and tell you. First off, Sam didn’t lie to you – well – not willingly, anyway. As much as I hate to admit this, if you want to blame someone, then blame Jared.”

“Oh – I do – make no mistake of that. In fact, I lay most of the blame on the coward! Now do me a favour. Answer my question, before I forget Jared is the one to blame and start taking it out on you. I’ve had it with men in general today! Oh – and another thing – I want Sam and Richard in here, working on this with us. We are a genetic team, meant to work together. I am tired of hiding in closets and tip-toeing around something that could change the World if we’re successful.”

“What about Jared, D? What about the promise you made to him?”

Donna's eyes glossed; she swallowed hard. "Jared made a promise to me too, Gary. He promised me that nothing would ever come between us. He laid all the blame on me for our breakup. As far as I'm concerned, there was no breakup. You remember when I collapsed in Forrest's office? Did you ever find out why that happened?"

Gary narrowed his eyes. "Not entirely."

"Did Jared tell you that he and I could communicate telepathically – even now – if I didn't use a great deal of mental energy to keep him out?"

"Yes, Donna. I don't fully understand the concept, but I know about it."

"Jared was the reason I collapsed. Because he's full-blooded Dine'é Kay-Yah, his mental abilities go way beyond mine. His mother taught me how to keep certain things from him – to block him out."

"Right..."

"I had Jared blocked out. I took the memory of sending my DNA and blood samples to you and put it behind what Nadine called a warning barrier. As I understand it, a warning barrier is kind of like a thought force field. It doesn't actually keep Jared from accessing those thoughts, but warns him, that it is my personal preference, unless my life is in danger that he not read that part of my mind. Out of love and respect to me, he's not supposed to force his way beyond my warning barrier. You see, I've been doing this for years, I just didn't know what it was."

"OK... I'm not sure I agree with all this, but I'm with you so far."

"Jared got angry with me because I left the clinic with Forrest to go and see my new office. He tried to push his way past my warning barrier. Of course when I realised that he was trying to do this, I strengthened it. Apparently, my ability to block him out was stronger than he thought and he kept pushing, but, the more he pushed, the more I strengthened my warning barrier. To make a long story short, I collapsed under

the mental strain. Jared stopped when he realised he was hurting me. He also tried to hide the fact that he was the one who'd hurt me. I realised that was a mistake, so I let it go."

Gary tightened his jaw. "Jared hurt you?"

"I think if it hadn't been for my EHG, I might not have survived that."

Adrenaline rushed through Gary's veins like molten lava. "Are you saying Jared Thundercloud almost killed you that day?"

Donna swallowed hard. "I'm saying it was a strong possibility. I don't want you to breathe a word of this to Jared. You're the only person I've told, and I'm only telling you because I know if there's anyone on this earth that I can trust – it's you. Please, promise me you won't repeat what I'm telling you."

"Can I just beat the shit out of him without telling him why?"

"No, Gary. I do not want Jared to know we've discussed this. He wrote something in his 'Dear John' letter that I've come to realise is true. Jared and I don't have a future, at least not together." She went into the back room.

Gary opened his cell phone. "Sir Richard, it's me. I think you'd better get Jared out of the UK as soon as possible."

Sir Richard furrowed his brow. "What's wrong Gary?"

"Donna is not – let's just say - I wouldn't want to be Jared right now. Until Jared comes clean and tells her why he left, I think he has truly cooked his goose this time."

"I know. Donna was pretty upset when she left my office. I hate to see those two split. I know if Jared would just tell Donna why he left; Donna would drop Sam like a hot potato and wouldn't give Ricky or anyone a second look. Donna and Jared had something special, Gary, and I know what you meant, now."

"Sir?" Gary furrowed his brow. "*I don't follow.*"

“Donna may not let us see her pain, but it’s there. No one gets that upset when they don’t love someone or don’t want to see them again. I don’t care what she says. And the part that makes this whole damn thing so unfair is Jared still loves Donna as much as he did the night he left. I would love the opportunity to make Forrest pay for all the pain he’s caused my family.”

“I would too, Sir Richard. Anyway, what I called about. Donna said to send Richard and Sam back up here to help us with the project.”

“She what – but I thought…” Sir Richard sighed. “Donna is really pissed with Jared if she’s refusing to keep his secret about his unique abilities.”

“Yes Sir. That’s what I was talking about. If Jared doesn’t talk to Donna before he leaves this time and explain why they can’t be together, I don’t know if she’ll be willing to listen when he’s *ready* to explain. Donna says she’s not, but I think she’s falling for Sam.”

“It’s her choice, Gary. I suppose time will tell. I’ll get Ricky headed that way. Tell her Sam will be there later. He’s still running the tox screen on Missy. How long does Donna think it will take to get the CTZ5 treatment ready with all of you working on it?”

“Half the time, Sir Richard, four to five hours.”

“OK, Gary. Work as fast as you can,” Sir Richard said and ended the call.

Gary locked his cell phone and walked in the back room where Donna was. “Sam is still busy working on Missy’s tox screen. Richard is on his way. Sam will be here as soon as he’s done in the lab.”

Donna nodded but didn’t look up from her work. Five minutes later, Richard walked in. “Dad said Donna asked for me.”

“Yeah,” Gary sighed. “We’re working with a different DNA sample and the CTZ5.”

“A different DNA sample,” Richard echoed. “I thought Donna was the only one who carried the EHG.”

“She is,” Gary replied. “But, she’s not the only one who carries the Native American gene.”

“But we’ve already tried your DNA, and you *carry* the Native American gene.”

“It’s Jared’s, Richard. Jared gave your dad cheek scrapings and blood samples. He said we would find what we needed to make a temporary stable vector. If Missy can be saved, he said this is the way to do it.”

Richard frowned. “I thought Mr. Secretive didn’t hand out samples of his blood and DNA. That’s why Donna had to go behind his back and send them over here to you so we could analyse them.”

“Well, circumstances have changed. Sam will be up here as soon as he’s finished running the gas chromatograph and spectroscopy on Missy.”

“Where is Donna?”

“In the back.” Gary grabbed Richard’s forearm, halting him. Richard gave him an expectant stare, one eyebrow arching. “She’s not in a good mood. She’s pretty upset over this thing with Jared, so unless you want your head bitten off don’t patronise her.”

Richard frowned. “Gary, I know how she feels about him. The last thing I want to do is cause Donna more grief,” he said and went in the back.

Gary rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Sure you don’t,” he scoffed. “You’ll just try to take advantage of her vulnerabilities, like you always do,” he muttered.

Richard sat at the work station next to Donna’s and started setting up his electron microscope. She glanced at him out the corner of her eye, sighed and went back to her work. “I heard what happened. Do you think we’ll find something in time to save Missy?”

“I hope so, Richard. Did you stop by her room?”

“No. Dad said you needed me. I came straight away. Have you made any progress?”

“Not yet. I got here about five minutes ago myself. Even I can’t come up with something that quick. Jared’s DNA is about as stubborn as he is. It doesn’t want to give up its secrets.”

Richard grinned. “Maybe what we’re looking for from him is the arrogant gene.”

Donna softly smiled and shook her head. “If that were the case, then maybe I should be analysing yours.”

Richard narrowed his eyes. “Aren’t you the Miss Clever Clogs. It’s good to have you back up here with us.”

Donna shook her head again. “Will you stop trying to kiss my ass and just get to work?”

Richard chuckled and took a culture dish out of cold storage.”

An hour later, Sam finished testing Melissa for the cerbera. It seemed two things had kept her alive; the injection of atropine Donna had given her and the fact that Melissa was already on the respirator. Now the problem Sam faced was determining the best form of treatment. Under the circumstances, he knew a stomach and bowel wash wasn’t going to do Melissa much good. There was no way she could have ingested the cerbera. It had to have been an injection, but when and by whom? At this point, it didn’t really matter how the poison got into Melissa’s system. Her internal organs were already starting to shut down. Sam put her on a steady atropine drip and hoped Donna could convince the CTZ5 to work with the EHG. It was Melissa’s only hope, now.

After he’d finished hanging the drip, he called Sir Richard and asked him to stop by his office. Sir Richard sat in the chair in front of Sam’s desk. “Donna was right,” Sam began. “Although Missy’s arrest could partially have been caused by her condition and the EIA, she was poisoned with cerbera. I believe that’s what caused her to go into cardiac arrest. The toxin blocks the calcium ion channels in the heart muscle and

disrupts its rhythm. Two things kept Missy alive. The fact that she was already on the respirator and the atropine injection.”

“Why didn’t Donna catch the cerbera?”

“Because, Donna didn’t know what to look for. She looked for an overdose of digitalis – the toxin found in foxgloves and other drugs that disrupts heart rhythm. The only reason I knew about it was because it grows in the coastal areas of Northern Australia.”

Sir Richard furrowed his brow. “But you’re from Tasmania. That’s clear on the other side of the country. How did you know about it?”

Sam grinned. “Girlfriend and research for my book. Anyway, all I could do was put Missy on a steady atropine drip, but it won’t last forever, Sir Richard. If we can’t come up with something, as Missy’s physician, it’s my duty to honour her living will. I’ll have no choice, but to take her off life support and let nature decide her fate.”

“Then you’d better get up there and get busy. Gary, Donna, and Richard are working with a new DNA sample. Jared has assured me it is what Donna is looking for to use as a temporary fix while I work on getting her the HIV1.” Sir Richard stood. “I’ll talk to John and tell him what’s going on. Whether or not we take Missy off life support is still left up to him.”

Sam looked dubious. “And what makes you think Geronimo knows what he’s talking about? How does he know it will work? Whose DNA is it?”

“His,” Sir Richard sighed and left.

Chapter 47

Sam assigned one of his anaesthetists, Dr. Ruth Clarke, another member of his surgical team to monitor Melissa's vitals, while he went upstairs and helped the genetics team. The front office to the genetics lab was empty. "Where is everybody?" Sam called out.

"Back here!" Gary responded. "Hi Sam. Grab a stool." Gary was at the workstation on one side of Donna; Richard was on the other, which forced Sam to work on the other side of Gary.

Sam frowned, switched on his electron microscope and started scanning through the images. "By the way, sweetheart, you were right. Missy was poisoned with cerbera. I put her on an atropine drip. I've got Ruth monitoring her while I'm up here."

"Hang on just a second..." Donna responded as she searched for the EHG in the TCC gene sequence located on the same leg of one of Jared's X chromosomes as hers had been. "You sneaky little devil! Found it," she smiled. "It wasn't in the same place as it was on mine."

"Where was it located on Jared's?" Richard asked.

"The sequence was still on chromosome 12, but it was at the end, next to the stop codon - not where you would expect it to be."

Richard's mouth dropped open. "What? It's next to the stop codon?" Gary and Sam stepped closer.

"Yes," Donna smiled and nodded. "Instead of the normal repeat of TTAGGG, Jared's has TTAGGGTCC *followed by* the TTAGGG repeat. It seems as if the TCC sequence is acting as a genetic marker which is causing the next replication of the strand to be lengthened with more TTAGGG repeats. It's causing the telomerase to be regenerated."

"Can we control the cell growth?" Sam asked.

“As far as I can tell – yes. I’ll know more once I’ve put it through my simulation software.”

Gary’s eyes lit. “If we can control the cell growth, do you know what this means?”

“It means that we can do this!” Sam added and hugged Donna. “Congratulations, sweetheart.”

“Don’t break out the champagne just yet. We still have to convince the CTZ5 to accept this new sequence. Replicating a virus that cures cancer is no good to us if we can’t convince it to transcribe to our new stem cells. It would be like trying to breed two mules. Even if, we can’t repeat the process, maybe we can at least culture enough stem cells to undo what Forrest did.”

“In that case, Richard...” Sam said, “...why don’t you get busy and see if Geronimo was lying to his intended.”

Richard glared at Sam. “Two things, Sam. One, Jared is not Apache. He’s Navajo, and two, speaking from personal experience, Jared would not lie to Donna about something like this. If he says the answer is in his DNA, then you can damned well bet it’s there.”

Gary arched an eyebrow. “Defending the enemy, Richard?”

“No, Gary. I’m just stating the facts. I knew Jared... Sam didn’t. He may have gone about it in an odd and indirect way, but life was just as sacred to Jared as it is to Donna.”

Sam scoffed. “From what *I* know of Mr. Perfect, I’ve already found enough flaws to debunk that theory, but since my patient’s life is hanging in the balance, I’ll give *Jared*... the benefit of the doubt.”

Donna studied Sam’s eyes. “That would be a wise choice, because I knew Jared better than anyone here. He would not put someone else’s life in danger just to get back into my good graces. Besides, if that’s what he was trying to do, Jared would have come to me with the samples himself, so cut the crap, Sam! If you’re trying to get to the top of my shit list, you’re already on the third rung of the ladder. You’re not without blame. You knew Jared was in the observation area while we

were operating on Melissa, and you lied to me. So, unless you want to advance to the fourth rung, shut up and let's get this done. That way, you won't have to guess whether or not Jared was lying because I don't believe he was."

Sam clenched his teeth. "Fine!" he snapped and threw up his hands. "I'll do better than that. I'll take my little non-genetic engineering ass back downstairs where I don't have to stand around and listen to you defend a man who ripped your heart out without a second thought."

Donna's eyes glossed. She swallowed the lump in her throat and glared at Sam. "Under the circumstances that's probably the best thing you could do. You may have Jared's ways, but you will never, *ever* come up to his level."

Sam whirled and stormed from the room. He almost didn't give the thick glass door a chance to open. He had to jump back because he was standing too close. Gary waited until he disappeared down the corridor. "D... what was that all about?"

"Sam pissed me off. He said the wrong thing at the wrong time about the wrong person. And thank you, Richard."

"For what?"

"For taking up for Jared the way you did."

"Donna, I'll be honest with you. I'm much like Sam. I don't like Jared either, but I'll give the devil his dues. When it came to you, there wasn't anything Jared wouldn't have done."

Donna swallowed the lump in her throat. "Yeah... anything except forgive me," she sighed and went back to work.

Sam dropped by Melissa's room to see how she was doing. He tapped on the door and eased it open. Sir Richard and John were sitting in the corner, talking with Ruth Clarke, the doctor that Sam left to monitor Melissa's vitals. "Hello, Sam," Sir Richard said. "Where's Donna?"

"She's upstairs working with Richard and Gary."

"Have you made any progress?" John asked.

"Donna has located the EHG sequence, and they're growing the protein crystals. If everything goes well, Donna should

have something in another three or four hours. She's still concerned whether or not the CTZ5 will be able to convince the EHG to bind and replicate with Missy's stem cells."

"Are you and Donna still planning on staying at the infirmary tonight?"

Sam sighed. "I'm staying, but I don't know what Donna is going to do. She's a little upset with me right now, so I thought the best thing I could do was get out of Dodge and let her cool off."

Sir Richard frowned. "What did you do to upset her?"

"Well... let's see," Sam scoffed. "Where do I begin? Because of what I was told to do by my *superiors*, I lied to her about Jared being in the observation area while we were doing surgery on Missy. Then I reminded her that Jared left her and gave no thought to breaking her heart. I think that's what probably took the cake. Of course, it didn't help my cause a lot, when Richard stepped in and *backed up* Geronimo."

John and Sir Richard shared a knowing glance. They knew why Jared had left Donna, and it wasn't a spur-of-the moment thing. Jared had thought long and hard before facing the facts. It had nothing to do with Donna's so-called betrayal. John cleared his throat. "Sam, if you intend on holding on to Donna – no pun intended – maybe you should stop making smart cracks about Jared and give Donna time to get over him before you're standing in the same position Jared is."

Sir Richard nodded in agreement. "He's right, Sam. Sometimes things aren't what they seem. Which reminds me," he said, turning his attention to John, "... as soon as Missy is out of the water; you and I need to take Donna for a walk down memory lane."

"It's about time." John nodded and sighed. "Is it just going to be us, or are Ricky and Gary going to be there, too?"

"At one time, I would have said yes, to Ricky and Gary being there, but I had kind of expected certain... *things*," he stressed, glancing at Ruth out the corner of his eye, "... to have

turned out differently. Now... I think it might be best if it's just us, and possibly you, Sam."

Sam frowned. "I don't think Donna wants me included in anything right now. She may even ask me to leave the Hall."

Sir Richard frowned. "Is it really that bad?"

Sam turned his attention to Ruth. "I think we can handle it from here, Love," he grinned. "Thanks for keeping an eye on Missy for me."

Ruth smiled and stood. "My pleasure. Don't forget, I still need to... see you about the... shift rotations. You know I don't like working nights... alone."

A sly grin spread across Sam's mouth. "I'll be here all night. I'll look you up later, when I have a free moment – *if* I have a free moment."

"OK, Sam. Let me know how... *things* turn out – for your patient – I mean," Ruth added, smiling and turning her attention to John and Sir Richard. "It was nice talking with you both. John, I hope Missy pulls through and makes a full recovery. With Dr. Rigden on her case, I'm sure she'll be just fine. Later, Sam."

Ruth held Sam's gaze for a few seconds. He pressed his lips to a thin line and nodded. Ruth nodded back and left. "Now, where was I," Sam said. "Oh yes! It seems since Donna found out Jared was here, she's been acting a little moody. Jared still hasn't changed his mind about seeing her, has he?"

"No, Sam, at least not yet. I think it would probably be better for them if Jared *did* agree to see Donna. I think she needs closure. Jared explained it to her in his letter, but I don't think Donna is going to accept it until Jared tells her face-to-face that it's over."

Donna set an alarm on her cell phone. "Gary... I'm gonna go for a walk and stretch my legs while this scan runs."

Gary studied her eyes. "You OK?"

"I'm fine. I just need to get off by myself for a while."

"Is it Jared?"

Donna pressed her lips to a thin line and nodded. “And Sam...” she swallowed hard. “I don’t understand why Jared won’t even talk to me about this. I’d like to thank him for helping us. He didn’t have to do that.”

“No, he didn’t,” Gary sighed. “Maybe he’s softening.”

Donna’s eyes glossed. “Not Jared. Our breakup was imminent. I should have known that when I made the decision to tell you what I knew.”

“Do you regret telling me?”

Donna’s eyes hardened. “No, Gary. I don’t. If I hadn’t done what I did, we wouldn’t be able to save Missy. We are so close to fulfilling your dream. I just hope it doesn’t create a nightmare for the rest of the World.” She blinked to clear her vision and walked away.

Richard looked up as she passed through the other room to the door. “What’s up?”

“Just taking a break.”

“Want some company?”

“No, but thanks Richard,” she smiled and sighed. “I think I’d like to be alone.”

Since the Centre ran non-stop, the cafeteria stayed open, as well. The kitchen staff prepared three standard meals a day, but were also available to prepare in-between meals and snacks, as needed. “Vanilla cappuccino and a bran muffin, please,” Donna requested as she approached the counter.

“Are you eating it here, Dr. Rigden, or would you like me to pack it up?”

“Pack it up, please.”

“Would you like your muffin heated with a bit of honey butter and sprinkle of cinnamon to go with it?”

Donna smiled and glanced at the name badge on the black woman’s lapel. “Yes. Thank you, Harriet,” she smiled.

“Friends call me Harry, for short,” the black woman responded as she turned to put Donna’s bran muffin in the microwave.

“OK- Harry. Friends call me Donna, for short,” she chuckled.

Harriet turned and smiled. “Why the long face, honey?” she asked as she bagged Donna’s muffin and set her cappuccino on the counter.

“Men,” Donna groaned and collected her order. “Thanks Harry,” she said and walked away. Instead of taking the lift, Donna opened the door to the stairs. She stopped as she neared the level to the infirmary. She went back to the observation room, opened the door and went inside. She stared at the chair where she had sat before; the place Jared’s presence had been the strongest. Her eyes glossed as she slowly sat and leaned back. Closing her eyes, she turned her head to the side and pressed her nose to the back of the seat. She inhaled deeply. It was still there. The fragrance of his cologne was fading, but his presence wasn’t. It was as strong as it had ever been. Not knowing whether it would do any good or not, Donna cleared her thoughts and conjured an image of Jared in her mind. Her heart pounded as she reached for him. *Jared, I don’t know where you are, but I know you’re somewhere close. I can feel you. I know you don’t want to see me, and you’re probably not hearing my thoughts either, and I understand, but I had to try. I know I hurt you and I know I’m a disappointment to you. I just wish, even if we can’t be together that you could at least find it in your heart to forgive me. I love you. I’ve tried not to because I know that’s not what you want, but I can’t help it Jared. I would give anything just to see your face again, to have you hold me and tell me that you don’t... hate me. Please, at least say goodbye, before you go back to America.*

Jared clenched his teeth, straining not to respond to Donna’s thoughts. His throat burned. His vision blurred. His tears glistened red as they reflected against his glowing crimson eyes like liquid rubies. His heart and head pounded. Everything in Jared wanted to reach out to Donna, to go to her, to hold her, to

comfort her. Despite the fact that Jared was shouldering most of Donna's guilt and pain, she still wouldn't let go.

Jared pushed his feelings down deep. He took the anger he felt inside and used it to lash out, mentally growling and allowing her to see the rage in his eyes. His answering thoughts were like steel traps snapped around the leg of a helpless animal, cutting sharp and deep. *No, Donna! I won't see you. I said everything I needed to say to you in my letter. You have Sam now! Leave me alone!*

Jared first felt Donna's pain, then her disappointment, then her anger... and then nothing. He mentally screamed as hot tears slipped down his cheeks. His wolf-spirit reared its head back and let out a long, heart-ripping howl.

Donna slowly opened her eyes. She felt as if someone had punched her in the stomach. Her throat ached and burned, but she refused to cry. She knew Jared could sense her emotions. She would not give him the pleasure of knowing how badly his thoughts had hurt her. She took the lid off her cappuccino and lifted it to her lips, gingerly sipping it.

Sam saw the light on in the observation area as he walked past. He clenched his teeth and kept going. After a few more steps, he stopped, mulling things over. Donna's voice reverberated inside his head as her words diced at his male ego like sharp knives. *'You may have Jared's ways, but you will never, ever come up to his level.'*

Sam took another step; John's words came back to him. 'Sam, if you intend on holding on to Donna – no pun intended – maybe you should stop making smart cracks about Jared and give Donna time to get over him before you're standing in the same position Jared is.'

Sam turned the corner; Ruth was standing at the end of the corridor, next to his office. He walked up to her, hungrily gazing over her body. He kissed her hard as he opened the door to the empty patient care room and pushed her inside. He slid his hand up her thigh, hooking his finger around her thong

strap. Ruth groaned and tugged at the tie on his scrubs with one hand as her other one fondled his length.

Donna's face and dark eyes filled with need flashed through Sam's mind. Ruth continued to fondle him, sliding her hand inside and squeezing hot throbbing flesh. Overtaken by guilt, Sam froze. His carnal urge passed as Donna's other words wrapped around him like a warm blanket. *'If it were you, I would do everything within my power to keep you with me. I've already lost too much. I don't want to lose anything else.'*

Then their conversation earlier in the observation area, before their moment of heated passion, came back. *'It's OK... but please, don't push. I need more time. There is something I'd like you to do.'*

'Anything, sweetheart.'

'Lock the door....'

"Come on Sam," Ruth gasped as she finished squirming out of her thong. "What are you waiting for?" she groaned as she lifted her leg and pushed her slick heat against the head of his erection, yanking Sam from his silent reverie.

Sam frowned. "No..." he groaned through clenched teeth and pushed her away. "I'm sorry, Ruth, but I can't do this," he said as he tied the tie on his scrubs and backed away. "I *won't* do this!" Ruth frowned and stared in shock as she watched Sam close the door behind him. He hurried back to the observation area. Donna's head jerked up as she heard the door close. She followed him with her eyes as he crossed the floor and stopped at the chair beside her. "Excuse me, Pretty Lady, but is this seat taken?"

Donna held his gaze and slowly shook her head. Sam sat beside her and faced the one-way glass. He'd come very close to doing something stupid. He swallowed the lump in his throat, and laced his fingers with hers; sighing deeply when she didn't pull away. He closed his eyes and slowly brought her hand to the warmth of his lips, kissing the back of it and nibbling the tips of her fingers. A slow smile spread across his

mouth as he tasted the honey on her skin. “Forgot to get a napkin?” he asked as he finished cleaning the honey off her fingertips.

Donna’s eyes glosed; she nodded. She cleared her throat. “There’s still half a bran muffin in the bag... if you want it,” she whispered. “I may even share the rest of my vanilla cappuccino with you if you clean the honey off my lips.”

One side of Sam’s mouth turned up. He leaned his face to hers and covered her mouth with his, kissing her and sucking the honey off her sticky lips. Donna parted her lips and allowed him to explore her mouth, kissing him back and leaning into his kiss. She cupped the nape of his neck in her palm and held him in place. Sam ended the kiss and pulled back, studying her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Sam whispered and kissed her again. “I shouldn’t have taken a stab at Jared like that, but... I’m so afraid of losing you to him.”

Donna crawled on Sam’s lap and buried her face at the side of his neck. There was a faint fragrance of perfume on his skin, and it wasn’t hers. She frowned slightly and swallowed hard. *No strings Donna. It works both ways,* she reminded herself. “Jared doesn’t want me,” she whispered against his skin and kissed it. “I was kind of hoping you still did.”

Sam drew in a deep breath and slowly blew it out between his lips. He tightened his arms around her and rubbed his cheek against the top of her head. “I love you.”

Donna softly smiled. “I’m glad somebody does. I’ve got a couple of hours before I have to be back upstairs. Feel like taking a nap with me?”

Sam grinned. “Do you mind if we take it in my sleeping quarters on my tiny half-comfortable bed?” Donna slowly shook her head. Sam handed her the bag with the leftover muffin and coffee in it. “Hold this,” he said and stood, cradling her in his arms. Donna flipped the light switch. Sam closed the door.

Ruth watched as Sam carried Donna into his office. She narrowed her eyes, typed out a short text on her cell phone and hit send.

Richard's cell phone vibrated. He unlocked it and read the text 'Sorry, I tried. They're still together.'

"Damn!" he muttered under his breath. "What is it going to take?"

Gary glanced at Richard over the top of his glasses. "Pardon?"

"Oh nothing," Richard groaned and put his cell phone away. "I was just talking to myself. So how are you and Tina doing?"

"We're... fine," Gary lied.

Richard arched an eyebrow and grinned. "Really...?"

Gary frowned. "Yes – really – why?"

Richard pursed his lips and shook his head. "No reason," he responded, took another culture disk from storage and started scanning it. "I was just curious."

Gary's cell phone vibrated. He unlocked it and read Donna's text. 'Taking a nap with Sam. Cover for me. May be a little longer than two hours.' He glanced at Richard out of the corner of his eye and grinned.

Richard looked up and frowned. "What?"

Gary shook his head. "Nothing...."

Chapter 48

Gary knocked on the door to Sam's sleeping quarters several times before a sleepy Sam opened the door and stepped into his office. His eyes filled with panic. "Donna's still sleeping. Is something wrong with Missy?"

"Nope," Gary grinned. "I just came to see if you and Donna were awake enough to give her the first treatment."

A slow smile spread across Sam's mouth. "It worked?"

"I went ahead and ran the last scan for Donna after the other one finished. The EHG seems quite happy to bind with the CTZ5. I ran the first test about an hour ago – no malignant growth. One hundred percent regeneration of damaged cells."

"Regeneration rate?"

"Unbelievable! At least doubled, and then some."

"And that's testing it on Missy's cultured stem cells?"

"I did the culture test after I ran it through Donna's simulation software, and then tested it again to make sure. I'd like for Donna to have another look, but I think it'll work."

"Get everything ready. I'll wake Donna. Good luck, Gary."

Gary furrowed his brow. "You're not coming?"

"I don't know if Donna wants me to."

Gary glanced to Sam's side and grinned again. Sam felt Donna's arms wrapping around his waist and pulling him against her body. Her hot breath warmed his skin through his scrub top. "She wants you there," she said. "We'll be there in a few minutes, Gary."

"I'll make you and Sam a cup of coffee," Gary said and left.

Donna turned Sam to face her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, rose on her tiptoes and kissed him. "Thank you," she whispered against his lips.

Sam kissed her back. "What for?"

“For just holding me and letting me cuddle up to you. I needed that simple warmth and understanding. I promise I’ll try to be less defensive, when it comes to Jared.”

Sam softly smiled. “And I’ll try to be more patient and less he-man, when it comes to Jared. Should I let the surgical team know?”

“No. This is experimental, it’s probably better if we do the procedure ourselves. I’ll go on up. You tell Sir Richard and John, and then come to the genetics lab.”

Sam tenderly kissed her forehead. “I’ll be up shortly. Don’t start without me.”

Donna left. Sam knocked on Missy’s door and stuck his head in. John looked up as Sam entered the room. “Where’s Sir Richard?”

“Gone to get us some coffee. What’s up?”

“I’m on my way up to the genetics lab. Donna has already left. Gary and Richard have been working all night. They’ve come up with something. They’re just waiting for Donna to go over it and make sure they haven’t made any mistakes. If it checks out, we’ll be trying it on Missy in a couple of hours.”

John’s eyes lit. “I’ll tell him when he gets back.”

“John... Donna said to warn you. This is experimental. You know what that means.”

John nodded. Sam left. John picked up Missy’s hand and pressed the back of it to his cheek. He bent down, kissed the corner of her mouth and pushed the hair back from her forehead. His voice was small and choked. “Honey... I’m sorry, but I’m not ready to let you go,” he whispered. “Please, come back to me, because if this doesn’t work, I’m going to have no other choice than to let you slip away from me. You’re the light in my dark, honey. Without you, I’d just be a grumpy old man. The World doesn’t need another grumpy old man, so you have to come back to me.”

“She will,” Sir Richard said as he entered the room. “Here, grab one of these. They’re a little hot. I met Sam on his way to the lift. He told me the news. It’s going to work out. I also just

talked to Jared at the complex. He and Juanita plan to leave just as soon as this is over. He said he can't stand to be this close to Donna and not set the record straight."

"Thanks for sitting with me, Sir. I know I'm causing you a mountain of grief over this."

"No, you're not! Drink your coffee. We'll discuss how much I'm going to dock your salary when this is over."

John chuckled. "Damn! Guess asking for a rise in pay is out of the question, then."

"Depends on whether or not you use your head this time around," he motioned to the bed, with his head.

Forrest's private jet taxied to a stop at Newcastle Airport. Liu walked to the back of the plane that had been turned into a makeshift hospital. He stared at what was left of a once vicious person. "What's his condition?" Liu asked the registered nurse.

"He's weakening – gradually slipping away. We should have brought the doctor with us. After that half hour delay at St. Johns, I didn't expect him to make it to the UK alive. The man has unbelievable stamina."

Liu studied Forrest's sleeping face. "That's not stamina," he scoffed. "That's pure stubbornness. How much longer before he wakes up?"

Forrest lay quietly listening to the conversation.

"He could wake up in the next five minutes, or he could never wake up, Mr. Liu. Mr. Forrest's condition is unstable."

"He could do the World a favour by *never* waking up," Liu muttered under his breath.

"The ambulance is here," one of the bodyguards announced.

The nurse frowned. "Mr. Liu you're being too harsh on Mr. Forrest. He's a dying man."

One side of Liu's mouth turned up. "Nurse, you don't know the old bastard like I do. You ride in the ambulance with him and the doctor. Take him to the Vermont Hotel, Castle Garth. Reservations have been made. Mr. Forrest will be staying in

the city suite. I have business to attend to. I will join you shortly.” Liu turned and left.

Forrest sat up on the side of the bed. He crooked his finger to his two security guards. “Keep an eye on him. I don’t want him disrupting our schedule.” The guard nodded and left the plane. “So... I’m an old bastard who would be doing the World a favour by dying? We’ll see who has the last laugh in this game, Mr. John Liu. Is everything set up at the RVI?”

“Yes, Mr. Forrest. The doctor has been informed.”

Forrest grinned. “Has Wilson and his wife been located?”

“Yes Sir. Mrs. Wilson is in the infirmary at the Newcastle Stem Cell Research Centre, under Dr. Rigden’s care.”

“Dr. Rigden? How convenient, but why would their moron of a doctor assign a genetic engineer to treat a pregnant woman?”

“That is a mystery. According to Linda Wilson’s medical records, Dr. Rigden performed an ultrasound, at which time she noted the abnormality in the developing foetus. She then did an amniocentesis.”

“And what did the test show?”

“That the unborn is ready to be harvested.”

“The harvester?”

“Arranged, Sir.”

The nurse glanced out the window. “You should lay back down now, Mr. Forrest. They’re coming to take you off the plane.”

Forrest lay back and closed his eyes. “This is coming together nicely.”

There was a knock on Tina’s apartment door. “You’re late.”

“The bastard nearly died on us at St. Johns.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s being taken to his hospice room at the Vermont Hotel. I’ve spoken to the doctor in Shreveport and the one who will be treating Forrest while he’s in the UK. I doubt he’ll be leaving alive. The doctors paint a grim outlook.”

“Come inside before someone sees you.” Tina closed the door behind him. “Do you want a cup of coffee?”

“I’d prefer green tea. You know I don’t drink coffee.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t drink green tea. The taste is revolting. It’s coffee or nothing. I have regular tea.”

“Earl Grey?”

“No, Tetley.”

“I suppose that will have to do. Have you found out where Kevin Wilson and his wife are going to be staying?”

“I heard at the guest house at Triplet Hall, but I haven’t been able to confirm that. Mr. Wilson is being extremely protective of his wife’s pregnancy.”

“Any idea why?”

“No. I have the result of the amniocentesis,” Tina said, handing it over as she went into the kitchen to make the tea. “I can’t see any reason why Forrest would be interested in Linda Wilson or the unborn child,” she called out from the kitchen. “I had thought it was because Forrest had fathered the child, but according to the paternity test, the unborn is Kevin Wilson’s son.”

“So... it is a boy then?”

Tina handed Liu his tea. “Yes. There’s no doubt.”

Liu dunked his tea bag a few times, wrapped the string around the spoon and squeezed it. He laid the spoon on the side of his saucer. He sat back in the chair and casually crossed his leg, sipping his tea. “Forrest hates children. It does not make sense that he would take out a trust fund for a child who has nothing to do with him.”

Tina softly chuckled. “Would it be the first time Forrest had done something against his nature?”

Liu smiled. “No, I suppose not. Another thing I don’t understand. Before his last collapse – the one that made him bedridden – Forrest insisted that Donna Rigden was out to get him. He was adamant that she had a cure for him and was withholding it.”

“In my experience, which hasn’t been a lot – I’m happy to say – Donna Rigden is somewhat of a tart.”

Liu arched an eyebrow. “What makes you say that?”

“She came over here – at least for appearance’s sake – as if she was Richard Triplet’s girl. Then she goes out with Sam Kaliea, beds him and they’ve been together ever since, yet, according to Joyce, Donna insists it’s a no string relationship. Apparently Donna is still pinning over some guy – a singer, I think – back in Arizona.”

“How do you find out so much when you never leave England?”

“How can you live right under Forrest’s nose and still not know anything about him?”

Liu softly chuckled. “We each have our own agenda, Tina. Are you any closer to yours?”

“Not after they put a stop to the BSV we were using.”

Liu set his empty teacup back on the saucer and slid to the front of his chair, his attention peaked. “What do you mean? That was fool-proof.”

“Apparently not as fool-proof as you thought. Gary had no trouble getting around it. He used some kind of super virus to counter it. The BSV is useless now.”

Liu frowned. “Perhaps you are not providing Dr. Browne with the right incentive.”

Tina turned up her nose. “I give him incentive when and if I have to. He’s about as exciting in bed as a cold mackerel. Richard was better than him.”

“Sounds as if you’ve covered all the bases, apart from Sam Kaliea.”

Tina grinned. “I’ll have you know, out of the three, Sam was...”

Liu held up his hand. “I don’t have time to listen to tales of your bedroom antics. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Then why are you here? Looking for a little of your own action?”

Liu narrowed his eyes. “Don’t flatter yourself. I don’t fraternize with the help. Did you use the protocol on Hart?”

“I did.”

Liu glared at Tina. “I did not authorise you to use it!” he snapped.

“If you didn’t want me to use the damn thing, you shouldn’t have given it to me,” she countered.

Liu groaned. “How well did it perform?”

“Like flying a model airplane – only smaller. It still has a few problems. It’s particularly sensitive to EMP or any kind of static electricity. It also doesn’t like taking a bath.”

“What did you expect? Water and electricity don’t mix. Did you have any trouble deploying the payload?”

“Not in the slightest. You do need to figure out how to make it work on solar power though. Unless it’s close to a cell phone signal, its internal battery drains quickly.”

“I already have that sorted. Oddly enough, the design just showed up on D’Netics database. It was very much like my own design. The mysterious design hints that it’s possible to make an even smaller device.”

“How much smaller?”

Liu chuckled. “Need-to-know basis, Tina.”

Chapter 49

Despite the early hour, once the news had leaked out, the paparazzi swarmed the front entrance of the Vermont Hotel, eager to document the history. Would this be Custer's last stand? GW Forrest's notorious business attitude toward his competition was renown throughout the globe. His arrival in the UK surely signalled the impending battle, between Forrest Enterprises and Triplet International, the other global superpower. Whispering speculation made for juicy gossip on either side of the Atlantic.

Would this be another hostile takeover by Forrest Enterprises? Would Newcastle Stem Cell Research Centre, NSCRC, follow the fate of D'Netics? Would the feathers of the phoenix be singed by the breath of the dragon, or would the talons of the phoenix pluck out the dragon's eyes? Sir Richard was also renowned for his aggressiveness; preferring to lay low among the ashes and wait for the opportune moment of rebirth.

In the face of Forrest Enterprise's falling share prices, those who thirsted for blood put their odds on America's Saint George as GW Forrest had been named by the mainstream media. To the veterans it made little difference. Those who had witnessed past conflicts between the two superpowers knew the only time Saint George made a personal appearance like this was to scoop up the bricks of yet another fallen empire. Would the King abdicate his throne and be exiled, or was this another sly move by blueblood domination? Jack Brantley, former reporter for Shreveport Times was determined to find out.

Rumours of Forrest's European ancestry had sparked Jack's reporter instincts. He'd followed Forrest's corporate crusades since he was old enough to understand the meaning of the word traitor. His stash file of information and stories he'd written just kept getting bigger. Sooner or later, Jack would find the missing link to the chain that joined the two bloodlines. He was

convinced that Sir Richard Triplet and GW Forrest were one and the same; one was bad as the other.

Dr. Gary Browne's quiet trade off from D'Netics to Sir Richard's growing UK Empire had prompted Jack to abandon his nesting grounds; he now stood under different colours. Dr. Donna Rigden's recent appearance on the scene had further sparked Jack's interests. First Gary Browne, then Donna Rigden, Gary's cousin, and now Kevin and Linda Wilson. This puzzle was coming together if he could just find the missing piece. Perhaps when the dust settled it would be found among the ashes, and Jack would at last find out why his birth father's death had been obscured, cleverly covered by a posh monarchical scarlet carpet.

After two continuous hours of tedious work, Donna and the genetics team's progress, at NSCRC had come to a screeching halt. The EHG they'd extracted from Jared's DNA and Donna's temporary vector had paired, with a success rate of 83.05%. Donna would have been more confident with the ninety percent she'd been pushing for, but they couldn't afford to wait any longer. Melissa was slowly slipping away from them. Unless a miracle happened soon, the mixture of Forrest's psychotropic drug and the perp's cerbera would seal Melissa's fate.

Fingers laced at her nape, Donna leaned forward on her elbows and tucked her chin. She shook her head in dismay and let out a long sigh of exasperation. "That's it!" she groaned. "I can't get it any higher."

Sam stepped closer. Donna turned on the stool and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek against his body and ignoring the strange perfume on his scrub top as he caressed her hair. She turned her face up and softly smiled. Sam bent his head and kissed her. Richard groaned inwardly, watching them out the corner of his eye.

"Me neither," Gary added.

“I don’t understand it. Do you see now why I said your HRV-A would never serve as a stable vector? It’s almost as if the EHG is sentient. It looks for the twelfth chromosome. It simply will not transcribe to any other location. The only way to make this work permanently is to bombard the patient’s system and give the EHG nowhere to run. The rate at which this thing mutates is scary. It could easily get out of control in a very short time. Used as a weapon, it would be unmatched.”

“We’re not using it as a weapon,” Richard pushed through his teeth.

“No,” Sam responded. “But, if he could get his hands on it, somebody like Forrest would.”

Richard narrowed his eyes at Sam. “Are you suggesting that we scrap the idea and let Missy die?”

“I’m suggesting that the death of one person to prevent millions might be justified. Medical sacrifices are made every day, Richard.”

Gary snorted and shook his head. “We’ve already had this ethical argument.”

“Yes, we have!” Donna snapped. “And we don’t have time to debate the moral pros and cons again. Before, we were just guessing and testing theories. Now, a life is at stake – two - if you count the effects losing Missy will have on John. They’re *both* my friends, and I’ve lost everything for this. I *have* to follow it through. Unless John says otherwise, I think we should take the risk. Sam... if we don’t, Missy *is* going to die. That’s a set fact. Put yourself in John’s shoes. Remember what I told you.”

Sam studied her eyes as he considered her petition. *What would I do if it were you instead of Missy?* The thought of losing Donna made his stomach roil. Would he turn his back on the ethics to save the life of the woman he loved? Love – that had a strange ring to Sam. Lust and self-gratification he understood, but love was never an emotion he’d considered, at least not until Donna. He held her a little tighter. “Let’s talk to John and Sir Richard,” he sighed.

Donna stood to leave. “John won’t want Missy left alone. Frankly, after what happened before, neither do I. Why don’t you go sit with Missy while Sam and I meet with John and Sir Richard? That way, Richard can continue working with the new stem cell cultures.”

Gary stood. “That sounds reasonable to me.” He followed them to the lift. Gary looked at Donna and furrowed his brow. He leaned closer and sniffed.

“What is it? Are you suggesting that I need a shower?”

“No,” Gary responded and sniffed again. “Are you wearing a different perfume?”

“No. You know I don’t wear anything but Sand and Sable. Maybe it’s mingling with the fragrance of my bath soap or shampoo.”

Sam swallowed hard and focused his attention on his feet. Donna glanced at him out the corner of her eye and sighed. “Could be,” Gary admitted. “It just smells stronger than what you usually wear.”

Sam tapped on Melissa’s door and stuck his head in. John looked up. “Sir Richard, Donna and I would like to speak to you and John in my office. Gary is going to sit with Missy.”

Sir Richard turned and motioned to John. Donna sat in the chair to Sam’s side. Sir Richard and John sat to her right, in front of Sam’s desk. “Sir Richard,” Sam began. “It’s crunch time. We have to decide what we’re going to do about testing the EHG on Missy. Conventional medicine isn’t going to help her now. We either use it, or we have to let her go. As far as Missy’s rights are concerned, I’ve already kept her on life support longer than I should have.”

“What is your success rate?” Sir Richard asked, turning his attention to Donna.

“Less than I’d prefer – 83.05%. I had hoped for at least ninety. I believe it will work, but I can’t guarantee Missy won’t suffer some form of amnesia. According to her latest MRI, the drugs and beating Missy was subjected to have done

irreparable damage to her hippocampus - the part of her brain responsible not only for processing new memories but, it also affects emotions, behaviour and sense of smell.”

“But she won’t be paralyzed, or not be able to speak, or anything like that, will she?” John asked.

Donna softly smiled. “No, John. Missy will wake up whole. She might not even suffer from the amnesia. I just wanted you to be aware that it was a possibility.”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Sir Richard asked.

“Despite all our precautions and all the compatibility tests I’ve run, Missy’s system could still reject our new stem cells and we’ll lose her anyway. If we don’t use the procedure...” Donna broke off and swallowed hard. “I’m sorry. Missy is the first. No matter what form of treatment we use, she still may die.”

“The decision is yours, John,” Sam added.

John looked at Sir Richard. “I’m not stepping in on this one, John. I’ll abide by whatever decision you make.”

John drew in a deep breath, held it for a few seconds and then let it out slowly. “Then what are you waiting for?”

Sam reached in the cabinet behind his desk and grabbed an epidural catheter kit.

As soon as Sam had threaded the epidural catheter into Melissa’s arachnoid mater - a membrane surrounding the brain and spinal cord - Donna attached the syringe containing the concentrated stem cells they’d cultured and started slowly injecting them through the catheter tube. Sam kept a close eye on Melissa’s vitals while John, Sir Richard, and Gary watched from the other side of the room. “Anything?” John asked, once Donna had injected half the stem cells.

Sam glanced at Donna and shook his head. “Sorry, John – no change yet.”

“We probably won’t see any huge changes for several hours, John,” Donna said. “The CTZ5 has to have time to direct the EHG stem cells to their target. If it works the same

on Missy as it did on me, once that happens, you'd better be deciding on what you want to say to her."

Sam frowned. "Sweetheart, I wouldn't go that far. You didn't have any broken bones. You know how long it takes bones to heal."

"Yes, Sam, I do, but I also know what this EHG is capable of doing. If Missy's system doesn't reject it, what you're going to see is nothing short of a medical miracle."

Sam narrowed his eyes. "And if it doesn't work, we're going to watch her die."

"Do you have to be so blunt? You don't know that."

"I'm just being objective and realistic, sweetheart. Under normal conditions...."

"We're not dealing with normal conditions, Sam," Gary said, in Donna's defence.

"There... it's in," Donna said and closed the end of the catheter. "As soon as Richard gets some more stem cells ready, we'll administer the rest intravenously. In the meantime, we wait. How are her vitals, Sam?"

"Still being maintained by the respirator."

"I don't think we should move the setting for at least an hour. If all goes well, after that, you should be able to switch her from full to assisted."

"You honestly think it will take that little time?"

"Sam, for a gunshot wound like mine, I should have been taken to the hospital. It's nine miles from Florien to Many. By the time we got to the city limits, my bleeding had already stopped. Under normal conditions that shouldn't have happened, but it did. Ten hours later, by the time we landed in the UK, I didn't even need a sling, and I certainly didn't need any pain killers. To my knowledge, I wasn't given any antibiotics at Barksdale, and you told me yourself, from the looks of my wound, I wouldn't need any, and you were right. The EHG we used here came from Jared. He was born with the gene, as part of his natural DNA structure. Mine was a freak accident. Jared said what he used on me should have done no

more than what a topical antibiotic cream would have. He was just as surprised at the results as anyone.”

“So... exactly what are you saying pet – I mean Donna?” Sir Richard asked.

Donna picked up Melissa’s chart and noted the difference in the I/O of her catheter. She glanced at Sam with worried eyes and turned to face Sir Richard. “I’m saying if what we’ve done works, Missy will be healed within 72 hours – a week at the most.”

“I will have to see it to believe it’s possible for broken bones to knit together in days rather than weeks,” Sam said.

Donna grinned. “Fine – don’t believe me. The results will speak for themselves. In the meantime, can I suggest – without stepping on your male ego toes – that we do some more blood work and see if there’s been any internal changes? I can run the tests myself, as before.”

Sam glanced at his watch. “No. The lab techs will be here in about twenty minutes. One of them can run the tests. That much time is not going to make any difference anyway. Let’s go get some breakfast. I’m starving.”

Donna yawned. “Sounds good to me. John, what are you and Sir Richard having?”

“Nothing for me, Donna,” John spoke up.

Donna narrowed her eyes. “If you don’t tell me what you want, I’ll bring back what I think you need. And unless you like eating healthy, you probably wouldn’t like it. Same goes for you, Sir Richard, so out with it.”

Sir Richard grinned. “OK, you win. I’ll have a fruit scone with clotted cream and strawberry jam, and a cup of tea.”

“Same for me,” John agreed.

“Right. We’ll bring it back in a couple of...”

“...Eat your breakfast in peace,” Sir Richard interrupted. “We’ll last until you get back.”

“Gary... are you coming with us?”

“No, Sam. I’m going to hang around here for a while, but you can bring me back a scrambled egg and bacon sandwich and a cup of coffee.”

“OK, see you in a bit,” Sam said and led Donna out into the corridor.

Before Jared and Juanita went to the infirmary at the complex, they decided to have breakfast together in Jared’s quarters. It hadn’t taken either of them long to learn how to use VICi’s advanced voice activated technology. Juanita set the table while Jared provided her with a somewhat partially edible breakfast, proving yet again that Jared’s cooking skills left a lot to be desired.

Juanita stared in awe and wondered how Jared managed to make eggs look like small pieces of yellow cotton. When she put a bite in her mouth she found out; they had the same consistency as cotton. “Not bad...” she lied as she forced it down with a sip of coffee. Juanita’s eyes widened. Not knowing that coffee in the UK had a tendency to be stronger than he was used to, Jared had used the same amount of instant coffee he would have used in the States. Juanita picked up a piece of what she guessed was toast. It was dryer than the eggs and a lovely shade of mottled black, covered by a liberal smear of strong marmalade. She picked up a slice of bacon and with a little effort bit off a piece. She smiled sweetly as she chewed what to her was more like a piece of bacon flavoured jerky.

Jared watched her through narrowed eyes, a grin of embarrassment spread across his mouth. “Maybe next time you should cook the breakfast,” he chuckled.

Juanita nodded as she finished chewing and forced it down with another sip of the black poison. “I think that might be a good idea.”

Jared laughed. “Now you know why I have a cook. Shall we listen to the news, while we torture ourselves with this heinous breakfast, or would you rather go to the cafeteria and pick up something?”

Juanita grinned. "Let's listen to the news. I'll survive – I think."

"Wallscreen on," Jared said. "Display the news."

VICi; Please select a country and channel.

"UK, BBC," Jared responded.

Because it was breaking news, Forrest arrival at the Vermont Hotel in Newcastle by gurney was the first thing they saw. Juanita and Jared shared a worried look. "VICi, halt playback," Jared commanded. "When was this filmed and was it recorded live?"

VICi; Affirmative, the newscast was broadcasted live from the Vermont Hotel, Castle Garth, in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne at half past five this morning.

Jared's eyes changed to glowing crimson. Anger creased his brow. His voice was a low rumble. "VICi, confirm identity. Is the person in the newscast GW Forrest of Forrest Enterprises?"

VICi; Affirmative.

Jared bent the blade of the butter knife in his hand to a ninety degree angle with his thumb. He growled and studied Juanita's eyes. "What the fuck is going on? What is that bastard doing in England? He was supposed to stay away from Donna. That was part of my agreement with Forrest. He was supposed to leave Donna and Beth alone," he said and unlocked his cell phone. "Sir Richard, it's Jared. Are you aware that GW Forrest checked in to the Vermont Hotel in Newcastle this morning at five thirty?"

Sir Richard glanced at Gary. "Hang on a second." He pressed mute and left the room. "OK. I'm back, Jared. I didn't want Gary to overhear. Repeat what you just said."

Jared growled low in his throat. "I said... Forrest is in Newcastle at the Vermont Hotel. He got there about five thirty this morning."

"What? No! Forrest is here? In Newcastle?"

"The fucker reneged on our agreement! I can't leave now, Sir Richard. Not until he's back on the other side of the

Atlantic. Turn your TV to BBC. Reporters are camped out at the hotel entrance.”

“Jared, stay as long as you want, but we may have to either move you to another location, or risk you bumping into Donna. I may have to move the genetics team to the complex. I can’t risk Forrest doing to Donna what he did to Missy.”

“No shit Sherlock! I’ll run the risk and take her back to Arizona with me first before I let that happen.”

“Just sit tight. Let me do some checking, and I’ll get back to you. In the meantime, keep monitoring things from there. You’d be surprised at how much information VICi can find out about what’s going on around us. Other than Donna, if you stay, it leaves us with a slight dilemma.”

“Yeah, I know. How to get Juanita back to her mother.”

“If it comes to that, we’ll figure something out, Son,” Sir Richard said and ended the call. He tapped on the door and motioned to John.

“I’ll be right back,” John said and followed Sir Richard into the corridor. “What is it, Sir?”

“That was Jared. He’s just seen a BBC newscast. Forrest is apparently in Newcastle. Jared said they were wheeling Forrest into the lobby at the Vermont Hotel on a gurney at half past five this morning.”

John’s eyes turned to dark pools. “That’s all we need. I’d better...”

Sir Richard held up a hand. “You’d better get back in there with Missy. I have other security who can handle this. Looks like I’ll have to postpone our little get-together with Donna for a while. I’ll be back shortly. Don’t say anything about this to Gary. He still doesn’t know Juanita and Jared are at the complex.”

“How long are they staying?”

“Jared is not leaving until Forrest does. I don’t know about Juanita, yet. I gotta run. Tell Donna I’ll eat my scone later.”

Chapter 50

Ruth and Joyce collected their breakfast trays. “Where do you want to sit?” Joyce asked.

Ruth scanned the room. Sam and Donna were sitting at their usual table; the one toward the back of the cafeteria, next to the windows. She motioned with her head. “How about the one in front of them?”

Joyce frowned. “I do *not* want to sit next to Sam and Donna.”

“I do,” Ruth grinned. “Come on. You can sit with your back to them.”

“Fine,” Joyce groaned. “As long as I don’t have to look at them.”

“Joyce, you know damned well if you could be in Donna’s shoes, you would.”

“Yeah – well – I’m not.”

“You might if Donna wasn’t in the way.”

“No, I wouldn’t. All Sam is ever going to see me as is a quick fuck.”

Ruth laughed, catching Sam’s attention. He looked up, groaned inwardly and turned his attention back to Donna. “Let’s face it, Joyce. That’s all Sam sees in most women. Personally, if I were you, I’d go for Richard.”

“My blood is the wrong colour,” Joyce sighed.

“Good morning, Sam, Donna,” Ruth said as she and Joyce reached their table.

“Morning, ladies,” Sam responded curtly.

Donna furrowed her brow and studied Ruth’s eyes for a few seconds. She noticed Ruth’s perfume bore a strong resemblance to the one she’d smelt on Sam’s neck. “Morning...” Donna said quietly.

“Are we having a staff meeting this morning?” Ruth called out.

“Not today,” Sam responded. “Did you notice if Tina was in the lab when you passed by?”

“No Sam,” Ruth replied. “Ian was there, though.”

“If you see her, tell her I need to talk to her.”

“OK Sam.”

Joyce and Ruth started chatting while they ate their breakfast. Sam didn't seem the least bit bothered by either of the women. Donna and Sam shared stories about college and medical school. She laughed at his jokes and tales of crazy things that happened to him when he lived in Australia, but Sam could sense she was a little preoccupied by something. “Sam, when was the last time you saw your mother?”

“It's been at least five years, maybe longer.”

“Don't you go home for Christmas?”

Sam sighed. “No, sweetheart. I haven't been back home since I moved to the UK.”

Donna frowned. “Is there some kind of friction, between you and your parents?”

“Not between me and my mom, but there was between me and my stepfather.”

“Oh, so your mother was married before?”

“No. My mother was pregnant with me when she met my stepfather. I never knew my father. He died before I was born.”

“How much do you know about your father?”

“Not a lot. According to the stories my mother told me, he was supposed to be someone important. Why all the questions about my past?”

“I was just curious.”

Ruth shared a look with Joyce as they quietly eavesdropped on Sam and Donna's conversation. Joyce pressed her lips into a thin line. She knew Sam didn't like talking about his childhood.

“Well, don't be!” Sam snapped. “I don't like talking about my past. There's a lot of pain back there. My stepfather and I didn't get along. According to my mother, my stepfather was jealous of my father.”

Donna sighed. "I see...."

"You still haven't told me why, all of a sudden, you're so interested in my family."

"I was just – I mean," she sighed, unsure of how to approach the subject. Finally, she decided to take the direct approach. She studied his eyes. "How do you feel about... children?"

Sam's eyes widened. He swallowed hard. "Um... I honestly hadn't given it a lot of thought, Donna. I mean – there's nothing like diaper duty to put a damper on a relationship."

"So... you *don't* want children, then?"

"I didn't say that. Do you?"

Joyce grinned. She could almost hear the wheels turning in Sam's head.

"Yes," Donna softly smiled and answered without hesitation. She remembered how much enjoyment she got from hearing Sarabeth, Jared's daughter, call her 'Mommy'. "I'd like to have a little girl and maybe, even a little boy - someday," she added quickly. "Obviously, you're not interested in that sort of thing."

Sam reached across the table and squeezed her hand. "Will you stop putting words in to my mouth? I did not say that I didn't want to settle down, or that I didn't want to have children – someday – as you put it. Like I told you before, I've never stayed in a relationship long enough to even consider marriage, or starting a family."

Joyce leaned forward so Ruth could hear her. "How is he responding to that?" she whispered.

"He's giving her a snow job – plastering up the cracks. From the look on her face, I think Donna is buying it."

Donna shook her head and scoffed. "Oh, forget it. It doesn't matter. It's not important. I'm finished. Let's get Sir Richard and John's breakfast. It's been almost an hour. I'm anxious to check on Missy."

Sam stood and picked up their trays. "Do you want anything else to drink?"

“Yeah. I think I’ll have another vanilla cappuccino.”

“I’ll get us both one,” Sam said.

Donna stood and followed him. She stopped near Ruth and Joyce’s table. “Ruth, could I ask what kind of perfume you’re wearing?”

“It’s called Euphoria.” Ruth glanced at Sam and then turned her attention back to Donna. “Richard gave it to me. Do you like it? I’m sure if you talked to him, he’d get some for you, too.”

Donna softly smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “He already gave me some. It doesn’t suit me, but it smells nice on you.”

“Richard has excellent taste.”

“Yes, he does,” Donna replied and followed Sam to the counter.

“Richard bought you Euphoria?” Joyce asked when they were out of earshot.

“Yeah, but it didn’t do what he said it would.”

Joyce frowned. “What did he say it would do?”

“It’s supposed to have something in it that drives men wild. He told me to wear it and see how Sam reacted.”

“It didn’t work, did it?”

Ruth arched an eyebrow. “No... it didn’t.”

Joyce sipped her coffee. “It didn’t work when I wore it either, but oh did it drive Richard nuts.”

Ruth grinned. “Is that so? Hmm...”

Sam collected Sir Richard and John’s breakfast and guided Donna to the exit. As they approached the lift, Richard stepped out. “Have you got the next batch of stem cells ready?” Donna asked.

“I just put them in Missy’s room. I was looking for you. Since I’ve obviously found you, I’m going to have some breakfast while I wait for the next batch to get ready.”

“Good,” Donna smiled and turned to Sam. “That will give us a chance to run the blood work on Missy first. Then, I want to check it again in another hour.”

“Why every hour?” Richard asked.

“I don’t know how Missy is going to respond. I want to stay on top of it, in case I have to do something fast. I told you, the EHG has a high mutation factor. The CTZ5 is barely holding the bond. I may have to adjust it. Once it’s in her system, there shouldn’t be any problems.”

“OK, well, I’ll see you later then,” Richard said and left.

Sam and Donna stepped into the lift. She frowned. “Did he seem a little preoccupied to you?”

Sam scoffed and wrapped an arm around her waist. “No more so than usual.” The lift doors closed.

John looked up from the sound of the door opening.

“Where are Gary and Sir Richard?” Donna asked as she and Sam entered the room.

“Here’s your breakfast,” Sam said, handing it over.

John opened the bag and took out his tea. He leaned back in the chair. “Ah, that’s just what I needed. Gary was going to make a quick trip to Tina’s apartment and see why she hasn’t returned his calls. Sir Richard had to take care of some business. He said he would eat his scone when he got back.”

Donna took a vacutube, alcohol swab and tourniquet out of her lab coat pocket. “What’s wrong?” John asked, worry creasing his brow.

“Nothing, John.” Donna smiled. “I just want to draw some blood and make sure she’s doing OK.”

Sam unlocked his cell phone. “Gary... it’s Sam. John said you were going to check on Tina. Do me a favour. When you see her, give her a message for me. Tell her if she hasn’t called me by the end of the day to start looking for another job.”

“I didn’t see her, Sam. Tina’s apartment has been cleared out. The landlady didn’t know where she went. I tried ringing her, but her number doesn’t work anymore.”

Sam frowned. "Tina's moved?"

"Apparently so. She hadn't mentioned anything to you about moving, had she?"

Donna jerked her head up and shared a worried look with Sam. "I'm going to get this to the lab. Is there anything you want me to tell Ian?"

"Sam... are you still there?"

"Hang on a second, Gary." Sam pressed mute. "Yeah. Tell him if he sees Tina or hears from her that she's fired."

Donna nodded and left. John's interest peaked. He stepped closer to Sam. "You're sacking Tina?"

"Gary said her apartment was empty. Her landlord didn't know her new address, and when Gary tried to ring her cell phone, he said it had been changed. I'm not putting up with this kind of behaviour."

John unlocked his cell phone and stepped out of earshot. "Tim, it's John..."

Sam took his cell phone off mute. "I'm back. Where are you?"

"Sitting at Westgate Road, waiting on the light to change. How's Missy doing?"

"Her vitals are stable, and it looks like the problem with her kidneys may be getting better. We'll know more when Ian gets done with her blood work. Donna took it to the lab."

"The light just changed. I'll be there in a couple of minutes."

"OK Gary." Sam ended the call.

John was still on the phone. "See what you can find out Tim. Also, keep an eye on Sir Richard. Call me if you find out anything." John locked his cell phone. "Did I overhear you tell Gary that you think Missy's problem with her kidneys is getting better?"

"Yes, you did John," Sam smiled. "Her output is still below what I would expect it to be with the amount of fluids we're putting into her body, but it's looking better." Sam motioned with his head. "We're you calling Sir Richard?"

“No. Tim. I’ve got him, and Joe working to find out what’s going on with Tina. I’m a little concerned that she disappears the same day Forrest shows up. I don’t like it when he’s on our side of the pond, especially with me tied up here with Missy. I should be out there doing my job, but I wanted to be here when she came out of the coma. There’s no telling what state she’ll be in.”

“She’ll probably be confused. The last time she was aware of anything, she was being tortured. There’s also something else I need to talk to you about, but I was waiting to see how things turned out.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’d rather not talk about it in here,” he said, motioning toward the bed. “I don’t want to chance that she’ll overhear. We can step out into the corridor and talk, or we can talk in my office.”

“I don’t want to leave her long, Sam.”

“Then let’s just step out into the corridor. It will only take a couple of minutes to say what I have to say.”

John nodded and stood. He turned to the two guards outside Melissa’s door; a stern look on his face. “*No* one gets through this door.” The guards nodded and stepped closer together. John followed Sam out of earshot. “What happened to Missy that you haven’t told me about?”

“Missy was sexually assaulted, John.”

John slowly clenched his fists. He tightened his jaw. “Why didn’t you tell me about this before now?”

“Quite frankly, I didn’t expect Missy to pull through. I didn’t see any reason to mention it. Legally, I shouldn’t be telling you now, but since we’re friends, I thought you should know. It might be an idea not to say anything to Missy about this until we find out how much she remembers. She’s got enough to deal with right now, just staying alive.”

John nodded. “Thank you, Sam. Does Sir Richard know about this?”

“Yes.”

“Who else knows?”

“Donna, Gary, Richard, Jared and Juanita. Jared suspected it when he went in and rescued her. For precautionary measures, I’ve done the standard examination. Her blood work was free of STDs. It’s just the emotional trauma she’ll have to deal with. That is if she was conscious, at the time.”

The respirator alarm went off. Sam and John took off in a run.

Chapter 51

Richard finished his breakfast and sat back in his chair. “So... you think if I show an interest in children, it will win brownie points with Donna?”

Joyce glanced at Ruth. “I don’t know Richard...” Ruth responded, “... but Donna sounded pretty keen on the idea of having children. Sam, on the other hand – as you might have guessed – dodged the issue. Well... mainly dodged it. When he realised Donna wasn’t kidding, he started covering his ass, but he never gave her a definite answer.”

Richard grinned and glanced at his watch. “I guess I’ll just have to work on that,” he said and stood. “Thank you Ruth, Joyce. I’ve had a very enjoyable breakfast, but I need to get back upstairs.”

“Are we still on for tonight?” Ruth asked.

“Depends on whether or not I’m free. I’ll call you.” Richard left.

Joyce frowned. “I didn’t know you were going out with Richard?”

Ruth chuckled and stood. “Like I said, if I were you, I’d forget about Sam.” Ruth stood and left.

When Donna left the lab, she felt as though someone were tightening a noose around her neck. Could life get any worse? Remembering what Forrest had said about pressing charges against her and Jared, she could think of only one reason why Forrest would be in the UK. What didn’t make sense were the conflicting newscasts. One showed him, being wheeled into the hotel on a gurney. The other showed him standing before a press conference announcing that he was moving the research department of D’Netics to the UK and would be devoting it entirely toward stem cell research.

Richard saw Donna staggering down the corridor as he stepped off the lift on his way to Melissa's room. He grabbed her shoulders to steady her. "Pet, what's wrong?" Donna stared at Richard as if she were looking through him, confused and dismayed. "Donna?"

She blinked a few times before responding. She'd forgotten about the test results, tucked in her lab coat pocket. "What...?"

Richard frowned. "Pet, you're pale as a ghost. What's wrong?"

"He's here," Donna murmured. "Forrest is in the UK. When I gave him my resignation, Forrest said he was thinking of pressing charges against me and Jared. Now he's... here." She swallowed hard. "You have to warn Jared."

He helped her back to the small sofa beside the lift. "What do you mean Donna?"

"Richard, I know Jared's in the UK somewhere. He won't have anything to do with me, but you have to tell him about Forrest."

"Donna, Forrest isn't in the UK."

"Yes he is!" she snapped. "I just saw the story on the TV in the lab. Ian was listening to the news. Forrest is staying at the Vermont Hotel, in Castle Garth, wherever that is."

"It was on the telly – just now?"

"Yes, Richard! Forrest is all over the news. The media are speculating about a corporate showdown between Triplet International and Forrest Enterprises. Something else, I dropped by Linda Wilson's room, and she was gone. I didn't release her. She shouldn't be leaving the infirmary. I'm very concerned about her and the baby."

"Sam, what's going on? What happened?"

Sam hurried to the respirator and checked the controls. He smiled. "I'll be damned. Nothing is wrong. Missy is trying to breathe on her own, John. The alarm sounded because she's fighting against the respirator." Sam changed the setting to assisted breathing again and waited. He watched Melissa's

heart rate on the monitor. It stayed strong and steady. A few seconds later, Melissa took a breath. Sam left the respirator on that setting until Melissa had taken several more breaths.

John looked worried. “Sam... talk to me. What’s going on?”

“She’s getting stronger, John. I’ve changed the setting back to where it was before. It will only come on now if she stops breathing again.” Sam unlocked his cell phone. “Ian, it’s Sam. Do you have the results on Missy’s blood gases?”

“Yeah Sam. I gave them to Donna. She should have been back, by now. Did you know Forrest was in the UK? Donna, and I were just listening to a BBC news story about it.”

“Yes, Ian,” Sam groaned. “How long ago did Donna leave?”

“About five or ten minutes. Why?”

Sam forced the air from his lungs. “She hasn’t come back yet,” he said and ended the call.

John’s eyes widened. “Sam, what’s wrong?”

“Ian said Donna left the lab about five or ten minutes ago.”

Richard gave Donna an incredulous look. “Maybe Sam released Linda Wilson.”

“He wouldn’t do that, Richard. Just as, Missy is Sam’s patient, Linda was mine. Doctors don’t step on each other’s toes like that. It goes against our professional etiquette.”

One of Richard’s eyebrows arched. “Donna, I think when it comes to professional etiquette, you’ll find it doesn’t mean as much to Sam as it would to you or Jared.”

Donna studied his eyes. “And what about you, Richard? How much would professional etiquette mean to you? How far would you go to get what you want?”

“What do you mean, Donna?”

“Are you deliberately trying to sabotage my relationship with Sam?”

Richard frowned. “If I answer that honestly, you’ll hate me.”

For a few seconds, Donna turned that thought over in her mind. “Why would I hate you, Richard? Honesty is extremely important to me, especially now.”

“What’s so different about now?”

Donna’s cell phone rang. She unlocked it, glanced at the name, swallowed hard and ignored it. “Because if I’d been honest with Jared, I might not have...” she broke off and shook her head. “Never mind, it’s not going to change anything.” She stood and accepted the call. “Sam... we need to talk.”

“Yes we do. Where are you? I rang the lab to tell you about Missy, but Ian said you’d already...”

Donna’s eyes widened. “I got a little... distracted,” she said, locking her eyes with Richard’s. “What about Missy?” She turned, disregarding her conversation with Richard.

“Well... I’m waiting on the results of Missy’s blood gases, but I think we’re about ready to take her off the respirator. I wanted to make sure, and I thought maybe you might want to be here.”

“We’re on our way!” Donna ended the call.

“What’s wrong with Missy?” Richard asked.

“Nothing!” She smiled. “Sam is waiting on me to get back. He’s getting ready to take her off the respirator. I have to go, but before I do, take some advice. For some reason, Euphoria doesn’t work on me or Sam, so stop wasting your time and money on it. I know you gave it to Joyce, and I know you gave it to Ruth, and I’m flattered that you’re willing to risk almost as much as Jared was, but next time, try your unwitting charm. It seems to be what you’re best at.” Donna turned to leave. Richard held her wrist.

“Sam will never give you what you want Donna. It’s not in him. He’s afraid of commitment.”

Donna looked down at her wrist. The corners of her mouth turned up. She frowned and slowly lifted her head to meet his eyes, staring at him impassively. “And you think you could give me what I want?”

“I wouldn’t walk away from my responsibilities, like he will.”

Donna slowly arched an eyebrow and shook her head in dismay as she pulled her wrist free. “I have to go Richard.” She left him standing there.

Richard waited until she was out of earshot. He unlocked his cell phone. “It’s me. The deal is off.”

“Did you try the Euphoria again?”

“Yes, I did,” Richard forced through his teeth.

“And...?”

“It didn’t work. She knows, and I’m not doing it again. I won’t risk having her hate me, so I’m done. Donna will fall for me my way, or she won’t fall for me at all. I want her to love me, not hate me for the rest of her life.”

“We had an agreement. I hold up my end of the deal. You hold up yours. Everybody is happy.”

“Everybody but Donna...”

“Do you realise what you’re risking for the sake of your feelings, for this girl? You renege, and she’ll die. You have no idea what’s at stake here!”

One of Richard’s eyebrows slowly rose. “Neither do you...” he countered. “Like I said... I’m done doing things your way. Touch Donna... and *you*... will die.” He ended the call.

“The *Little Shit!*” Forrest growled and paced the floor.

Eli looked up from his tablet. “What’s wrong?”

Forrest glared at him. “Your enhanced Euphoria did *not* work on the good doctor – again! Thundercloud is in the UK, and Triplet said he’s done. This whole crock of shit is coming unravelling. I don’t know why I ever trusted *any* of them.”

“I warned you unless we had a genetic match, the Euphoria may take some tweaking. It works on the majority of people. Perhaps there is something in Dr. Rigden and Dr. Kaliea’s DNA that’s blocking the effects of the pheromones.”

“And what about the Indian? All your magic potion did was piss him off. Even then he controlled his.”

Eli sighed. “As far as Dr. Thundercloud is concerned, it will never work on him. His immune system is too strong. It sees the threat and eliminates it. He is a lost cause. The other one is a different story. Get me a sample of his DNA and I can send the good doctor – as you put it – on the trip of his life.”

“If you can’t prevent him from remembering, it will be a lost cause. He loves the girl.”

Eli grinned. “So he says, but love is just an emotion, and emotions can be manipulated. You’ve already witnessed that.”

“You know, if they figure out what’s really going on, somebody is going to end up behind bars.”

Eli grinned again. “Ah – yes... but it will not be either of us.”

“What about Wilson and his wife?”

“Her release has been arranged. Wilson and his wife can be dealt with whenever you choose.”

“She can’t know!”

“She won’t,” Eli responded with confidence.

Forrest pushed a button on his cell phone. “It’s me. I need a sample of Sam Kaliea’s DNA or this is never going to work.”

“You’ll have it!”

Sam furrowed his brow. “We’re?” he mused, shook his head and went back in the room. “Donna is on her way. She said she got a little distracted.” A few minutes later, Donna tapped on the door and stuck her head in. Sam was pleased to see her until Richard stepped in right behind her and closed the door. Sam held out his hand. “Can I have the test results now, please?”

Donna frowned. “Oh, yes,” she responded, reaching into her pocket. “I’m so sorry, John. After seeing that newscast about Forrest, I was so upset I forgot all about it. Sam, did you know about this?”

Sam shared a wary glance with John. “Ah – yeah, sweetheart, I did.”

“And considering that I was gunned down in the cemetery, it didn’t occur to you that I might have wanted to know about that?”

“It would make sense to me,” Richard murmured and focused his attention on his feet, a sly grin turning up the corners of his mouth.

Sam cut his eyes at Richard and then turned his attention back to Donna. “I was going to tell you.”

“When? After I’d bumped into him on the street?”

“Sweetheart, Forrest was taken into the hotel on a gurney. The only place you might bump into him would be the morgue. I honestly didn’t think there was a reason to upset you.”

Richard propped his back against the door and folded his arms across his chest. He lifted his head and pressed his lips into a thin line. Sam was digging his own grave. He stepped closer to John.

Donna leaned close to Sam’s ear. “Oh really? We’ll settle this later!” She motioned to the form in his hand. “Is that proof enough to you that I know what I’m doing?”

Sam grinned. “OK, Smart Ass, rub it in.”

Donna narrowed her eyes and picked up the IV solution with the stem cells in it. “Oh, I intend to – every chance I get,” she said, connecting the tubing. “Are we ready to take her off the resuscitator, Dr. Kaliea?”

Sam arched an eyebrow. One side of his mouth turned up. “Yes, Dr. Rigden.”

Richard and John watched, while Sam and Donna took Melissa off the respirator. Donna checked Melissa’s pupils. Although they were responsive and the scars on her face were starting to heal, Melissa did not respond to verbal or physical stimuli. Sam was pleased that Melissa’s blood gases and electrolytes were back to normal. Good indications that the EHG was countering the cerbera poisoning as well.

Donna stepped closer to John. “Have you decided what you want to say to her when she wakes up?”

John smiled. "Oh yeah. I've been rehearsing that speech for a long time. Thank you Donna. If it hadn't been for you, and Jared, and Sam, I would have lost her."

Donna's eyes glossed. She swallowed hard. "You're welcome, John. I'm just glad we could help."

There was a knock on the door. Ian stuck his head in. "Sam, could I see you for a second?"

"I'll be right back," Sam said and left the room. "What is it Ian?"

"I don't know how to tell you this, but, I'm beginning to wonder if Tina had something to do with Linda Wilson's records disappearing off the system. She did walk off with the amniocentesis results I gave her."

"Yes, she did, but why would Tina do something like this, Ian? She's one of us."

"Who knows, Sam, but I can tell you this. I don't know when she did it, but the day she left, she cleared out her locker completely. Tina had no intention of coming back to work."

Sam frowned and scratched the back of his neck. "Do me a favour; don't mention this to anybody else, until I've had a chance to talk to Sir Richard." Sam turned to leave. "Ow!" he whirled and rubbed the back of his head. "What the bloody hell are you doing?"

"You're worrying too much." Ian held up the silver hair between his fingers. "You're going grey, Sam," Ian chuckled.

Sam frowned and reached for the door handle. The door opened. Richard and Donna stepped out and headed down the corridor. "Where are you going?" he called out.

"To find out who released Linda Wilson."

Sam ran his hand through his hair. "Oh shit!" he hissed.

Donna whirled. "What is it?"

Sam studied her eyes for a few seconds. "I did," he groaned.

Richard raised an eyebrow and waited. Donna stared at Sam in bemusement. "You did?" she echoed.

"Yes, Donna. I discharged Linda, but I can explain."

"I'll bet," Donna snorted.

Richard stopped at the lift and turned. “Are you coming, pet?”

Donna forced the air from her lungs. “Yeah, I’m coming.”

Sam grabbed her elbow. “Now where are you going?”

Donna moved his hand out of the way. “Upstairs.”

“Why?”

“I don’t have a patient. I was hired to work in the genetics lab. You don’t need me here anymore. You’ve got everything under control, Sam. Oh! Don’t forget to run another set of tests on Missy in an hour and let me know the results. I need them for my research.”

Richard rested his hand at the small of her back and guided her into the lift. He flashed Sam a condescending grin as the doors slid together.

“This is why I stayed single,” Sam groaned to himself. “Women are too fucking complicated.”

Chapter 52

Gary looked up as Richard and Donna stepped through the door to the genetics lab. “What are you doing back up here?”

“I don’t have a patient anymore. Despite my concerns about Linda and her baby, Sam went over my head and released her. If you don’t want me here, I’ll be perfectly happy to....”

Gary held up his hand. “No, please, be my guest.”

Donna went into the back and started working. She reached for her purse. As she opened the flap, a plain white envelope fell out onto the floor. Donna took out the sample of Euphoria Richard had bought her and laid it on the desk. She bent down and picked up the letter, turning it over. There was nothing on it. Her curiosity had been peaked.

Using her nail file, Donna opened the letter and pulled out a folded document. She scanned through the short message. She slowly narrowed her eyes and tightened her jaw. “This is so childish.” She paused briefly and read through it again. “How long are we going to play this game, before you realise it’s not working?” she scoffed. “You’re not scaring me!” She crammed the document back in the envelope and stuffed it in her purse.

Shaking her head in bemusement, Donna picked up the tiny crystal vial of shimmering blue perfume and held it up, allowing the sunlight from the window to pass through it. The liquid seemed to glow and pulsate as if it had a life of its own. She carefully pulled the top off and sniffed it for the first time. She twisted her nose and made a face. There was nothing pleasant or alluring about it. The odour reminded her of a cross between blood and dead fish.

“Planning on trying some of that?” Richard asked as he reached for the last dish of the cultured stem cells.

Donna jumped. “No! It’s repulsive Richard! Why would I want to put something on me that stinks of dead fish. Unless,

of course, I was trying to attract the seagulls. Have you smelled it straight from the bottle?"

"No, but it certainly smelled good on the people I've given it to. Especially on Joyce, but not so much on Ruth."

Donna's eyes widened in surprise. She held the bottle under his nose. "Smell it then!"

Richard furrowed his brow and turned up his nose. He took the vial and lightly whiffed it under his nose again. "You're right. It does smell slightly of dead fish."

Donna's eyes twinkled. "That suggests to me that it must have some kind of organic or synthetic biomatter in its composition."

Richard's eyebrows shot up. "Are you suggesting that it's alive?"

Donna grinned. "Why not?"

"That *would* account for its fluidic mobility," Richard agreed.

"Wanna help me find out what it's made of?"

"Sure," Richard smiled. "Get things set up and I'll help you as soon as I've harvested these. If you're really nice to me, I might even take you to the carnival tonight."

Donna furrowed her brow. "Carnival?"

"Yes. There's a carnival on the seafront at Whitley Bay. I'm surprised Sam hasn't mentioned it to you."

Donna frowned. "It seems there's a lot Sam hasn't mentioned to me. Maybe I misinterpreted the meaning of my dream," she mused.

Richard studied her eyes. "What dream, Donna?"

"Oh, nothing – never mind. I was just thinking out loud. You wouldn't be interested in that psychic stuff. Sam wasn't. He laughed at me."

"Then why don't you share it with me. I may not put a lot of belief in it, but I promise not to laugh. Who knows? Together, we may be able to figure it out. If we can't, I know someone who might be able to help."

"Who would that be? A former girlfriend?"

Richard grinned. "As a matter of fact..."

Donna held up her hand. "Never mind. I've had enough of dealing with former girlfriends. Every woman in the Centre either hates me or avoids me because I'm with Sam."

"Probably because you're stealing their action. You don't think he's stopped seeing those women, do you?" Donna narrowed her eyes. Richard held up his hand. "OK – forget I said that. It was a cheap shot."

"Yes, Richard, it was, and I've already told you how I feel about that."

"So will you let me take you?"

Donna sighed. "It depends on what kind of explanation Sam offers me about going over my head and releasing one of my patients. Is that good enough for you?"

Richard softly smiled and brushed the back of his fingers down her cheek. "I can deal with that."

Sir Richard stopped by Melissa's room on his way to his office. John told him what Donna and Sam had said about Melissa's progress. He was pleased, but John could tell something was bothering him. "I appreciate your sending the troops out to guard the old man," Sir Richard chuckled. "But, whether you realise it or not, I am capable of looking out for myself."

John arched an eyebrow. The corners of his mouth turned up in a cheesy grin. Sir Richard softly laughed and held up a hand. "OK – most of the time," he added.

"Have the men run Tina down?"

Sir Richard closed his eyes, leaned back in his chair and exhaled. "Yes, John."

"What did she say?"

Sir Richard raised his head and locked his eyes on John's. "She's not talking. Is she?" John guessed.

Sir Richard kept his eyes locked on John's and slowly shook his head. "She was probably drilled not to."

"Tina's dead, John." Sir Richard handed John a copy of the police report. "The DVD is footage from the security cameras

tracing Tina from her apartment where she got in her car and drove to Clive Street in North Shields. Her body was found in a derelict factory there, along with the heroine kit.”

John opened the manila folder and read through the report. He looked up and frowned. “You’ve got to be kidding me – overdose? Of cocaine? This sounds highly unlikely,” he scoffed. “If Tina had been doing recreational drugs it would have shown up in her drug screening.”

“See, that’s what I thought. But... I suppose, with her being a lab tech, she could have faked her test results. The problem is I can’t find any evidence suggesting she was a user.”

“Well... her strange behaviour and then Linda Wilson’s medical records disappearing the same time Tina did....?”

“I know John. It looks highly suspicious to me, too. That’s why I’m going to suggest to Sam that he check with forensics and see what he can find out. Maybe he can get us some samples.”

“How did Gary take this?” John asked.

“I haven’t told him yet. I have to tie up a few loose ends. Because of me Sam is not in a good position with Donna. He rang me and said she’d found out that Linda had been released. What impressed me was Sam admitted to her that it was him who turned Linda loose. Donna is pretty pissed off with him right now. On one hand, that’s not a bad thing.”

“Then maybe you should just let it go.”

“No way. I’ve kept enough secrets from Donna already. She’s got her mother’s temper, and you remember how determined Marie could be when she wanted to know something.”

One side of John’s mouth turned up. “I seem to remember you getting a few red cheeks from time to time.”

Sir Richard grinned and rubbed his cheek. “I loved fighting with Marie. She used to get so mad at me that you could almost see the red sparks dancing in her eyes. God she was sexy!” Sir Richard stood and patted John’s shoulder. “Anyway, I’ve

asked Sam and Gary and Donna to meet me in my office. I thought I'd kill two birds with one stone."

"Do you want me there?"

"No. I think we can handle this on our own. You stay and keep an eye on that beauty in the bed," he motioned with his head.

John smiled. "Thank you, Sir. I'll make it up to you when this is over."

"Oh – you can bet on it, Old Friend," Sir Richard chuckled and headed for the private lift.

Sam was in Sir Richard's office when Donna and Gary walked in. Gary raised an eyebrow at Sam. "If you two are going to start fighting, maybe I'd better sit in the middle."

Sam studied Donna's eyes. "I'm not going to fight," he responded.

"John has taught me how to take care of myself," Donna grinned and took the chair between them.

Sam leaned his mouth close to her ear. "I'm sorry about Linda, sweetheart, but I was under orders. You walked away without letting me explain."

"I'm sorry, Sam. I have issues with lies. Sir Richard said he could clear the air between us, so I'm here. Let's just leave it at that, for now - OK?"

"Can I request one thing?"

"What?" she asked, not looking at him.

Sam held out his hand. Gary glanced at them out the corner of his eye. Donna cut her eyes at his outstretched hand. Turning her head slightly, she impassively stared into his eyes. *Jared wouldn't even consider forgiving me. You seem so sincere. Can I be that cold to you?* Richard's words echoed through her head. *'Sam will never give you what you want Donna. It's not in him. He's afraid of commitment.'* How can you be afraid of commitment and share a daughter with me? You seemed so happy with her – we seemed happy. How can that be unless the man with the dancing aqua eyes is actually

Richard? But if that's the case, why can't I feel for him what I feel for you? Yet, if I were where I wanted to be, I wouldn't be with you or Richard. Oh this is so confusing. Chance and choice Donna.

Sam waited patiently. No matter how she felt about Richard or Sam, Donna couldn't forget the little girl with long black hair. She couldn't turn her back on her daughter. Cautiously, she laced her fingers with his. Sam breathed a sigh of relief and lifted the back of her hand to his lips; tenderly kissing it.

Donna faced forward, seemingly unaffected by his relief. She swallowed hard and sighed.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," Sir Richard said, closing the door behind him. He sat in his chair, stretched his arms across the desk and laced his fingers. He glanced at Sam and Donna's hands and then directed his attention to Gary. "We have a couple of things to cover, but Gary, this will likely hit you the hardest." Gary's eyes widened. He grabbed the arms of his chair as he waited. "Tina's dead, Son," Sir Richard began and slid the manila folder across the desk.

Sam's mouth dropped open. Donna let go of his hand and turned in her chair to face Gary. She rested her hand over his arm. "I'm so sorry, Gary."

Gary's eyes glossed as he slowly opened the folder. The first thing he saw was a photograph taken by forensics when Tina was found. Gary shook his head.

Sam reached across Donna. "Do you mind if I..." he motioned to the folder. Gary passed it to him. Sam opened it and started scanning through the report.

Sir Richard continued. "Tina's body was found in a derelict factory on Clive Street in North Shields. According to the police report, she died from a drug overdose. They found a cocaine kit in the glove box of her car, parked outside the factory. As you can see, the tourniquet was still on her arm. The empty syringe was found near her hand where she'd apparently dropped it."

Sam looked up. “Sir Richard, it’s a lie. Tina didn’t take drugs. I would have fired her if she had.”

“What about the possibility of Tina changing the results of her drug test?” Sir Richard asked.

“No,” Sam shook his head adamantly. “I had a situation with an orderly, not long after I took over the infirmary. From that point on, because the wellbeing of the patients and employees in this complex are my responsibility, I do the drug screening tests myself.”

“I appreciate that, Sam,” Sir Richard smiled. “I had a feeling you would say that, and I have to agree. In light of the fact that Forrest is prancing in our paddock, I don’t think Tina died of a drug overdose. That’s why I’d like you, as Tina’s immediate supervisor, to contact forensics and see if you can work something out with them, so they’ll let you examine the body. I’ll back you up, if necessary.”

Sir Richard turned his attention back to Gary. “Son... I did some research and as far as our records are concerned, Tina didn’t have any living relatives. Did she mention anything about her family to you?”

Gary’s cheeks showed some colour. He tucked his chin. “Sir Richard... I have to admit, Tina and I – well – we didn’t do a lot of *talking*, if you know what I mean.”

Donna pressed her lips into a thin line and cut her eyes at Sam, who smiled knowingly back at her. It embarrassed Gary to admit his sexual prowess in front of Donna.

Sir Richard nodded. “I figured as much,” he sighed. “In that case, as you know, in South Korea, which is where Tina was from, cremation is favoured to burial, but I’m going to leave that up to you to decide. If you want to have a regular funeral and graveside ceremony for Tina, I’ll arrange it and take care of the costs.”

Gary swallowed the lump in his throat. “Thank you, Sir Richard. I’ll give it some thought and let you know.”

“OK, Gary. With that out of the way, since the other business concerns Sam and Donna, I’ll let you get back to your work.”

Gary stood. Donna held his hand. “We’ll talk in a little while.” Gary nodded and left.

Sir Richard turned his attention to Donna. “I’m sorry you found out the way you did about Sam releasing Linda Wilson from the infirmary. It wasn’t planned. When I found out Forrest was in the UK, I knew he would go after Wilson and his wife. Like you, Kevin Wilson is not my favourite person, but I’m not going to take that out on his wife and an innocent child....”

Donna opened her mouth to protest; Sir Richard held up his hand. “Before you get your knickers in a twist, let me finish. Linda is still your patient and you’ll still be able to care for her and treat her. As I said, Kevin Wilson is not one of my favourite people and quite frankly, I don’t trust him. For that reason, Kevin and Linda will be living in my guesthouse, so I can keep an eye on him, and you can continue to treat Linda.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “Can I speak now?”

“Please... do so.”

“I can treat Mrs. Wilson from a genetic point of view, Sir Richard, but I’m not a neonatologist, which is who should be treating her for her pregnancy. In fact, to be truthful, for the sake of Linda’s health, the baby should be aborted as soon as possible. If I’m right, even if she carries it full term, the baby will never be normal, Sir Richard. As I see it, whoever treated her in the States should be sued for negligence and malpractice. There’s no way this kind of thing wouldn’t have shown up in a standard blood test. I found out through the ultrasound, which is why I did the amniocentesis. To make sure I hadn’t made a mistake in my judgement, but since the results disappeared, I didn’t get that chance.”

“Will it make any difference if we go ahead and let her try to carry it to term?”

Donna frowned. "Yes, Sir Richard! I believe it will. I know how much Linda wanted this baby. She had been trying to conceive since I took over the research department. For some reason or the other, she couldn't get pregnant. I offered to see if I could figure out why, but Mr. Wilson refused. He said if it was meant to be it would happen. He didn't want to subject Linda to more fertility tests. Linda was willing, but he wasn't. Personally, and this is just my opinion, I don't think Mr. Wilson wanted this baby, as much as Linda did."

"Why do you think that?"

"A conversation Mr. Wilson and I had, not long before Jared and I got together. He told me he was concerned that he was too old to start a family. He was afraid he might not be around to help Linda raise the baby. I believe he had a trust fund set aside for that purpose when they found out Linda was pregnant. Anyway, I didn't want to talk to the Wilsons about this until I had medical evidence to back up my diagnosis."

Sir Richard sat back in his chair. "I want you and Sam to make a list of equipment and supplies you'll need to treat Linda and Missy. John and I have talked at length about this. For security reasons, as soon as she's stable enough, John wants to move her to the Hall. Apart from a few odds and ends, the West Wing is empty. We'll alter it to be a temporary lab and infirmary. I would be better satisfied with the genetics team working from there, anyway."

Donna looked incredulous. "You're going to move all our equipment to the Hall?"

"No, Donna. That would be too inconvenient. I'll purchase new equipment and supplies. The Centre cannot be secured as easily as the Hall can be, and is, for that fact. The only vulnerability is the River Tyne, but I'm taking measures to secure that, as well. The local environmentalists will not be pleased, but it's necessary. At any rate, I wanted you to know that Sam was not to blame. He was acting under my orders, so don't take it out on him."

Donna grinned slightly. "I'll try to remember that, but, unfortunately, Sam and I have other issues to deal with."

Sam frowned. "We do?"

Donna studied his eyes. "Yes, we do. Sir Richard, when did you plan on making the move to the Hall?"

"I'd like to do it as soon as possible. Some of it is already being done. It's the specialised equipment and supplies that I need a list for. I was hoping to have everything set up and running by the weekend. Why? Is there some kind of problem that would prevent us from moving then?"

"No, Sir. It's just that – well – this is going to sound a little childish of me, but Richard said there's a carnival going on tonight at Whitley Bay, and I'd kind of like to go. I haven't been to a carnival for a long time. Jared took me to Coasters – n- Castles in Phoenix and we had a ball with..." Donna's voice choked. She swallowed hard and continued. "With Beth, our daughter – I mean – Jared's daughter. I could use a little fun time, if you know what I mean?"

Sir Richard pursed his lips. "You know with Forrest here, it will be risky."

"I know that, Sir Richard, but with Richard and your security men, surely it would be all right for a few hours. Please, I really need this."

"Hang on a second," Sam spoke up. "Were you planning on going to the carnival with Richard?"

Donna pressed her lips to a thin line, suppressing a grin. "He is the one who asked me to go, Sam. You haven't said anything to me about the carnival."

Sam frowned; his eyes widened. "Well, no, I hadn't because I figured it would be too risky – as Sir Richard has suggested. You don't think for one second that Forrest came to the UK empty handed – do you?"

"No, of course not. If you're afraid that it's too risky, that's fine. Richard said he would take me."

Sam's eyebrows shot up. "Oh no. If you're going to the carnival with anyone, it will be me. Sir Richard, will it be safe enough?"

"I'll make you a deal, Donna," Sir Richard responded. "If Missy is well enough for John to go with you, then I'll agree to it."

Donna narrowed her eyes. "You'll agree to it? Does that mean if you say no then I can't go? Sir Richard, don't start that again. I don't like being ordered around by anyone, or told who I can and can't spend time with," she added, directing her attention to Sam. "If I want to go to the carnival with Richard, and he'll take me, I'll go. I told you before we decided to live together that this was a no strings relationship, and I meant it. I am not ready for a serious or a monogamous relationship. If you start trying to cramp my style, our partnership will abruptly end." Donna stood to leave. "Sir Richard, if you don't have anything else to discuss with me, I'd like to go now."

"No, Donna. I'm done. You're free to go."

"I'll have the list ready for you shortly."

"Donna..." Sam groaned and held her wrist.

Donna pulled her hand away. "Sam... don't! If you wanted to take me to the carnival, you should have asked me instead of assuming you were the only person I would go with." Donna left.

Sam groaned and shoved a hand through his dark hair. "Sometimes that woman can be incredibly stubborn."

Sir Richard grinned. "She gets it naturally. Her mother was the same. Go on," he said with a wave and chuckled. "Go talk to her. Trust me. She's worth it. Just don't forget to sort this thing out with Tina."

"I won't. Thank you, Sir Richard," Sam said and hurried to the door. What Sir Richard had said about Donna hadn't registered. He took out his cell phone and rang her. "Donna, where are you?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"So I can grovel at your feet. I need to ask you something."

“So ask...”

Sam groaned. “I don’t want to ask you like this. Come on, sweetheart. Where are you?”

“I’m standing on the roof, preparing to jump to my doom. Where do you think I am? I’m on my way to the genetics lab. You know – that place where I work. I’m going to talk to Richard and tell him that I accept his invitation to the carnival. Now, if you’ll excuse me....”

“No! Don’t! Sweetheart, please let me take you to the carnival. If I’d known you wanted to go I would have already asked you. I was concerned about being out in the open, but if you really want to go, then go with me.”

“I have a better idea. I half-promised Richard I would go with him, why don’t we ask him to go with us.”

“You want me to ask Richard to go with us to the carnival?” Sam asked incredulously.

“No. I’ll do it.”

“Well, there shouldn’t be a problem then,” Sam scoffed. “He’d probably jump off the building with you if you asked him.”

Donna softly chuckled. “He probably wouldn’t go to that extreme, but he would do pretty much anything I asked him to. So that’s the deal. If you want to take me, Richard goes, too.”

Sam’s eyes twinkled. “He can’t. I only have two seats in my car.”

“Yes, but Richard’s has room.” She knew Sam was looking for excuses.

“Ah – come on sweetheart! You can’t possibly expect me to agree to this.”

“No, Sam. I don’t, but that’s my final offer. Make your mind up, cause I’m on my way to tell him now.”

“Do you take stubborn pills?”

Donna grinned. “I’ll see you when you get to the lab. I’ll be in the back. That way Gary and Richard won’t have to see you grovelling at my feet.” She ended the call.

Chapter 53

John was so engrossed in his book that he hadn't noticed Melissa's blue eyes staring at him, patiently waiting for him to look up and notice her. He casually glanced over the top of his Kindle and laid it on the small table. "Missy?"

Melissa followed him with her eyes.

John took her hand. "Welcome back, sweetheart."

Melissa looked up at him; her pupils dilated. She didn't think she would ever see his face again. She didn't think she would ever see *anyone's* face again. When Liu whispered he was giving her something to end her pain, Melissa never expected to wake up. She desperately wanted to say something to John, but couldn't.

John unlocked his cell phone. "Sam, she's awake!"

"What?"

"Missy is awake," he choked and pushed the hair back from her forehead. "I'm staring at a pair of the most beautiful blue eyes in the World."

"I'll tell Donna. We'll be there shortly." Sam locked his cell phone, grabbed Donna's hand and led her to the front. "That was John. Missy is awake."

"Richard. Gary. Are you coming?"

Gary gave Donna a half-way smile. "I'll be down later."

"Are you sure you won't come with us to the carnival tonight?"

"No, D, but thanks for the offer. I think I'd like to be a lone tonight. I need to decide what to do about Tina. I know her people favour cremation, but I'd kind of like to bury her instead. That way, if we ever find out who her family are, I can at least point them at the grave."

Donna nodded. "OK. I'll see you later, then."

Richard grabbed his tablet computer and followed Sam and Donna to the private lift.

Sam tapped on the door and eased it open. John looked up. "Look sweetheart. You've got visitors."

Sam, Donna, and Richard entered the room. Richard closed the door behind them. John attempted to move. Melissa tightened her grip on his hand. "I'm not leaving, honey. I'm just moving so they can examine you." Melissa gradually released his hand.

"G'day, Miss Hart," Sam said in a strong Australian accent.

Donna stepped closer. "Hi, Missy. I want you to blink for me. OK? Once for yes. Twice for no."

Melissa blinked.

"Do you remember me?"

Melissa blinked.

Donna smiled. "Good. Are you in any pain?"

Melissa blinked twice.

"Do you know who you are?"

Melissa blinked.

"Do you know where you are?"

Melissa blinked twice.

"Well, that's understandable. You were unconscious when you got here." Donna motioned to John. "Do you know who that is?"

Melissa's pupils dilated. She blinked, smiling with her eyes.

Sam softly smiled. "Since you're blinking, I won't shine my light in those beautiful blue eyes. I do need to test your reflexes, though." Sam pricked her finger with a probe.

Melissa winced and pulled her finger back.

"That's good. Now for the other end." Sam scraped the probe across the bottom of her foot. Melissa moved her foot and clenched her toes. "Good. Now comes the hard part." He picked Melissa's leg up and cupped her heel in his hand. "All right, sweetheart. I want you to push my hand as hard as you can."

Melissa concentrated and strained. Sam felt a slight resistance. "That won't win marathons, but it's a start."

Sam jotted down some orders on her chart and tucked it under his arm. He unlocked his cell phone. "Sir Richard, it's Sam. You might want to break out the Champagne. Missy's awake and she's responding to physical and verbal stimuli."

"I'll be there shortly...."

Richard stepped forward, bent his head and kissed her forehead. "Welcome back, Beautiful." He placed his tablet computer near her hand. "You might find this more useful than imitating a Christmas light. I've loaded a text to speech program for you. All you have to do is type out a response and press enter. Can you manage that OK?"

"Yes," a synthesised voice responded. "Thank you, Ricky. Where is your father?"

"Sir Richard is on his way, Missy," Donna interjected.

Sam walked next to Donna. He wrapped an arm around her waist and guided her out of earshot. "I'm impressed," he said in a quiet voice. "At this rate, I expect nothing short of a full recovery."

Donna rested her head against his shoulder. "I told you the EHG worked fast. We should probably take her casts off. That way she won't have to waste so much energy typing out her responses. I'm sure it's exhausting to her."

Sam did an ultrasound to assess the healing stage of Melissa's broken bones. The small temperature change caused by the ultrasound produced a surprising effect with the EHG. Sam's mouth gaped. He pointed to the screen. "Is the EHG doing this?"

Donna smiled. "Yes." She, Sam, and Richard literally watched the broken bones in Melissa's jaw knitting back together. The other broken bones were healing at the same accelerated rate. All that was left of the cuts on her face were thin red lines. Melissa wouldn't have to deal with the emotional trauma of permanent scarring.

There was a tap on the door, and Sir Richard stepped inside. Sam and Donna were in the process of removing the cast from Melissa's neck and chin. They'd already removed the cast from her arm. "Mind if I join the party?" Sir Richard asked and stepped closer. He waited until Sam had unwired Melissa's jaw. Sam and Donna stepped toward the foot of the bed. "Hi Missy. Welcome back. I thought I'd lost you this time."

"I thought you had too, Sir," Melissa slightly smiled. "Where am I?" she asked, her voice weak.

"You're in the infirmary at the Centre in Newcastle."

"I know you want to debrief me, Sir Richard, but I'm afraid I'll have to let you down. I can't remember anything that happened after they took me to Forrest's penthouse. One of them held me down while the other one gave me some kind of injection, and it made my head feel fuzzy. I tried to fight it, but in the end..." she swallowed hard. "They beat me. The pain became so unbearable, I just gave in and let them do whatever they wanted to me. The last thing I remember was a man's voice, whispering in my ear that he was going to end my pain. Kevin Wilson sold me out. He told me to go back to my desk and act as if nothing had happened. Forrest had been acting really strange, lately. He must have intercepted my phone calls with you."

John's face reddened with rage. "I'll make that son of a bitch pay, honey."

Melissa's eyes glossed. "I'm so sorry, John. I tried to fight them off, but they..."

"It's OK, Missy," Sir Richard interjected. "We know what they did to you. You don't have to go through this again." He glanced up at the others. "Whatever happened wasn't your fault."

"How did I get here?"

"When Mildred couldn't reach you on your cell phone, and Gary couldn't locate you with VICi's satellite system, I sent... someone in. When they got you back to the UK, we didn't expect you to live."

“Sam and Donna said I have broken bones. They just feel itchy and sore.”

Donna softly smiled. “It will be that way for a while, but you shouldn’t feel any pain. If you do tell us, and we’ll give you something for it.”

“Is she ready to travel, then?” John asked. “I want to get her home as soon as possible.”

Donna reached into her pocket. “Oh! That reminds me. Here’s the list you asked for, Sir Richard.”

Sir Richard scanned through the items. “OK, petal. I mean Donna. I’m sorry. I have to keep reminding myself that you don’t want to be called petal anymore.” He folded the list and put it in his jacket pocket. “I’ll give this to Mildred.”

“So, how about it Sam. Can I take her home?”

Sam rested his chin on the top of Donna’s head. “As far as I can tell, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t, John. In my expert opinion, Donna was right. This is nothing short of a medical miracle. Triplet International could market this stuff and make billions.”

Donna frowned. “This is *not* about personal gain, Sam.”

Sir Richard arched an eyebrow. “This will *never* go on market, Sam. Nor will its discovery *ever* be published.”

Sam grinned. “You can’t blame a guy for dreaming.”

“Can I get dressed?” Melissa asked. “This thing you call a gown is a little draughty in the back.”

Donna laughed. “In that case...” Sam spoke up, “... why don’t we get out of here and give Missy a little privacy. I’ll go make my final report – at least as far as the official infirmary is concerned – and sign her release papers.”

Melissa held out her hand to Donna. “Thank you for giving me my life back.”

Donna squeezed her hand and smiled. “You’re welcome, Missy, but I’m not the one you should be thanking. Jared got you out. If you do get a chance to thank him personally, thank him for me, too.”

“I heard, Donna. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s OK, Missy. I’m surviving. In fact, my boyfriend, over there…” she said, motioning with her head to Sam, “…is taking me to a carnival tonight at Whitley Bay.”

Melissa frowned and glanced at Richard. She turned her attention back to Donna, confused. “You’re with Sam?” She crooked her finger. Donna leaned closer. “Is it serious?”

Donna grinned. “We’re together, but I’m still deciding. I’ll see you later, Missy.” Sam and Donna left.

Richard followed them out into the corridor. “We’re taking my car to Whitley Bay – right?”

Sam groaned. “I guess so. Unless you want to ride in the boot. My car wasn’t geared for families.”

Richard glanced at Donna; remembering what Ruth had told him in the cafeteria. “So I’ve noticed.”

Donna softly smiled. “Who’s your date?”

“With so many flowers in the field to pick from it’s hard to choose. With the prettiest one already spoken for,” Richard grinned, “I’m taking Joyce.”

Sam swallowed hard and scratched the back of his neck. “This should be interesting,” he muttered and led Donna to the private lift.

Richard shook his head and followed them. “That it will, Sam,” he chuckled.

“Missy, I have something to tell you before you find out the hard way. Forrest and Wilson are in the UK. In fact, Kevin and Linda are in my guest house.”

“But, don’t worry, Love,” John spoke up, coming to her side. “Forrest won’t get anywhere near you. Him or that traitorous bastard.”

“No, they won’t,” Sir Richard agreed. “I’ll set my private watchdog on them.”

Melissa swallowed hard. “You must mean Jared,” she made it a statement.

Sir Richard frowned. “I thought you said you didn’t remember.”

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of Donna. Jared and I talked for a while before we left. I was in and out, so I’m not sure of everything. I would remember his smile anywhere. He’s not... completely *normal*, Sir Richard. Does Donna know that?”

Sir Richard glanced at John. “What do you mean, Missy?”

“It may have been the drug playing tricks on my mind, and I don’t want you to think I’m crazy, but...” she broke off, glancing from Sir Richard, to John and back to Sir Richard. “...I could have sworn that Jared’s eyes were... red. Glowing red – in fact,” she added, unsure of her own words. “He’s the only one who came in to rescue me, wasn’t he?”

Chapter 54

Using his extra-sweet-playboy charm, Sam contacted Jasmine at the pathology department at the Royal Victoria Infirmary. Jasmine had been given strict orders not to release any information on Tina Philips death until the police had ruled it out as a homicide.

Jasmine told Sam, considering the rather cold treatment he'd given her lately that she would not risk her job for him again. However, if Sam agreed to her terms, Jasmine, as always, was willing to negotiate the issue. Seeing how easily Donna's mood and attitude toward him could change, Sam didn't want to risk pissing her off again. He sensed all Donna needed was a reason to doubt him and it would be over for them.

Exercising his connections as a major contributor to the Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, as promised, Sir Richard intervened. Instead of speaking with Jasmine's supervisor, Sir Richard spoke to the head of administrations and arranged for Sam and Donna to meet with Jasmine and examine Tina's body the next morning.

Although the guest house was a fair distance from Triplet Hall, upon hearing Melissa confirm that Wilson was the one who betrayed her, John wasn't comfortable with Melissa staying at the Hall. In fact, John wasn't comfortable with the genetics team being there either. He never trusted Wilson, and he trusted him even less now. John knew, sooner or later, Wilson would betray them again. Next time, they might not be so lucky.

John and Sir Richard talked at length about this situation and decided if Jared and Juanita agreed to take over the infirmary at the complex, perhaps it was better for Melissa to be taken there.

Jared, of course agreed, as did Juanita, but only until she left the UK. Jared stood firm on his decision not to leave until Forrest was no longer an immediate threat to Donna. He would have preferred that the threat be removed altogether, but Sir Richard wasn't ready to take that step. Like Jared, Sir Richard preferred allies instead of enemies and only killed as a last resort. Despite his misgivings about Jared, Sir Richard trusted Jared's professional judgement.

If the worse came to the worst, Sir Richard would make the move to the complex and Sam and Jared would either learn to tolerate each other or Jared would have to use his enhanced speed and senses to avoid Donna. Regardless of Jared's reservations, Sir Richard had decided, he'd had enough. If Jared and Donna were meant to meet, nothing on this earth could stop it. That much Marie had taught Sir Richard long ago.

Because of Sam's position as head of the medical department, Sir Richard told him of their plans to take Melissa to the complex. He left it up to Sam to tell Donna. Sam told her that with Wilson staying at the guest house, John didn't want Melissa living at the Hall, so she was taken to a secure location. Because Melissa was the first human Donna had used the EHG on, she wasn't pleased with the decision, but accepted that it was not her judgement call.

Although she'd assisted with Melissa's surgery and postoperative care, Melissa was Sam's patient, just as Linda Wilson was hers. However, in order to appease Donna, Sam had to promise her he would take her to see Melissa after they'd finished at the RVI, in the morning. Sir Richard, of course, was not happy with Sam's decision.

"*Sam...*" Sir Richard forced through his teeth, "...by promising to take Donna to visit Missy, you have put me in an *extremely* difficult position. You knew Jared had refused to see Donna, and you knew Juanita didn't want to see Donna either. Now both Jared and Juanita will basically have to be put under

house arrest until Donna leaves the complex. What were you thinking?"

"I know, Sir Richard, but you don't understand how stubborn Donna can be. I didn't have a choice. It was either take her to see Missy or lie to Donna. Frankly, I'd rather risk upsetting Jared and Juanita than Donna. Besides, why is he doing this? Why won't he face her and end it? If Jared cares so much for Donna, why keep her guessing?"

Sir Richard gathered his laptop case and other things and prepared to leave. "Look Sam. I'll talk to Jared. I'll let you know something tonight or in the morning. I have other business to attend to at the complex. Depending on what time I get finished, I may spend the night there instead of coming back to the Hall, but I promise to let you know something before you go to the RVI. I have to go," he said, ushering Sam out the door. "If I don't see you tonight, be careful. Have a good time, and whatever you do, you and Richard keep an eye out for trouble. With Forrest at death's door, I doubt we need to worry about him, but that doesn't mean that he won't have someone else do his dirty work."

"OK, Sir Richard. Thanks."

"Don't thank me yet. Jared may disagree, but I'll talk to him," he said and stepped in the private lift.

As soon as Melissa had changed clothes and was ready to travel, she and John met McGowan and Sir Richard on the roof. Once they'd boarded the chopper, John took his place at the pilot's seat, and he and McGowan flew them to the complex.

Sam and Donna left shortly after Sir Richard and John had left with Melissa. Richard followed Gary out to the car park. As soon as he was in his car, Richard snapped his cell phone in the car cradle, popped in his Bluetooth ear buds and pressed a button on his steering wheel. "Hi, it's me. Is everything set up for tonight?"

“Yes, Richard. I received your text. You will owe me big time for this.”

“Yes, and I will compensate you big time for this.” Richard grinned. “As I always have.”

“What makes you think this woman will listen to me? You don’t take my talents seriously. Why would she, and why are you doing this?”

“Because Donna means more to me than anything, and she’s not like other women. Donna is... well... she’s different.”

“Ah! I get it now. She is the one you told me of. The one who has dreams of the future.”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe these dreams?”

One side of Richard’s mouth turned up. “I don’t need to. I just need Donna to think I believe. I happen to know for a fact that Sam thinks Donna is a little loony, when it comes to her so-called psychic abilities. Sam doesn’t believe in any of that shit, so he’ll think we’re wasting our time. That’s why you’ve got to make this your best performance yet.”

“And you promise to take me back to Bucharest, so that I may spread my father’s ashes over the River Danube?”

Richard chuckled. “I will personally fly you back on one of our private jets.”

“This woman – Donna – she must mean a lot to you.”

“More than you could possibly imagine.”

“Bring her to my tent. I will tell her fortune. All who hear will believe, or their souls will burn black in their chests.”

Richard laughed. “Yeah, yeah, yeah – OK. I’ll remember to borrow John’s silver crucifix, before I leave the Hall.”

“Had you been wearing it the last time you came to my bed, the silver would have melted around your neck.”

Richard grinned. “Days gone by, Daria. My twilight activities have ceased. I’m a converted man now.”

“Yes, of course you are,” she taunted. “And I believe that about as much as I believed my mother’s claims that she was descended from the same bloodline as Isis.”

“Help me get Sam away from Donna and I’ll produce documentation to back her claims,” he joked. “I have to go sweetheart. We’ll see you tonight. Remember, make this good.”

“I will remember, Richard....”

Donna stood in front of the mirror, brushing out her long hair. “Sam, what kind of rides will be at the carnival?”

Sam wrapped his arms around her waist and planted kisses up the left side of her neck. “Just standard twisting, turning, up down, forward back stuff, sweetheart. Why?”

“In that case, I’d better wear my hair in a ponytail. I can’t stand to have it flopping in my face.” She fastened it high on her head with a hair tie.

Sam turned her. “You can have it flopping in my face anytime you want to,” he said and kissed her.

There was a tap on the door. “Are you two about ready to go?” Richard called out. “I don’t want to keep Joyce waiting.”

Sam took Donna’s hand and opened the door. “Like you’ve ever cared about keeping *anyone* waiting,” Sam groaned.

After Jared had examined Melissa, John took her for a tour of the complex. While they were doing that, Sir Richard asked Jared and Juanita to join him in his office. Sir Richard sat back in his chair. “Jared, Juanita, I appreciate what you’re doing for me.”

“Like I told you, Sir Richard,” Jared responded. “I don’t mind helping.”

“Donna asked me to express her thanks to you for giving her what she needed to save Missy’s life. Donna wanted to thank you personally, but since you won’t see her, she asked me to tell you.”

“Does she know where we are?”

“No. I haven’t told her. She just knows you’re in the UK. There is a slight problem, however.”

Jared locked his eyes with Sir Richard’s and leaned forward. “What kind of problem?”

“As you might have guessed, Donna was upset when Sam told her we weren’t taking Missy to the Hall. I think Donna is concerned something might go wrong with the EHG.”

Jared frowned. “EHG?”

Sir Richard chuckled. “Enhanced Healing Gene - that’s what Donna is calling it.”

“Oh – I see – catchy title,” Jared laughed.

“It sounds like something Donna would come up with,” Juanita added.

“She hasn’t published this, has she?”

“No, Jared. Sam made the remark that Triplet International could market this stuff and make billions. Donna quickly reminded Sam that this was not about personal gain. No, Son, it won’t be published. At first, I thought she might be considering it, but despite what happened between you and Donna, she still protects your secret. All Donna has ever been interested in was saving lives, Jared.”

Jared swallowed hard. “I know, Sir Richard. You still haven’t told me what the problem is.”

“Donna wants to make sure Missy is OK. Sam had to promise her that he would bring her here and let her visit. We can handle this one of two ways. You can either face Donna or you and Juanita will have to remain in your quarters until she and Sam leave. Personally, I think you should talk to her, but it’s not my call. When we brought Donna here, my plans were to tell her what was going on, give her a tour, and let her decide whether or not she wanted her own quarters, or whether or not she wanted to remain with Sam as she is now. If you decide not to talk to her, I’ll forgo the tour, but you need to decide soon. Sam is bringing her in the morning after they examine Tina Philips body.”

“Her body?” Jared frowned. “Tina - that’s the lab tech I talked to at the Centre – correct?”

“Yes.”

“What happened to her?” Juanita asked.

“We suspect someone murdered her, but until Sam has done his examination, we won’t know for sure. At the moment, the police are treating it as an overdose of bad cocaine. The evidence suggests that it was an overdose, as well, but Sam insists Tina didn’t do drugs.”

“She could have faked her drug test results.”

“That’s what I thought, Jared, until I found out Sam did the drug screening tests himself. I may not always agree with what Sam does, but when it comes to running the infirmary, Sam has an iron hand. Since you and Juanita are part of the team now, you might as well know the rest. Donna is extremely concerned with Linda Wilson’s baby. She believes the baby should have been aborted long ago, which is surprising since Donna is pro-life.”

Jared frowned. “Why would Donna suggest Linda Wilson have an abortion?”

“The ultrasound she did on Linda showed that the baby’s internal organs were not developing at the same rate as its skeletal system. She also said that the medication Linda Wilson’s physician had been giving her had nothing to do with a kidney infection. Donna was surprised that Linda hadn’t already had a spontaneous abortion. Although she didn’t know why Linda’s physician would do it, Donna believed the drugs Linda had been taking were to prevent this from happening. She said Linda wasn’t having Braxton contraptions. What was actually happening was that Linda’s body was rejecting the malformed foetus.”

“Did she check this through an amniocentesis?”

“Yes, Jared, but the results of the test and Linda Wilson’s medical records disappeared from our system, altogether. Sam spoke to Ian Allen, another of his lab techs. Ian told him that he’d given the results to Tina Philips. Tina was supposed to

drop them off at the nurse's station, but we never heard from Tina again. That's when we found out she'd taken an overdose of cocaine. They found her body in a derelict factory at North Shields."

Juanita furrowed her brow. "Wasn't Tina Philips the girl Gary had been going with for the last few months?"

"Yes..." Sir Richard responded, "... and it's hit him pretty hard, too."

"But why would Tina steal the test results and then go to the trouble of wiping Linda's records from your system?"

Sir Richard softly groaned. "I don't know Jared, but I have a sneaky suspicion that whoever wanted those results kept quiet, was also the person who bumped Tina off."

"Then I would suggest doing another amniocentesis and this time have Donna do the test herself. That way there won't be any chance of the results falling into sticky hands."

"I would imagine Donna will talk to the Wilson's and see if Linda will agree to another amniocentesis. With Linda being in my guest house, it shouldn't be a problem. Now, at this point, I have to ask you a question, Jared. Do you think there's any possibility that Donna's EHG will be able to correct this kind of genetic abnormality?"

Jared grinned and glanced at Juanita. "Sir Richard, I'm not the one who would know that. I only carry the gene. Other than that, you would have to ask Donna."

"So you don't object to her using it again?"

Jared frowned. "Of course not, Sir Richard. I know I can trust Donna not to let this get out. I mean, I know eventually if she achieves her goal that it will get out – so to speak – but I know, even if Donna figures out what makes me tick, she will never reveal that secret to the World."

Sir Richard's eyebrows shot up. "So the tough attitude you used on her was another part of your front?"

Jared grinned again. "Sweetheart," he said, turning his attention to Juanita. "It looks like you and I will be under house arrest for a while tomorrow."

Sir Richard softly chuckled and shook his head. "I'll let Sam know. He will be pleased. He really does seem to care very deeply for Donna."

"Yeah – well," Jared scoffed. "Sometimes looks can be deceiving. Time will tell. If that's all, I'd like to go work on Richard's surprise for Donna."

"You mean the stage project?"

"Yeah. You'd be surprised how bad his memory was. If I'm here long enough and have the time, this is one project that will be done right."

"Should I give you a call when Sam and Donna head this way?"

Jared smiled his sexy crooked smile. "No need. Trust me, I'll know. Later, Sir Richard," he said and left.

"Now, Juanita, not that I'm trying to run you off, but when did you want to fly back to the States?"

"Soon, Sir Richard. I'm afraid when Forrest figures out I helped Jared rescue Melissa, the first thing he'll do is go after my mother."

"Yes, you're probably right, but when that happens, all he'll find is an empty room. I won't wait until the last minute to get either of you out."

Chapter 55

Having been to the carnival before and knowing what to expect, Joyce French-braided her long blonde hair. She glanced at her watch as she finished applying her makeup. Richard would be there to pick her up in five or ten minutes. Unlike his other dates, when he went out with Joyce, Richard was always punctual. She wondered why, when Richard was late for everything else, including picking up Donna, or so she'd said.

According to Tina and Mary, Richard was never punctual. When he wanted to do something, he didn't consider *anyone's* feelings. With Richard's status and wealth, he pretty much did what he wanted. She wondered if it were because his aristocratic father had spoiled him rotten. Probably, but did it matter? Joyce knew where she stood with Richard. The answer was easy – nowhere. Tonight wouldn't be any different.

Joyce shook her head in dismay as she checked her reflection in the mirror, turning her head from side to side. "Is that all I'm good for? A cheap fuck? Sam...it's all your fault," she softly chuckled. "I never should have fallen for the boy next door." She applied her last application of Euphoria.

The doorbell rang. Joyce hurried to the door. Her heart jumped to her throat. *God... not again!* She put on a plastic smile, accepted her parcel and thanked the deliveryman. She took her prize to the lounge. Gingerly, she set the small brown box on her coffee table, staring at it as though it might be a bomb. Her pulse thumped in her ears. "No!" she gasped and shook her head as she pushed the package to the middle of the table, refusing to open it.

Joyce's cell phone rang, giving her a start. Her hands shook. In her heart she knew, before she even turned it over. 'Unknown caller' flashed on the display. Covering her mouth with her other hand, she blinked to clear her vision. The cell phone continued to ring. "No!" she pushed through her

clenched teeth. “I won’t answer it!” she hissed and switched off her cell. She took the battery out and tossed it and her cell phone on the coffee table, next to the unopened parcel. Her apartment phone rang. Joyce’s breath caught. She took a couple of deep breaths to steady her nerves and pressed the button. The strange metallic voice began.

“You’re going out with the wrong person, Joyce.”

Joyce’s mouth gaped. “How in the hell did you get my landline number?”

There was laughter. “Do you think I am limited to wireless? If I wanted to, I could probably speak from your refrigerator, or the radio in your car. I have technology at my fingertips that would amaze you. That’s an extremely revealing top you’re wearing. I approve, especially without the bra. It shows off your better qualities, but if anyone sleeps in your bed tonight, it had better not be Richard, again.”

With anxious eyes, Joyce scanned her lounge; the curtains were drawn. “Where the fuck is the camera, you sick bastard?”

Ringing laughter filled her ears. “*Everywhere...*”

Joyce’s eyes filled with tears. “What do you want from me?” she choked.

“Haven’t I made myself clear? I want Sam away from Donna.”

“Why? Why is that so important to you?”

“He was meant for another but don’t get your hopes up, Joyce. It’s not you.”

“He doesn’t want me! What do you expect me to do – kill Donna?”

The voice tightened. “That, Little Bitch, would be the worst mistake you could ever make in your life. Your death would be slow and agonising. Imagine the most pain you’ve ever felt, and then multiply that tenfold. Now, shut up and listen, because as I estimate it, you have about three minutes before the doorbell will ring again.”

“Then... I won’t open it. I won’t go. I’ll leave the country! Find somebody else to do your dirty work, you sick coward!”

“Do not kindle my anger. Open your parcel. If you don’t, you’ll regret it, and so will Sam. My patience is spent, Joyce. This is your last chance. Open... the box!”

Joyce grabbed the box and ripped off the tape. Slowly she slipped off the top. She gaped at it. “It’s empty!”

“It’s far from empty. Good work, Joyce.” The line went dead. The doorbell buzzed. Joyce grabbed a tissue from the box on her end table, dabbing her eyes and sniffing as she answered the door.

Richard frowned. “Why didn’t you answer your phone, Sexy?”

“Because I had it to bits. It wouldn’t come on, so I was checking the battery contact to see if they’d corroded.”

“Are you ready to go?” Richard asked, studying her teary eyes. “Have you been crying?”

“No!” she snorted. “I sprayed some perfume in my eye when I was getting ready. Have a seat,” she said, walking toward the lounge. “I’m just going to grab my purse from the bedroom, and we can go.”

Richard sat on the sofa and leaned forward. He picked up Joyce’s cell phone, rubbed the battery contacts on his jeans and put it back in her phone. He suspiciously eyed the empty box on her coffee table as he turned her cell phone over and switched it on. “It’s working now!” he called out.

“What?”

“Your cell phone. I cleaned the battery, and it’s working again.” He examined the empty box. “What was the parcel?”

Joyce’s eyes widened. “Ah – it was – ah,” she nervously glanced around and grabbed the first piece of jewellery she could find. “It was from my mother!” she called out, as with shaky hands, she fumbled to fasten the bracelet around her wrist. It dropped to the floor as Richard entered the room. He picked it up.

“Need a little help?” he grinned.

Joyce swallowed hard and smiled as she held out her wrist. “Yes, please.”

Richard studied her eyes as he brought her wrist to his lips and kissed it, deeply inhaling the fragrance of her perfume. "Why is your mother sending you a gift now? Your birthday is not until October."

Joyce cleared her throat and pulled her wrist away. "I guess she wanted to make sure it arrived on time."

Richard softly smiled and stepped into her personal space. "You look very sexy in that top," he whispered and rubbed the knuckle of his index finger over one of her peaked nipples through the thin tank top. Joyce's breath caught; her heart started pounding. Richard leaned in to kiss her.

Joyce groaned inwardly, held up her hand and stepped back. "We shouldn't keep Sam and Donna waiting," she said and headed for the door.

Richard frowned, rearranged the front of his jeans and followed her out. "Right..." he murmured and closed the door behind him.

Sam and Donna were sitting in the back seat of Richard's car, talking while they waited for him and Joyce. Sam brushed the back of his fingers down her cheek and studied her eyes. "You're awfully quiet."

"I'm concerned about Mr. Wilson's reaction when I told him we needed to do another amniocentesis on Linda."

"Why?" Sam frowned. "What did he do?"

"Well, of course, he wanted to know why, at which time I had to confess that we'd lost Linda's medical records and the test results. Then he suggested that we could contact her doctor in Shreveport. With Linda, only a couple of months from her due date, he wanted to know why it was so important. If anything had been wrong with the baby, he said her doctor would have informed him."

"So, did you tell him what you found out from the ultrasound?"

“Yes, but what he asked me to do next shocked me. He wanted me to put Linda under and take the baby, but he didn’t want me to say anything to her.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “He wanted you to perform an abortion without consulting his wife?”

Donna nodded. “When I told him I wouldn’t do it, he got angry with me. He said talking to Linda would be useless. Even, if she knew her life was in danger or that the baby would be born deformed, Linda would never have agreed to an abortion. He was probably right, but Sam, I won’t do it without Linda’s consent. I may be able to tweak the EHG and use it to save the baby, but I won’t know that for sure unless he lets me do another test.”

“Did you mention the EHG to Wilson?”

“No!” she frowned. “Under the circumstances, I didn’t think it was a good idea.”

Sam sighed. “Probably a wise choice.”

The door locks snapped. Richard opened the passenger door and helped Joyce inside. He crawled behind the wheel and reached for the ignition. “Sorry to keep you two waiting.”

The noise at the carnival was deafening. Donna, Gary, and Juanita had been to the Louisiana State Fair in Shreveport many times, and they had some hair-raising rides, but nothing compared her for the monster in front of her. Donna tried to be brave as they approached the front of the queue. Her heart was pounding so fast she felt as if she might faint. In her mind, she repeated her reassuring mantra. *It’s all in your head. It’s all in your head.*

Richard watched her out the corner of his eye; he leaned close to her ear. “You didn’t tell him you were afraid of heights, did you?” he whispered.

Donna jerked her head in his direction and frowned. “Yes, I did – in a round-about way.” She swallowed the bile creeping up the back of her throat. “I said I wasn’t fond of flying.”

“This is not the same thing as being in the chopper with me, pet. You don’t have to do this.”

“I’m fine Richard,” she insisted; adrenaline coursing through her bloodstream and thrumming in her ears. “I have to prove I’m stronger than he thinks I am.”

“You don’t have to prove anything, Donna. I’m perfectly happy to stay here with you and let them ride.”

“I’m fine Richard!”

“OK, but I know the truth. If you get scared, grab my hand. I won’t let go.” Donna gave him a tight smile and nodded.

Sam was oblivious to Donna’s fears as he grabbed her hand and led her up the ramp. The carny lifted the shoulder brace and the five people bailed out. Donna stiffened as she approached the seat. Richard sensed she was ready to bolt. Selfishly, Richard intended to take advantage of Donna’s fears, and Sam’s lack of them. Deliberately positioning himself, so he was sitting next to Donna, Richard helped Joyce to the seat on the other side of him. Sam sat on the opposite side of Donna. As far away from Joyce as was possible. At the sound of the brace snapping into place, Donna jumped and grabbed Sam’s hand with a death grip. The ride began to rotate. Sam grinned and kissed her. “Are you scared?”

Donna gave him a half-witted smile. “A little.”

The ride picked up speed; the seat started to tip forward and then back. The guy at the controls pumped up the music volume and grabbed the microphone. “You’re going to love this!” Sam shouted above the noise.

Donna pressed her lips into a thin line; her eyes like two eclipsed moons. “I doubt that!” she shouted and instinctively grabbed Richard’s hand. “*Oh God!*” she gasped as the ride flipped upside-down, again.

The rest of the ride was a hazy blur for Donna; she couldn’t tell which way was up. Sam and Joyce had their hands in the air and having the time of their life. Richard was enjoying the ride until he saw Donna’s pale face. “Are you OK?” he shouted next to her ear.

“No!” she snapped. “What the fuck was I thinking?” She screamed as the seat twirled over and over, rising to its highest position and freefalling, leaving Donna’s roiling stomach behind and giving her a feeling of weightlessness. “I must have been mad Richard!”

Richard softly chuckled and held her hand a little tighter. “It’s OK, pet. Just hang on to me. It will be over soon!”

“I hope so, or there’s going to be a mess to clean up.”

“Get this thing open now!” Richard ordered as the ride came to a stop. As soon as the brace was over her head, Richard grabbed her around the waist and escorted her down the ramp. It was a good thing he was holding her up; Donna’s balance was shot. Her legs were like wet noodles. Sam and Joyce jumped out and followed after them. Donna made it to the end of the ramp and bent over the railing.

“Oh God!” Donna groaned. Hot vomit splattered on the grass, barely missing her feet.

Sam frowned. “What happened?”

Richard narrowed his eyes. He groaned and wiped Donna’s mouth with his handkerchief. “Isn’t it obvious, Sam?”

“Sweetheart, are you OK?”

Donna coughed. “I will be as soon as I’ve thrown up my toenails.”

“Ah, honey. Why didn’t you tell me you had motion sickness?”

Donna cut her eyes up at Sam. “Because, I didn’t want to spoil everybody else’s fun!” she forced through her teeth.

Sam frowned, confused. “What did I do?”

“If you think hard enough, sooner or later, I’m sure you’ll figure it out!” She turned her attention back to Richard. “Where is that psychic friend you wanted me to talk to?”

“Psychic friend?” Sam echoed. “Don’t you mean con artist? You don’t actually buy in to all this tarot card astrology thing, do you?”

Donna glared at him. “No, Sam. I don’t!” she snapped. “But I do believe in telepathy and other psychic abilities that have

nothing to do with star charts and crystal balls. And if you're only coming to make smart cracks, then wait outside. I'm sick of you making fun of things that I take seriously! Just because, you can't see something or explain it, does not mean it doesn't exist."

"Well, if you expect this person to tell you something useful, you might as well start dancing around the campfire and baying at the Moon."

Donna narrowed her eyes and got right in his face. "You know, I think I'm about ready to go home. This evening started out fun, but it's suddenly gone sour. I'm sorry I'm not what you expected me to be. I have weaknesses, and I have imperfections, but you know what? That makes me normal. Sometimes, you're the most wonderful person in the World, Sam, and other times, you're just like Jared, an egotistical, arrogant, bull-headed asshole!"

Sam's eyebrows shot up. "Donna, you're getting upset over nothing. I never said you weren't what I expected you to be, but I don't appreciate you comparing me to a long-haired red skinned cowboy! I am not the person who walked away from you."

"No – you're not, but I'm walking away from you. I'm sorry, Joyce. I know you probably expected to bed Richard again, but if that's the case, I'll call a cab. I don't think I can stand a full night of dealing with Sam. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to see if I can find a place to sit down and get something for my upset stomach." Donna walked away.

Sam's mouth gaped. "What the *fuck* is her problem?"

"I don't know, but she's certainly upset about something." Richard glanced over his shoulder. "Let me see if I can talk to her. Joyce, you and Sam carry on with the evening. I'll ring you later." Richard ran after Donna. He took her hand. "Were you serious about wanting to go home?"

"Yes, if I have to spend the rest of my night smelling that awful perfume you gave Joyce. Do you honestly like the smell of dead fish?"

Richard laughed and leaned his face down to the side of Donna's neck. "I actually prefer Sand and Sable to Euphoria. Come on. Let's go see if we can find Madame Lupu."

Donna whirled. "Lupu? Doesn't that come from the word lupus, which is Latin for wolf?"

Richard frowned. "Come to think of it, now that you mentioned it, I believe it does."

Sam growled and sank to a nearby bench. "This is just fucking great!"

Joyce sat beside him. "Boy! She was really pissed off. What did you do to her?"

"Nothing, except mention her Indian boyfriend."

"Indian? Donna was involved with a man from India?"

Sam shook his head. "No, Joyce," he groaned. "Native American Indian. The one she was singing with in her music video. Remember – Jared Thundercloud?"

Joyce's eyes widened. "Oh... *that* Indian. I understand now."

Sam cut his eyes at her and frowned. "Don't tell me he's used his witch doctor magic on you too?"

"Like it would matter to you. Look, Sam. I know you don't want to be here with me, so why don't I call a cab."

"No!" Sam snapped and grabbed her hand. "I came out here to have a good time and that's exactly what we're going to do. Donna said no strings. That means I'm not tied down. Come on honey, you haven't forgotten how to party, have you?"

Joyce thought about the empty box sitting on her coffee table at home. The words from the strange metallic voice echoed through her head. *'It's far from empty.'* "But it *was* empty!" Joyce mused as she followed Sam to the next ride.

Chapter 56

Jared and Juanita were sitting at a table in the complex cafeteria, having their evening meal. Jared had picked at his salad, pushing the various vegetables in groups with his fork. He then proceeded to create an abstract design with them. Juanita took a bite of her salad and cocked her head to the side as she slowly chewed. "You're missing an olive," she said and placed one on his plate.

"Thanks," he snorted and grinned. "Guess I'm not hungry."

"Did you call your mother and let her know you were planning on staying?"

"Yep!"

"What did she say?"

Jared softly chuckled. "She already knew. She said, under the circumstances it was a wise choice."

"Your mother knew?"

"Yes."

"Did you talk to Beth, your daughter?"

"Yes. Beth was a little upset, but when I told her why I was staying, she was OK with it. She misses Donna terribly. I warned her that Donna and I may never be together again, but she still calls her Mommy."

"You could be with her now, you know. All you would have to do is tell her."

Jared frowned. "No. I can't, sweetheart. I made a choice, and now I have to follow it through."

Juanita pressed her lips together and shook her head. "You put an awful lot of faith in this destiny thing, Jared. I don't know if I could be that strong."

"You'd be surprised what you can do for someone you love. Having that special connection to her is what helps, and hurts at the same time."

"What do you mean?"

“Well, for example, take right now. Donna is fighting me – mentally. She’s extremely gifted, and she’s learning fast, but she’ll never be able to completely block me out of her thoughts.”

Juanita smiled. “I envy you and Donna that. It might have helped our relationship if Gary and I could have had that kind of connection.” Juanita’s cell phone rang. She glanced at the display and switched it over to VICi’s private satellite channel, so the signal would be scrambled. “Hello.”

“Dr. Walton, Juanita, it’s Kevin Wilson. I know you don’t trust me, but for the sake of your friendship with Donna, please listen to what I have to say. Are you alone? Can you talk freely?”

Juanita swallowed hard. “Not entirely. What did you want?”

“Is Dr. Thundercloud there with you?”

“Yes....”

“Are you still in the UK?”

“Yes....”

“Can Dr. Thundercloud be trusted?”

Juanita glanced up into Jared’s curious dark eyes. “Yes – more than you can.”

“You and Dr. Thundercloud got Missy out, didn’t you?”

“Yes, no thanks to you.”

“Dr. Walton... Juanita, I know this is asking a lot of you, but you have to go back to the States. You have to go back to D’Netics. There’s something in my desk drawer – a book – that explains everything, evidence that Trip needs to bring Forrest to justice. That is unless he plans to take matters into his own hands. After he reads what’s in the book, I wouldn’t blame him if he did. I did what I did to protect Linda and to protect Donna. I can’t explain over the phone, and I doubt I’ll get the chance to explain in person. Forrest is not working alone. There’s more to him than meets the eye. An unseen hand, a powerful hand, is manipulating this game. Linda is sleeping, so I’ll have to be brief. Before you can get the book, you need to know the combination. It’s not what it seems to be. Before you

can do any of this, you'll need to shut off the security camera. There are two places to do this. One, is in Forrest's office, the other is in his penthouse apartment. Forget the one in his apartment. Concentrate on the one in his office."

Juanita's mouth gaped. "You want me to break into Forrest's office? Are you mad?"

"Juanita... I wouldn't ask you to do this if there weren't so much at stake. He's coming after me – us, but at least we'll go together. That book holds dark secrets, strong evidence against the manipulators of the game, and it mustn't fall into the wrong hands. If Forrest or his minions were to get their hands on it, they would destroy it, and the game would continue. It has to stop. Too much has been lost and Donna will never be safe, unless the truth is brought to light."

Juanita swallowed hard. "What do you want me to do?"

Richard sat with Donna while they finished drinking their cans of cola. "Are you feeling better now, pet?"

"You did it again," Donna groaned and collapsed her empty can.

"Did what?"

"Called me pet. Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Force of habit," Richard grinned. "I've been doing it a long time – longer than you think."

Donna frowned and studied his eyes. "What do you mean – longer than I think?"

"There's something I need to tell you before we go and talk to the psychic." Donna lifted her brows expectantly and waited. Richard cleared his throat, took her hands and continued. "I've lost my chance with you, so promise you'll listen with an open mind?"

Donna inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. She studied his eyes. "You haven't lost anything with me, Richard, but why do I get the feeling I'm not going to like this?"

Richard caressed the tops of her hands with the pads of his thumbs. "Donna... I knew you, long before Gary introduced us

over Internet. In fact, before I came to Shreveport, the last time I saw you, was at your parent's funeral."

Donna's eyes widened in shock. "Richard... that was almost twenty years ago. How could you possibly...?"

Richard looked down at her hands as he spoke. "It was raining hard that day – in fact, it was storming. Had been that entire week. A lot of the small creeks and streams in the area were out of their banks. Water was rolling across the road at the bend, on White City Road before you get to the level crossing. The road was muddy and slick. You and your grandparents rode with us to Prewitt Chapel. Your grandfather rode in the front seat. I rode in the back with you and Regina, your grandmother. You wouldn't let go of my hand. You held it the entire time."

Donna narrowed her eyes and shook her head. "I remember that day, but... that was Gary. Wasn't it? You weren't there."

"Yes, I was. Mum had moved back to England, a couple of weeks before the night of the accident. Dad had a few loose ends to tie up with his business deal, so I stayed with him. I didn't want to move back because I didn't figure I would ever see you again, so I wanted to spend as much time with you as possible. You see..." he paused and chuckled; seemingly embarrassed and then continued. "I've had a crush on you for as far back as I can remember. We used to play together as kids. Our parents were close friends. We did lots of things together, and I know this is going to sound a little unorthodox, but I loved you back then. Well..." he scoffed, "...as well as a fourteen-year-old understands the meaning of the word," he chuckled again.

"If this is true, why didn't you tell me before now, Richard?"

"I was going to tell you, but then you got involved with..." he broke off.

"Why are you telling me now?"

"Because, the psychic may tell you some of these things, and I wanted you to hear it from me first."

Donna grinned incredulously. “Oh – I get it now. You’ve set this up. What did you do? Give her a script? Make her memorise it word for word?”

Richard frowned. “Pet – I mean – Donna. What I’m telling you is the truth. I’m not making any of this up. Surely, you must remember some of the things that happened the day of the funeral,” he prompted.

Donna slowly drew her hands away. “No, Richard. I remember very little about that day. I remember it was storming, though. The lightning and thunder frightened me. But, Gary could have told you those other things.” She stood. “Let’s just find ‘Madame Lupu’...” she said, with marked sarcasm, “...and then we can find Sam and Joyce and go home.”

“Before we go back, will you just do one favour for me?”

Donna arched an eyebrow. “That depends on what the favour is.”

“Ride the Ferris wheel with me. If things hadn’t happened the way they did, we were going to go to the State Fair together, that October. As far as I was concerned, it would have been our first real date – with Dad, of course – along as a chaperone. Will you do that for me?”

Donna laughed. “I think we’re a little beyond our first date, Richard. Anyway... yes, I’ll ride the Ferris wheel with you. But, I can’t promise I won’t get sick, again. I may even throw up on you. Sure you want to take the risk,” she teased.

Richard laced his fingers with hers and kissed the back of her hand. “I’ll take the risk.” He motioned to a colourful tent next to what Donna recognised as a freak sideshow.

From the outside, Madame Lupu’s tent looked like a standard fortune teller’s exhibit. It was made from panels of shiny burgundy and purple satin. Inside it was dark, lit by what Donna assumed to be candle glow. The first room, a waiting area, consisted of a single row of folding chairs draped with more burgundy and purple satin. On the walls of the tent hung various astrology charts and other strange esoteric art.

The floor was covered with loose hay.

Between the waiting area and the room beyond hung more purple and burgundy panels. Over them, seemingly attached, were strings of rose coloured quartz, catching Donna's attention. Mesmerised; she studied the various shapes. She recognised the wolf, the owl, the dragon and what she assumed to be a full moon, but the other two were unfamiliar; some kind of bird, with outstretched wings lifted high above its head, and a strange, oblong shaped spearhead. Richard's voice snapped Donna back. Startled, she blinked.

"Sit here," he said, helping her to one of the satin-draped chairs. "I'll see if she's"

"Pass through the veil from this realm and into the unknown, Donna," a soft mysterious voice said from the other side of the curtain.

Donna looked up at Richard, smirked and shook her head. "Perfectly timed, Richard."

Richard shrugged, smugly smiled and parted the curtain, allowing Donna to go through first. A firm hand on Richard's chest forestalled him. "Not you, Friend," she warned and motioned to the chairs. "This is for her alone..." her voice trailed off.

Richard glared at her and leaned close to her ear. "Don't be so melodramatic, Daria. This is important. Stick to the script," he whispered through his teeth.

Daria slowly arched an expectant eyebrow. "You may wait here," she responded and disappeared behind the curtain. Richard stood and eased closer, so he could eavesdrop on their conversation.

Eyes closed, Donna slowly inhaled. A sense of calm washed over her as the air seeped from her lungs between her slightly parted lips. She opened her eyes, gradually lifted them and studied the strange gold symbols above the woman's head. "Guardian of the wolf?" she prompted. "Land of dreams - that's Latin, isn't it?"

Daria motioned to the chair in front of a round table. She locked eyes with her. “No, Donna. It is not, but your translation is correct. I am Daria, better known as Madame Lupu.”

Donna frowned. “What language is it, then?”

“I do not know. I know only what it means.”

Donna was sceptical; a slight grin turned up the corners of her mouth. “So... do you read palms, gaze into the crystal ball, use tarot cards, or a combination of the three?”

“For my normal customers, I have all the paraphernalia, but this is a special reading.” Daria moved the other chair and placed it in front of Donna. “Do not be afraid.”

Donna reached into her pocket. “Before we begin, let me turn off my cell phone, so we won’t get interrupted,” she said, her scepticism growing. “Has Richard briefed you on what to say to me?”

Daria held her arms up and bore her palms to Donna, spreading her fingers wide. “I need to touch you...”

Donna sighed. “So you’re going to read my palms, then?”

Again, Daria studied Donna’s wistful eyes. “Will you allow this?”

Donna’s eyes widened. She slowly nodded and cautiously offered her hands; her calm feeling starting to fade.

“Press the heels of your hands to mine.”

Donna frowned, again. There was something extremely familiar about this. Then she remembered why she’d felt so peaceful before; her eyes lit. The aroma coming from the scented candles were the same as the ones Jared had lit and placed in the crystal holders around their bathtub. Her eyes glossed.

Daria drew in a quick breath as their palms touched. She laced their fingers; Donna felt as if she’d been zapped with static electricity. She jerked slightly. “Do not speak. Close your eyes and open your mind to me, Donna. Breathe deeply and clear your thoughts. You must trust me. Do you trust me Seer?”

The voices on the other side of the curtain were growing quieter. Richard narrowed his eyes, concentrating, intently listening for Donna's reply. "Yes..." she said. Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Donna's trusting voice was the last thing Richard heard from the other side of the divider. For a few seconds more, he waited the silence, then gradually inched the curtains apart, being careful not to rattle the rose coloured crystals attached to the curtains. What he saw was baffling. The room looked to be filled with a thick white fog. Nearer the centre of the room, the fog glowed with pale blue light. Through it, Richard could vaguely make out the two shapes. He rolled his eyes, sighed and sat in one of the chairs. Shoving a hand through his hair, he leaned his head back, staring at the ceiling of the tent, dimly lit by the candle's glow. "Daria has some new toys. She's going to scare Donna off with her theatrics. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, after all," he groaned.

Chapter 57

Movement caught the attention of two of Sir Richard's security guards, patrolling the back perimeter of Triplet Hall, near the Tyne. A small colony of bats gathered above their heads. One swooped down, close to the two security guards. The guard winced, reached up and scratched his neck. "What's wrong?" the other guard asked.

"I think the little bastard bit me!"

The bat made another pass at the other security guard. "Ow – damn bugger!" he proclaimed, searching above him. "If Batman comes back, I'm using him for target practice."

"Good thing we don't have to worry about them carrying rabies in the UK."

"Yeah," the first guard agreed, rubbing his stinging neck.

A few minutes later, all twelve guards patrolling the Tyne were prostrate on the damp grass.

Sheba, Bonker, Twister, and Terminator – Sir Richard's four guard dogs - were peacefully sleeping on the concrete floor of their wire mesh pen, behind Triplet Hall. A strange smell caught Sheba's attention. Her sharply-docked ears twitched as she slowly lifted her jackal-shaped head, from off her wide tan feet. She stretched her head higher; quietly coming to her feet, catching the attention of the other three dogs. Immediately, they went on alert-mode. Silently they rose to their feet and started sniffing the air, as well.

Sheba's pointed mussel jutted a couple of times as she pulled the strange scent into her lungs. Her keen eyes searched the ley of the land for the source of the smell. Her moist nostrils flared as she sniffed again and turned her head toward the Tyne, deciding that was where the scent came from. Terminator's lip pulled back. The tips of his fang-like teeth shone like snow in the dim street light. He emitted an almost inaudible growl, low in his throat.

A muffled pop sounded from behind and a small metal canister flew through the air, landing amidst the four dogs, making a slight hissing noise. The four curiously approached it, sniffing the white mist seeping from one end. Bonker slapped at it with her paw, and it rolled toward Twister, who lowered her mussel and sniffed at it again. After a short time, one-by-one, the curious animals began to drop to the floor of their pen.

Donna felt the connection. Her sense of calm returned as Daria's gentle voice entered her mind.

'You are filled with positive energy - powerful energy - but negativity drains your gift. You are suffering - in the heart. You have lost something special, someone special. I see him. He is near, but far.'

Donna swallowed hard as stinging tears collected behind her closed lids. *'I hurt him very deeply. He won't forgive me, won't even see me.'*

'You began this journey together, but the path has split, and now you walk on opposite sides. It twists and crosses, but at each meeting point he stands on the other side. This is as it should be because of a choice you have made. Do not fear change, Seer. With it comes growth and understanding. You are threatened by paper and air. Do not dismiss the danger. You are with someone you care very deeply for, but his eyes wander, and he will never fully claim your heart. You seek a man with dancing aqua eyes, but what you seek is a shadow. Your seer sight has been blinded by crimson power. You must look harder into the eyes of this man and see that he is not who you thought he was, for there are two.'

Daria paused. There was a slight change in the flow of energy between them. Donna waited patiently. Daria continued, unaware of what she was saying or where the words were coming from. *'One wishes to possess your heart, the other your body, but a third holds your soul. Because you have experienced perfectus amor, you are afraid to chance disappointment. If you continue to do so, your journey will be*

long and your future vague. You choose to hide the truth because he satisfies your body, but yet your heart hungers. What you see before you is not necessarily what must be. The outcome depends on the choices you make and who will meet you at the end of this journey. That is yet... uncertain. You will only ever have one perfect match. You must be patient, Donna. Open your heart and test the possibilities. Grow, Seer. Grow. Learn and love. When the time comes, you will understand all...farewell.'

As soon as Juanita was off the phone with Wilson, she reiterated the story to Jared, and then she and he went straight to Sir Richard's office in the complex. Again, Juanita repeated what Wilson had told her. Sir Richard's cell phone rang. Alice's frantic voice came over the line as soon as Sir Richard accepted the call. "It's Alan, Sir Richard. He's collapsed. He says he's having chest pains. I gave him his pills, but they don't seem to be working."

"Calm down, Alice. What happened? Where is he?"

"I helped him to the lounge. He's lying on the settee. Something happened here. I heard a loud ringing and then woke up on the kitchen floor, in front of the dishwasher. I know you have your own way of doing things, but should I call an ambulance?"

"No Alice. Keep him calm. I'll be there in ten minutes!" Sir Richard ended the call and turned to Jared.

Jared held up his hand. "Just give me the details. I heard enough of your conversation to know something is wrong at the house. Alan... that's your butler? And he's collapsed suddenly?"

Sir Richard stood. "Yes. VICi," he said, turning his attention to the complex computer. "Contact Tim McGowan and John Sherriff. Have them meet me at the chopper."

VICi; Executing... message sent and acknowledged.

"Go! I'll grab two medkits from the infirmary and wait for you in the chopper," Jared said and disappeared.

“Let’s go Juanita.”

“What about Donna?”

“I’ll let her know if I need to.”

Jared suddenly appeared next to one of the nurses at the supplies closet in Sam’s office. At the sight of his glowing crimson eyes she gasped, and the kidney dish she was holding clanked to the floor. “Sorry, sugar,” Jared groaned and disappeared again.

Sir Richard and Juanita felt a gush of wind go past them. By the time they reached the lift and got to the chopper, Jared was already strapped in and ready to go.

Daria opened her eyes and locked her gaze on Donna’s. Donna felt something sliding down her cheek. She touched her face; her fingertip came away wet. She swallowed hard and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. Donna sat in a daze, uncertain of what to say, how to take what she’d heard. “Wait here,” Daria said and disappeared.

Richard rose from his chair as soon as Daria passed through to the waiting area. “What took you so long?” he asked his voice tight with agitation.

“I must speak with you outside,” she responded, urging him to the door of the tent.

“When did you get the special effects, and what was that all about? You hardly said a dozen words to her! Why didn’t you stick to the script as I requested?” he pushed through his clenched teeth.

Daria narrowed her eyes. “You have no idea what she is. Do you?”

“What do you mean? Of course, I know what she is!”

“Her gift is genuine, Richard. What she says to you in prophecy is not gobbledygook. If you don’t listen to her counsel, you will regret it. She carries your child.”

Richard’s mouth gaped. “She what? Donna can’t be pregnant. She’s on contraceptives, has been for months, and

even if she hadn't been, we only had one night together. If Donna *is* pregnant, the child is Sam's, not mine."

"She is with a rival, but trust me, she carries your son. He is beyond special, Richard. Even now, as he grows in his mother's womb, the child is aware of everything. Go – do what you must do, but be careful. She is in great danger."

Richard cocked his head and grinned. "You're getting better at this, Daria. The fog and pale blue light added that special bit of mystery to your nonsense."

Daria frowned. "Fog? Pale blue light? Richard, I don't know what you're talking about, but I'm not lying to you. Donna is pregnant with your son, and it will be up to you to protect her and even the score." Daria whirled.

Richard caught her forearm, forestalling her. "Did you tell Donna she was pregnant?"

"No..." Daria went back in the tent, where Donna was. She looked upon her in awe. "It has been a rare treasure to meet you, Donna. Protect him well. In his hands lies the fate of two realms. Richard is waiting for you outside."

"Thank you," Donna mused and stepped outside, still looking bemused and pale. *Protect him well? Fate of two realms?* She glanced over her shoulder. *What the hell is that supposed to mean?*

Richard put an arm around her waist; Donna turned. "So, did you enjoy your entertainment? Did she say anything useful?"

Donna studied Richard's eyes and slowly smiled. "At first, it was a little confusing, but yes, she did. Thank you."

"Shall we take that Ferris wheel ride now, or would you rather just find Sam and Joyce and go home?"

"I promised you a ride, and I keep my promises."

Before the chopper blades stopped spinning, Sir Richard was on the ground and barking orders. "Tim, go to the house with Juanita. See what you can do for Alan and Alice. John see what you can find out about what happened here. Jared, I want you to

come with me to the guest house. I want to hear the story straight from Wilson.”

Jared glanced around to make sure no one was watching. “I’ll see you there,” he said and disappeared. He reappeared at the guest house door and knocked, but his enhanced smell told him what he would find. He couldn’t hear a heartbeat, and there was a strong smell of fresh blood. Jared sighed deeply, making light of the front door, despite its advanced locking system. Upon entering the lounge, he froze to the spot. His glowing crimson eyes scanned the room. His stomach roiled at the carnage. His mind went back to the night he’d been forced to walk away. He remembered everything as if it had happened yesterday. He was on his way to meet Donna when he’d received Forrest’s threatening phone call. The words burned through Jared’s memory like a scorching wind.

~ ~ ~

“What the fuck do you want?”

“For someone who has your best interests at heart, I would think you’d be more grateful.”

“What hold do you have over Victor Grey?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?”

“If I’d thought you were stupid, I wouldn’t have considered bringing you on board Forrest Enterprises. I’m having a little get together at my apartment. Some of our major investors will be there, so I’ll expect you to dress appropriately. You’ll need to tell Donna not to expect you back for dinner, I’m afraid, but I’ve taken care of that as well.”

“I invested in D’Netics, not Forrest Enterprises. I don’t owe you anything, and I’m not interested in attending your little get together. Our relationship is strictly business. You don’t honestly think I like you, do you Forrest?”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters to me, and it will to Donna, when she finds out just what kind of person you are.”

“Don’t dare threaten me, Jared. I have ways of getting what I want. If you don’t do exactly as we’ve agreed your little daughter – the one you think is so safe in the cradle of Sir Richard’s protective arms – could have an unfortunate accident. Despite what you tell Donna, I know how much your wife meant to you. Losing Sarabeth would hurt you more than losing Donna. Besides, if I can’t get to you through Sarabeth, I’ll get to you through Donna.”

“You could never make Donna turn on me!”

“Don’t be so sure of yourself, Dr. Thundercloud. I’ve been around a lot longer than you have. I’ve been playing this game with the Triplets for years. There is one link that ties them all together and your sweet fiancée is in the middle of it. She means little to me. If I can’t get what I want, neither will you. I suggest you figure out a way to make this happen. My time is running out! I have nothing to lose, but you do, and so does Donna.”

“You’re bluffing!”

“Am I? Care to test that theory, Jared? If Donna were to find out you were the one who hurt her, how long do you think it would take her to call off this silly engagement? She doesn’t want it anyway. She’s just trying to keep you happy. He’s there now, isn’t he?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The spoilt brat – Richard Triplet. Think about the timing, Jared. The Triplets are on to you, my friend. You invest in Donna’s research and Sir Richard’s son offers you a position in his company. You’re falling into the very trap you’ve been trying to avoid, and you’re right, Jared. Sir Richard will eat you alive!”

“And you won’t? You just tried to blackmail me with my daughter. That’s crossing the line, Forrest!”

“Jared... I think you’ll learn, when it comes to members of The Order, we draw the lines others fear to cross. You think you have power? You think you can hide? I control the very thing you love most. No one is exempt from my influence. I

own you Jared Thundercloud. You're a tool of my trade now. You signed away more than your money. I don't accept compensation from those who cross me. I accept blood, but not yours Jared. You're too honourable. You would gladly sacrifice your blood to protect Sarabeth or Donna, but what would you do if you were forced to choose between saving one of them? You will do as I say, or you will lose both of them! Distance – Jared – distance or death! Your choice!" The call ended.

~ ~ ~

Jared shook his head as if trying to shake the memory. It hit hard. He knew if this had been Sarabeth, or Donna, instead of Linda Wilson there would be no controlling his rage. He would be like a wounded wolf, in pain and lashing out at whomever, or whatever got in his way. No matter how badly it hurt to be separated from Donna, it would hurt him more to see her slaughtered like this poor woman had been. There was no need to check for vitals on either of them. He yanked the bloody note off Wilson's shoulder and turned. Sir Richard met him at the front door. He glanced at the piece of blood spattered paper in Jared's hand. "How bad is it?"

Jared shook his head. "I can't do anything for them."

Sir Richard's eyes widened. "They're both dead?"

"It looks like a slaughterhouse in there, Sir Richard. I'd say they're both dead. I found this pinned to the flesh on Wilson's shoulder with a surgical scalpel."

Sir Richard read the printed note: 'Progress demands sacrifice. Traitors deserve justice. Justice has been served for both of us. Let this be a lesson to you, lest it be repeated.' "Bastard!" Sir Richard growled. "Did you touch anything?"

"Nothing but the note, Sir Richard. You need to notify the police."

"Not at this stage, Son." Jared followed Sir Richard back into the house. Sir Richard stopped as he entered the lounge and saw the bloody scene for himself.

Wilson's body had been fastened to one of the dining chairs, with plastic ties. His neck had been positioned so he couldn't look away. His throat had been slit from ear to ear. The chair was facing the large wooden coffee table where Linda's body lay. Her arms and legs had been fastened to the legs of the coffee table, with plastic ties, as well. Her abdomen had been slashed open; the foetus removed. Both Linda and Wilson had been gagged to muffle their screams.

Sir Richard took his handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped it across his mouth. "How did they get in?"

"They didn't use the front door. As you might have noticed, I had to unlock it my way – sorry about the mess. Sir Richard, if we're not calling the police, what do you intend to do with the bodies?"

"We'll take them back to the complex. You and Juanita can perform a post-mortem. Then we'll store their bodies in the morgue until we decide how to dispose of them."

Jared frowned. "Dispose of them? You're just going to sweep this under your aristocratic carpet and forget about it?"

"No, Jared!" Sir Richard snapped. "I'm not going to forget about it, but trust me. The person who did this is beyond the laws you live by."

"Then you believe it was Forrest, as well?"

Sir Richard glanced through the message again. "Yes, Jared, I do, and if you hadn't left like you did, he probably would have done this to your daughter and Donna."

"That thought had occurred to me."

"Let's get back to the Hall." Sir Richard took out his cell phone and pressed the hands free speaker, so Jared could listen. "John, send Ronnie Houston and his investigative team to the guest house. Wilson and his wife have been murdered. Once they've documented the scene and collected the evidence, I want the guest house cleaned from stem to stern. Then I want the bodies taken to the complex. We're on our way back. Have you found out anything?"

"It looks like they came in from our weakest point."

“The river?”

“Yes Sir. They managed to dart all twelve guards – how I don’t know. Two of the guards said something about a colony of bats, but I don’t think that had anything to do with it. They knocked the dogs out with something. I found what looked to be a tear gas canister in the pen.”

Sir Richard glanced at Jared. “OK, we’ll be there shortly,” he said and ended the call. He softly smiled and shook his head. “Jared, Son, I’m getting used to it, but before we get to the house, you might want to dim the lights a bit. I thought you said you could control the glowing eyes.”

One side of Jared’s mouth turned up. “I can, but it’s harder when people know.”

“Then it must be hell for you when you’re around Donna.”

Jared snorted. “You have no idea, Sir Richard.”

“How are they?” Sir Richard asked as he and Jared followed Juanita to the west wing where he’d had a temporary infirmary set up.

“Mrs. Kingsford is still a little disoriented and shaken. She bumped her head when she fell. I’ve treated her for a mild concussion. She has a bit of a headache, but I think she’ll be OK. She’s relaxing on her bed.” Sir Richard breathed a sigh of relief.

Juanita’s tone darkened. “I’m concerned about Alan, your butler. His blood pressure is elevated, and he’s having some difficulty breathing. The part that bothers me is his irregular heartbeat. I’m not a cardiologist, Sir Richard. He should have been taken to the Centre, but he refused to leave until he’d spoken to you. I’ve given him a muscle relaxer and some medication to bring his blood pressure down, but I would still be better satisfied if Donna had a look at him.”

“Prepare him for transport. We’ll take him to the complex.” Sir Richard rested his hand on Jared’s shoulder and guided him out of earshot. “Son, there’s only one other safe place I can take Donna, other than the complex, and I’d rather not do that.”

“Where is that?”

“To my mother’s castle.”

“Why are you opposed to taking Donna to your mother’s castle?”

“It’s a long story, Jared. One that I’d rather not go into.”

Jared pulled his brows together. “When you say castle, do you mean that in a literal sense?”

“Well, let’s put it this way. As castles go, it’s small, but it is literally a fortress. No one could get in it unless they blasted open the front door and it’s made of steel and three-inch thick oak.”

“What about the roof?”

“Someone *could* abseil down to the roof from a helicopter, but that’s as far as they would get. The battlements door is as solid as the front door. Triplet Hall has too many entry points.”

“Then take her to the complex. I already know how secure it is.”

“How are you going to handle being around her, and Sam? They are quite affectionate toward each other.”

“With great difficulty, but I’ll manage.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“No, but I won’t risk her safety for my comfort. I’ll just have to convince her that we can be friends and nothing more. Maybe Juanita can help me in that department.”

“If you and Juanita pretend to be a couple, that’s likely to cause animosity between Donna and Juanita. Besides, you can’t do that. Juanita is going back to the States, soon.”

“Maybe by that time, Forrest will be back on my side of the pond. I’ll talk to Juanita about it first, but I’d do just about anything to protect Donna. Then, you already know that.”

“There’s another thing you need to worry about.”

“What’s that?”

“If Juanita agrees to help you... convince Donna, how is Gary going to react. When I make the move to the complex, it will be permanent, Jared.”

“I guess that’s something you’ll have to take up with Gary.”

“Don’t forget, it’s something Juanita will have to deal with, as well. I don’t think we should jump on this straight away. Let me sound my mother out. It’s four minutes from her castle to the complex. If we have to use your idea, and Juanita agrees to it, then fine, but I’d rather avoid conflict if possible. I do hope to have you and Juanita with me permanently, sometime in the future. If there are too many hard feelings among my family that could make living at the complex difficult for everyone.”

Jared arched an eyebrow. “If you let something happen to Donna....”

Sir Richard studied Jared’s eyes. “Jared, I love Donna, maybe as much as you do. I would gladly give my life for her. I am not going to let anything happen to her.”

“I’m just warning you. I will go on a rampage, and there isn’t anyone in this country that could stop me.”

Sir Richard frowned. “Talk to Juanita, but like I said, I’ll only do this as a last resort.” He walked away.

Jared stuck his head back in Alan’s room. “Sweetheart, could I see you out here for a second?”

“I’ll be right back, Alan,” Juanita said. “What is it Jared?”

“I need to ask you a really big favour.”

Juanita narrowed her eyes. “What kind of favour, Jared?”

“What I’m going to ask you is extremely selfish on my part, and you don’t *have* to go along with it. We may not even have to use this idea, but....”

Juanita held up her hand. “Just tell me what it is Jared.”

“Let’s get Alan to the chopper, and I’ll explain on the way to the complex.”

Chapter 58

The Ferris wheel ride was coming to a close. One-by-one, the carnies started letting riders off. “That was fun,” Donna smiled as the wheel began its final descent. To her surprise, the carny waved at Richard, gave him a little wink and skipped their seat. It was at this time that Donna realised the male carny had been replaced. Donna arched an eyebrow at Richard. She motioned with her head. “One of your female acquaintances?”

“*Past* acquaintance,” Richard stressed, with a grin. “Donna, I won’t say I haven’t *been* with other women since you and I – well – since we met, as far as you’re concerned, but they don’t mean anything to me.”

“What about Joyce?”

Richard drew in a slow breath and forced the air from his lungs. “I can’t explain my attraction to her. What happened the night we watched your music video, was as much a mystery to me as it was to you. I don’t... love Joyce, Donna. We’re good friends, and we have been... intimate, but it was never serious.”

Donna held up her hand. “Richard, what you and Joyce, or you and Daria, or you and any other women do – for that fact – is none of my business. Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because... I’d like another chance with you, and I wanted us to start out with a clean slate.”

Donna looked incredulous. “A clean slate? Do you even have one?”

Richard tucked his chin and softly chuckled. “Well... mine is more like a blackboard, but there’s only one name that hasn’t been wiped.”

A slow smile spread across Donna’s mouth. “And that would be mine?”

Richard slid closer; his mood turning serious. “It’s engraved, pet – I mean....”

“...No, it’s OK. Just finish what you were saying.”

“The one time we were intimate, I know you did that out of pain. You were on the rebound, and I know you’re not over Jared, yet. You may never be, and that’s fine. I can deal with that. I want a life, pet. I want a future, not a passing fling. I’m not afraid of commitment, or a long-term relationship, with a house, a wife and a family. That’s what I want, and I know that’s what you want, too. Because, if things had happened differently, Jared would have given you that life. I’m not Jared. I can write you a poem, but I could never sing you a love song like he and Sam can.”

Donna grinned. “Please – don’t. I have sensitive ears.”

Richard returned her grin and snorted. “Here am I, baring my soul to you and you’re taking potshots at my horrible singing voice.”

“I’m sorry, Richard. You’re right. It was a cheap shot, but I couldn’t resist. Music is important to me. It’s a big part of my life. It always has been, and it always will be, but it’s not the only reason I’m attracted to Sam. He reminds me of something I’ve lost – Jared. Talking to Daria really helped me.”

Richard frowned. “I don’t see how. She said maybe a half dozen words to you. What did you do all that time?”

“You were eavesdropping on our conversation?”

Richard drew in a breath, winced and forced it out slowly. “I have a confession to make about that.”

Donna put her finger to his lips. She smiled. “I know you set it up, but Daria is real. Her psychic ability – her gift - is genuine.”

“That’s the same thing she said about you.”

“Really? Sam certainly doesn’t think I have a gift. He’s probably off screwing Joyce somewhere out of revenge, like he did with Ruth.”

“And he’ll do it every time, Donna. Sam just can’t...” he broke off. “Let me put it this way. I’m sure Sam can... satisfy you... and, he may even be able to give you what you want, I don’t know,” he shook his head. “But... no matter how loyal,

or how much training it had, how long would you expect a starving dog to look at a piece of raw steak and not at least give it a lick or a nibble?"

Donna tilted her head up and studied his eyes. "You're this close, are you going to kiss me, or what?"

Richard softly smiled; his blue eyes twinkled. He leaned his face closer. "I'm going to kiss you, just like I would have done all those years ago if I'd been able to take you to the state fair in Shreveport."

"You were going to kiss a nine-year-old girl?"

"I know. It sounds a little corny...."

Donna brushed her lips against his. "You know what sounds even cornier?"

"What's that?" he asked, rubbing the side of his nose against hers, inhaling her scent.

"I probably would have let you...."

Forrest and Eli watched the screen as Joyce and Sam neared the front of the Ferris wheel queue. He watched Sam kissing and nibbling on Joyce's neck as he discreetly fondled one of Joyce's peaked nipples through the flimsy fabric of her blouse.

Eli grinned. "Looks like I was right. The new stuff is working."

"Zoom in!" Forrest demanded. "Boost the volume. This is good stuff. I want a close up of his hand and the expression on her face. Yes... that's good. Now, if she'll just – oh yeah – that's it Joyce. Warm him up good. This night is turning out more profitable than I'd expected. We may not have to use force."

Something caught Eli's eye. He changed the camera, locking on a particular seat on the Ferris wheel. "What are you doing?" Forrest growled. "Get it back on Kaliea and Stephens."

"Patience. Wait until the focus is clear. I thought I saw something."

The image cleared. Forrest's mouth gaped. He and Eli watched not only Richard kissing Donna, but Donna kissing Richard back, and it wasn't a friendly kiss, either.

Forrest's eyes twinkled. "He needs to see this! Sam needs to see this. Focus his attention that way somehow!"

Sam pressed his erection tighter against Joyce's hand. "You still know how to get to me," he groaned in her ear as he nibbled her ear lobe. Sam heard a buzzing near his ear and slapped at it with his hand.

"Too bad I'm wearing tight jeans, or we could have some real fun on the ride," Joyce murmured.

"We could always do what we did last year – go in the women's toilet and lock the door."

Joyce frowned. "Sam... you took Jasmine to the carnival last year!"

Sam grinned. "Oh yeah – right – that was Jazz."

"Well, I'm not doing it in a public toilet – so forget it!"

Sam twisted a nipple between his thumb and index finger as he inched his other hand down her stomach. "Bet I can change your mind." He slapped in front of him. "Damn little bastard!"

"What is it?"

The seat Richard and Donna were sitting in stopped in plain view, just behind the loading platform. Sam faced forward and scratched his chin, catching sight of them. He narrowed his eyes and tightened his jaw as he saw Donna lean her head to the side, giving Richard better access to the side of her neck, clearly enjoying his attention. Sam grabbed Joyce's wrist and started making his way back to the back of the queue.

"What are you doing Sam?"

"Fuck this shit. We're going back to my penthouse." *Two can play at this game.*

Eli and Forrest watched Sam, and Joyce leave the carnival together. "Wonder what they're going to do?" Eli asked rhetorically.

One of Forrest's eyebrows shot up. "What would you do if you were in his place?"

"Let's put it this way. As heated up as Joyce is, I would have pushed for the toilet thing."

"I'd love to get more of the brat mauling Donna, but I have a feeling the view from Sam's apartment will be much more entertaining. Stay with them."

"By the way," Eli said, making conversation. "I think you might have announced your decision to move D'Netics to the UK a little too soon."

"Why is that?"

"You're supposed to be dying – remember?"

"Oh, I will be – when the time comes. These two have got me so horny; I might have to look for a little action myself."

"Too bad you killed off Miss Gentry."

Forrest grinned. "Yeah... I know. I kind of liked that one, but progress demands sacrifice. I have other toys to play with."

Jared had explained his plan to Juanita, but she hadn't said a lot in return. She'd mainly concentrated on getting Alan settled in the infirmary at the complex. Jared wasn't sure if her silence was an answer or that she was in shock, wondering how low he would go. Jared wondered that himself. He remembered her words when he'd kissed her in the mail room at D'Netics. What if they used the plan and it backfired on him.

He didn't want to lead Juanita on, but by telling her upfront, didn't that solve that problem? Jared had no intention of getting romantically involved with Juanita or any other woman. If he couldn't have Donna, he wouldn't have anyone. He'd already made that decision and nothing inside him told him any different. Jared didn't get the least bit aroused when he'd kissed Juanita, but she had. Would this be fair to her?

"OK... I'll do it."

Jared was yanked from his silent reverie. "Pardon?"

"I said I'll do it. If Sir Richard has to bring Donna to the complex, I'll pretend to be having an affair with you."

Both of Jared's eyebrows shot up. "You will?"

"Yes. Sir Richard said if he moved to the complex it would be permanent. That means Gary will be here, too. If he sees us together, maybe he will leave me alone. I mean – we don't actually have to do anything. We may have to touch, or hold hands, or...."

Jared swallowed hard and held up a hand. "Trust me, sweetheart. It will never make it to the bedroom, or anywhere else, for that fact."

"No! It won't!" Juanita swallowed hard. "I would *never* do that to Donna." *At least, I hope I wouldn't....*

"Well..." Jared grinned. "I don't know about Gary, but just seeing us holding hands would be enough to piss Donna off."

Juanita smiled. "Probably would be enough for Gary, as well. With his temper, he's apt to take a swing at you. Even though, we're not together, he still thinks he owns me."

"Did you ever stop to think it might be because he still loves you?"

"I hope not because I don't love him, not like I once did."

Jared stood, gathered their empty coffee cups and put them on the counter at the cafeteria. "For Gary's sake, let's hope he doesn't take a swing at me. I wouldn't hurt him, but he may hurt himself on me," he said, giving her a wolfish smile.

Juanita shook her head and followed him to the door. "You're so full of yourself!"

Richard's cell phone rang. "It's Dad," he said, glancing at the name. Donna rested her head against his shoulder. "Hi Dad. What's up?"

"Where in the Hell are Sam and Donna? I've been trying to reach them for the last fifteen minutes."

Richard kissed the top of Donna's head. "Donna is with me. Sam and Joyce are off somewhere by themselves. Knowing Sam, he's got her in some dark corner...."

"What? Donna is with you and Sam is with Joyce? How did that happen?"

Richard sighed and rested his cheek on Donna's head. "It's a long story, Dad."

"One I'll expect to hear about when you get home. There's been an incident at the Hall. Linda and Kevin Wilson have been murdered in our guest house."

Richard furrowed his brow. "What? How did they get in?"

"From the Tyne – listen, I'll explain when you get here. Find Sam, take Joyce home and get back here as soon as you can!"

"OK Dad. I'll try ringing Sam."

"I hope you have better luck at getting him than I did."

Donna looked up, studying the expression on Richard's face. "What's wrong?"

"We have to find Sam and Joyce and get back. There's been an incident at the Hall."

"What kind of incident?"

"I'll tell you on the way. Is your cell phone off?"

Donna's eyes widened. "Oh shit - I forgot! I turned it off when I went in to see Daria."

Richard pressed a button on his cell phone. "Kathy, it's Richard. We need to get down now, sweetheart... no, I haven't forgotten. I'll take care of that before I go, but I need off this thing now!" Richard took out five twenty-pound notes and folded them in his hand.

"What's that for?"

Richard grinned. "Compensation for a favour, and believe me, it was worth it!" Richard laced his fingers with Donna's. As soon as the ride stopped, and the carny unfastened the bar, Richard handed her the roll of bank notes. "Here and thanks. That's more than we agreed on, but I would have paid a hundred times more." Richard popped in his Bluetooth ear bud and started looking around. "See if you can see them," he said and led her down the ramp. He tapped his ear bud. "Sam Kaliea," he said and listened. "Damn!" He tapped it again. "Joyce Stephens," he commanded and waited.

Joyce read the name of the caller. “Oh God!” she gasped, trying to catch her breath. “It’s Richard.”

“Let it ring,” Sam grinned and rolled over on top of her, moving his hips faster, lifting hers off the bed, so he could penetrate her deeper.

Joyce nodded. She didn’t want to answer it. Sam was pushing her close to the edge again, and they hadn’t been together since Donna came into the picture. She wanted this. Just a few seconds more – she was almost to her peak. Her cell phone rang again, breaking Joyce’s concentration. Sam didn’t pay it any mind. He reached his climax and lay still on top of her. “Thank you, Richard,” Joyce groaned and accepted the call.

“Joyce, either give Sam the fucking phone or tell him to call me back now!”

“Hold on a second,” Joyce responded and pressed mute.

“He wants to talk to you, and he sounds really pissed off.”

Sam grinned. “Does he now...?”

“Here!” Joyce shoved her cell phone at him. “You talk to him. I’m going to the loo.”

Sam rolled over on his back. “Hello, Richard.”

“Sam, where are you and Joyce?”

“What difference does it make to you?”

“Dad just called. He wants us back at the Hall.”

Sam sat up. “Why, what’s going on?”

“Someone got through our security, by the Tyne.”

Sam’s mind whirled. “We’re on the Booster Bomber,” he lied. “It just started. We’ll be about ten minutes.”

“All right. We’ll wait for you in the car.” The call ended.

“Shit!” Sam proclaimed and reached for his underwear.

“Fuck! Get dressed, Joyce! I have to go. He wants us to meet him at the car. Somebody broke through security at the Hall.”

Joyce jumped into her jeans and yanked her top over her head. “Call a cab!”

“No, we can get there faster on foot.”

Joyce was at the top of the stairs when she stopped. “Damn! My cell phone is on your bed.” She turned.

“I’ll get it – meet me at the back door.” Sam dashed across the landing to his bedroom. Grabbing her cell phone he noticed her bracelet on the floor. He picked it up and shoved it in his jeans pocket, on top of his cell phone and ran down the stairs, not thinking to take the lift. He grabbed Joyce’s hand and they started running.

Chapter 59

Richard held open the passenger door. "Ride up front, with me. That way I can explain what's going on."

Donna crawled in the front seat and fastened her seat belt. She turned to Richard and waited. "So, what's going on? Where are Sam and Joyce?"

"They're on a ride – the Booster Bomber. They'll be here as soon as it's finished. pet... Linda and Kevin Wilson have been murdered."

Donna's eyes widened, her mouth gaped. "How? I thought the Hall had one of the most advanced security systems in the country."

"We do, but no security system is fail-safe, Donna. They hit us at our weakest point. Dad was in the process of plugging that hole, but evidentially it wasn't enough."

"They couldn't do anything for Mr. Wilson or his wife? Did they take them to the Centre?"

"I don't know. We'll find out when we get back to the Hall."

Donna sighed and sat back in her seat. "Forrest must be behind this. I told Sam he wasn't as sick as he'd been making out. He either found a donor, or he's been lying."

"Probably." Richard cleared his throat. "Donna, why were you so certain what Daria told you was the truth?"

"You'll laugh at me."

"No, I won't."

"I don't think it was Daria speaking to me. She was being used – you know – channelled. It was almost as if she didn't know what was going on herself. The voice that spoke to my mind..."

Richard held up a hand. "Are you saying Daria spoke to you, telepathically?"

Donna narrowed her eyes. "You don't believe me."

“I didn’t say that. I’m not saying it’s not possible, or that there may be some kind of scientific explanation for it. I’ve just never come across it myself – until you.”

“I have, and trust me. It’s real.”

“Oh – I trust you. So you believe someone, or something was using Daria to speak to you? What makes you so certain of this?”

“Because the person that spoke to my mind didn’t sound like Daria. Well... it did, but the language was different.”

“In what way?”

“For starters, the voice didn’t use contractions like we do. It said things like ‘cannot’ and ‘do not’, instead of can’t and don’t. It knew things about me, things no one knows. Things I haven’t even shared with you, Gary or Sam. When Daria touched me, it felt like static electricity shot through me. It tingled and felt like butterflies, low in my stomach.”

Richard’s eyes widened. He swallowed hard. “Did you see the fog and the pale blue light?”

Donna frowned. “No. My eyes were closed. When I opened them, the room didn’t look any different. I recognised the fragrance of the candles. I couldn’t tell you what it was or where it came from, but Jared had some that smelt exactly like the one’s Daria was burning in her tent.”

Richard drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Donna... Daria told me something, too. And this is your turn not to laugh at me, but I honestly believe she knew what she was talking about.”

Donna studied his eyes. “What did she tell you?”

Richard swallowed hard. “She told me that you were...” he broke off and began again. “Daria said that you were pregnant and that the baby was mine.”

Donna’s eyebrows shot up. “Pregnant! Richard... that’s not possible.”

“I know, and I told her that, too, but she insists you are. If you believe what she said to you – or rather what was

channelled through her – don't you think we should check, to be sure?"

Donna tightened her jaw and pulled her brows together. "Is this some kind of joke? All that stuff you said about us playing as kids and you being at my parent's funeral. Was that a set-up for this?"

"No!" Richard snapped. "No, Donna," he repeated softening his voice. "I swear to you on my mother's grave, I did not make *any* of that up, and I'm not lying about what Daria said, either. I know it sounds crazy, and we only had one night together, but let's face it. Under the right circumstances, it only takes one time."

Donna vehemently shook her head. "No – it can't be true. Juanita wrote me a prescription for oral contraceptives before I left Shreveport with Jared. We didn't have sex the first time until we were back at Wisteria Hall. Trust me, as much as it hurt, I would have known. If the pills hadn't been working, I would have already been pregnant with him."

"What about the Depro shot Juanita gave you? How soon does it take effect?"

"It takes five to seven days, but I was still taking the pills. There shouldn't have been a lapse. When you and I had sex, we should have been safe."

"Is there anything that could interfere with the pills or the shot?"

Donna's voice rose in pitch. "Well – yeah – antibiotics can, but I didn't take any, unless the doctor at Barksdale gave me some. And, even then, if I am pregnant, it would have to be Sam's baby – not yours. Oh God! Now you're starting to scare me!"

"As I said, I know it sounds crazy, but don't you think we should find out if Daria was right?"

"Well, I do now!"

Richard glanced in his rear view mirror. "Good, they're coming."

“I don’t want Sam to know about this until I’m sure, Richard.”

“I’ll take care of it, pet.”

“How?”

Richard smiled and brushed the back of his fingers down her cheek. “Trust me.”

Sam opened the back door and jumped inside. “What are you doing in the front seat?”

Donna glanced at Richard out the corner of her eye. “She’s still feeling a little queasy from the ride, Sam. I figured it would be better for her up here.” Richard glanced at Joyce in his rear view mirror. “You don’t mind. Do you honey?”

Joyce narrowed her eyes. She got in the back seat with Sam. “No. Of course not,” she smiled tightly.

Richard pulled right, onto the Links and then promptly turned left onto Marine Avenue. Sam furrowed his brow. “I thought we were going back to the Hall.”

“We are, but I’m going to pick up something for Donna’s upset stomach, first. Then we’ll drop off Joyce.”

“She’s not coming with us?”

“No. Dad said to drop her off first.”

“Why? Wouldn’t it be faster if we took her with us?”

“Sam, I’m following orders.”

“Right...” Sam groaned. “Making an unnecessary stop at the pharmacy here, when you could get something at the pharmacy in Morrison’s, next to Joyce’s apartment is following orders.”

“Sam!” Richard forced through his teeth. “Morrison’s is altogether too crowded, and we’d be too vulnerable there. Dad doesn’t want us taking risks.”

Donna swallowed hard and held her hand over her mouth. “Joyce, what is the name of your perfume?”

“Euphoria – why?”

“I think it smells quite nice on her,” Sam interjected. “I was thinking of getting you some.”

Richard pulled in front of Numark Pharmacy, in Monkseaton and put the car in park.

“Think again,” Donna groaned and pushed the control on her window. “It’s making my stomach worse.”

Richard promptly used his control and put her window back up. “Not that, pet,” he said. “I’ll open the sunroof if you need some air.”

“Couldn’t I just go in with you?”

Richard smiled. “I’d feel better satisfied if you waited in the car. I’ll only be a second.”

Donna nodded, sighed and sat back in her seat. Sam leaned forward. Donna twisted her nose and turned her head away from him. Joyce’s perfume was all over him. “So what did the voodoo lady tell you?”

Donna swallowed the bile crawling up the back of her throat. “That you’re an arrogant asshole, but then I already knew that.”

Joyce pressed her lips together, suppressing a grin. She glanced at Sam out the corner of her eye. Sam sighed and sat back in his seat.

Richard got back in the car and handed Donna a pharmacy bag. “I hope I bought the right thing.”

Donna looked in the bag and grinned at Richard. “Yes. You did.” She pulled out the rather large bottle of Gaviscon liquid. “I’ve never had aniseed flavoured before. Do you think you got a big enough bottle?”

“I was just making sure you had some for later if you needed it.”

Donna unscrewed the lid and took a couple of swallows. “Thank you, Richard. It’s been a while since I’ve needed this.” That’s when it dawned on her. *The EHG should have protected me from everything.* She closed her eyes and inwardly groaned. *Everything... but pregnancy.* Now, Donna really felt sick.

Chapter 60

On the drive back to Triplet Hall, Richard kept glancing in his rear view mirror. The news about Wilson and his wife had understandably made him paranoid. He wasn't taking any chances, especially now.

When he joined the West Road a light coloured van pulled out behind him. Richard glanced in his rear view mirror again. The van was still there. As he crossed the A1 Richard went round the roundabout rather than joining the A69 to Corbridge, all the while watching the headlights in his rear view mirror.

The van made the unnecessary trip round the roundabout also.

“What in the hell are you doing, Richard?” Sam asked.

Dread caught in the pit of Richard's stomach. He was trapped between civilization and safety. He drove the car faster, staying in the right-hand lane of the roundabout. At the last minute, he swung left across the lanes, taking the road west towards Hexham.

The driver of the van followed, just making the turn.

“Fuck Richard!” Sam swore. “What are you trying to do? Get us all killed?”

Richard reached across and touched Donna's hand. “Pet, make sure your door is locked, and the seatbelt is secure.”

Donna's eyes widened. “We're being followed...” she made it a statement.

“I think so.”

Sam looked through the back window. “Which one? The light coloured van?”

For the moment, Richard ignored his questions and concentrated on driving. He was forced to slow as the traffic in front blocked his way. The van following then took the opportunity and pulled up on his right.

Richard touched a button on his steering wheel. “Dad, I think we’re being followed.”

“Dammit Ricky! Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. It’s been behind me since I crossed Grandstand Road. I’ve made some unnecessary diversions, and it’s still behind me.”

“Where are you now?”

“I’ve just turned onto the A69. I’m about a mile toward Hexham on it.”

Donna screamed. “Richard! Look out!”

Richard ducked involuntarily as a bullet struck his side-window at head-level. “Bloody hell!” He floored the accelerator and swerved around the car blocking his way in front. He glanced at Donna in confusion and then back at the road. “They’ve just took a shot at me!”

“Floor it Ricky! Are you all OK?”

“Yes, I’m already pulling ahead slowly, and we’re fine.”

“Speak for yourself!” Sam scoffed from the back seat. “What do they want?”

“I don’t know, Sam,” Donna spoke up. “Maybe we should roll down the window and ask them. What do you think they want? They’re trying to kill Richard, you idiot! Unless, of course they were aiming for you and missed!”

“The bastards are in a light coloured van,” Richard said. “Sam – can you read the number plate?”

“No. It’s too dark, and they’re too far back now!”

Sir Richard interrupted. “Ricky, I want you to keep going west towards Hexham. Stay ahead of them but keep them in sight. When you get to the Hexham roundabout, whip around it and come back towards Newcastle. I’m sending Jason and Jaime. This will give them a chance to get to you. Be careful. Stay ahead of them. Don’t let them overtake you! Take the Ovingham turnoff, go under the A69 and turn right. Jason and Jaime will pull in behind you there. Floor it and head down to the bridge! The road is too narrow for anyone to overtake. Go

across the bridge and head back to Corbridge. Get back here as fast as you can!”

“What if there’s a queue for the bridge?” Sam spoke up again. “It’s only wide enough for one car.”

“Don’t worry about that Sam. Ricky will have enough of a lead built up by then.”

Sam was sceptical. “Right....”

“Put a sock in it Sam,” Donna groaned. “Richard knows what he’s doing!”

“Look, Donna. You might be used to these high speed car chases and dodging bullets, but this is the first time for me. I’ve been chased down the streets of Turkey by an angry man with a machete, but this is my first experience at getting shot at!”

Donna rolled her eyes and sighed. “Sam, why do you think John gave us those self-defence lessons at the Hall? Just to pass the time? You wanted in – now you’re in – so hang on to something and stop whining! Let him concentrate on keeping us alive.”

Jason Howard and Jaime Olsen, the two security men who had been assigned as bodyguards to Sam and Donna, were waiting for Richard at the Ovingham turnoff. As Richard turned right at the end of Oatens Bank, Howard and Olsen pulled their van in behind him.

Richard pushed down hard on the accelerator following the narrow road toward Ovingham. His cell phone rang again.

“Richard, it’s Jason, we’re between you and the van. Bear down. When you get to the bridge, head back to the Hall. Be careful and don’t come back. We’ll handle it from here.”

Fortunately, there wasn’t a queue and Richard was able to drive over the narrow bridge without stopping or slowing down a lot.

Howard and Olsen started reducing their speed as they approached the bridge. He switched the ignition off and back on. The van backfired. He did this a couple of times before

stopping the van two-thirds of the way across the bridge. He flipped the toggle switch fitted to the fuel pump off and the engine stalled. He continued to turn the engine over apparently attempting to restart the van. Olsen got out and started pushing the van. Not easy when the handbrake was partially on.

The driver of the van became nervous and started blowing his horn. He shoved the van in reverse and started backing up. After a few feet, his path was blocked as the second security team pulled in at the entrance of the bridge.

“We’ve got them,” McGowan said over his cell phone to Howard. “They can’t go anywhere but in the water. It’s a fair jump, and the current is too swift. I don’t think they’re that stupid.”

“Richard you’re in the clear, head home!” Howard said.

Sam let out a long sigh of relief. “I think I need to change my pants,” he commented.

“Richard,” Donna laughed. “Why is it every time we’re together, I end up in a high speed car chase?”

Richard glanced at Donna out the corner of his eye. Surprisingly, she didn’t seem the least bit bothered. “Just lucky, pet,” he grinned. “Dad, we’re on our way back.”

“When you get here, come to my office. I need to talk to you and Donna.”

“What about Sam?” Donna asked.

“I’ll speak to him afterwards, but I need to speak to you and Ricky first.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Sam groaned. I guess Sir Richard or Gary was spying on me. I fucked up this time!

John and Gary greeted Richard and Donna as they entered the room. Sir Richard looked across his desk at them. “OK,” he sighed. “Before I explain what’s going to happen, Donna, I need to know what’s going on between you and Sam. Are you still together or are you calling it quits?”

Donna glanced across at Richard and sighed. “Because of the obvious threat we’re under, I don’t want you to leave Sam

in an unprotected environment, but I do want him out of my bedroom.”

Gary raised an eyebrow and held his tongue. He’d expected the car chase would have pulled Sam and Donna closer together, but instead she seemed closer to Richard now. Donna had to have a good reason for this turn of events.

Sir Richard paused and looked down, tracing imaginary circles on the top of his desk with his index finger. Richard and Donna waited. Sir Richard sighed and looked up. “Have you told him?”

Donna studied Sir Richard’s eyes. “No, Sir. I don’t want to hear any more of his lies.”

Sir Richard laced his fingers and tapped his thumbs together. “I’m not going to ask what he did – I can guess – but judging from Sam’s past behaviour, he probably deserved this. I’ll take your word on that, and I’ll handle the situation.”

Donna nodded. “Thank you, Sir Richard.”

“It’s fine, Donna. I take care of my own. You’ve been through enough. Now, my next question. Are you and Ricky... together?”

Gary watched the expression on Donna’s face. He hadn’t dismissed the possibility that Richard may be manipulating things in his favour. He’d done it before.

Donna sighed. A slight smile turned up the corners of her mouth. “I’ve decided to give him another chance. I figured he couldn’t be much worse than Sam, but I don’t know how it’s going to turn out, yet. Does this bother you?”

Sir Richard frowned. “No. Of course not. I expected you and Ricky would get together again, sooner or later, but I was giving Sam the benefit of the doubt.”

“Is this because you and Richard knew me before?”

Sir Richard covered his mouth with his hand and cut his eyes on Richard. “Yes, Donna, that would be one of the reasons. Ricky was quite fond of you back then, and I guess, despite his somewhat wanton ways, he... still feels the same.”

“Yes, I do.”

Gary sighed deeply and shifted in his chair.

“I’m sorry, but I seem to be at a disadvantage here,” Donna softly chuckled. “You’ve got your memories to fall back on. For the most part, all I’ve got are confusing nightmares - apart from... what Richard told me tonight,” she added.

Sir Richard glanced from Gary to Richard and then back to Donna. “It seems Ricky has left me with little choice, other than to fill in the gaps, but I’d like to get this other matter out of the way first. I assume Ricky has told you about the Wilsons?”

Donna swallowed hard. “He told me they were murdered, but he didn’t say how.”

Sir Richard glanced at Gary again and then back to Donna. “Another thing, which I’m sure you know now, as well. Jared is in the UK, and he and Juanita are....”

Gary’s eyes widened. Again, he shifted in his chair. Unlike Donna, Gary knew Jared and Juanita were in the UK, but was Sir Richard suggesting they might be involved with each other?

“...Juanita came with him?” Donna interjected.

“Yes, petal...” Sir Richard tucked his head and began again. “Yes, Donna. I’m sorry,” he softly chuckled. “Old habits die hard.”

Donna softly smiled. “It’s OK. Richard is determined I’m his pet, so I guess I can tolerate you calling me petal.”

Sir Richard chuckled and shook his head. “Anyway... Jared and Juanita are... together at the complex – my other rather advanced research facility – here in the UK. Has Ricky or Gary told you anything about it?”

“Richard gave me a virtual tour before we left the States. He was probably using that as a tactic to lure me over here. It looked... interesting.” She glanced at Richard out of the corner of her eye. “If I hadn’t thought Jared and I stood a chance... of getting back together, it might have worked. So that’s where he – they are now?”

“Yes....”

Gary frowned slightly.

Donna paused for a few seconds. “I see...” she finally responded. “I suppose it makes sense that Jared would choose Juanita to move on with. Is this a... permanent move, or are they in the UK because of Missy?”

“They’re here because of Missy,” he responded, glancing at Gary. “I don’t know exactly when they’ll return to the States, but this is not a permanent move, for them. Now, where was I?”

“You were telling me about the Wilsons,” Donna volunteered.

“Oh yes. My investigative team documented the scene. I have pictures if you’d like to see,” he said, gingerly approaching the subject.

Donna drew in a deep breath and nodded.

Sir Richard replayed the video on his smart TV. Donna brought her hand to her mouth and stared at the screen. “What did they do with the baby?”

Sir Richard sighed. “We don’t know, Donna. We searched every inch of the guest house and the area around it. We’ll search again, when it’s light, but we didn’t find it.”

“I assume your men collected samples?”

“They did, yes. Their bodies were taken to the complex. Jared and Juanita are... doing a post-mortem on them. Jared fears the murders were done in sadistic fashion.”

“You mean Mr. Wilson and his wife were aware of everything?”

“Yes. We’re obviously dealing with...”

“...Forrest!” Donna pushed through her teeth, finishing the statement.

“Probably.”

“No police...” Donna made an assumption.

Sir Richard shook his head. “Not at this stage. If Forrest is responsible, calling the police would do little good.”

Donna nodded and looked at her hands. “So he *warned* me, or should I say, *threatened* me, when I threw my resignation at

him.” She lifted her head, a stern expression on her face. “How do you intend to deal with him?”

“Ring his bloody neck!” John commented.

Sir Richard arched an eyebrow. “I haven’t decided. I’d like to gather a bit more information before I make my next move. But, whatever that may be, I have to make sure everyone is safe, first. The Hall is obviously *not* secure. It has too many entry points. You can go to the complex and work with Jared and Juanita, or you and Richard – I assume – can go and stay at my mum’s castle.”

Donna frowned. “Castle? Richard’s grandmother lives in a castle? How would I – we – be able to continue our work there?”

“Much in the same way you would have here. We’ll simply set up a temporary lab at the castle. You wouldn’t have some of my modern luxuries, but you would be safe there, until...”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “Until what?”

“Until Jared and Juanita go back to the United States. Then you could move to the complex. Unless, of course, you’d rather go there now.”

Donna pressed her lips together and sighed. “I don’t think so, Sir Richard. I mean, I expected Jared would... move on – as I’m trying to do, but, I’m not ready to... see him with someone else, especially not one of my best friends. I don’t hold a grudge against either of them, but...”

Sir Richard held up his hand. “It’s OK, petal. I understand. I expected it would be... difficult for you, when you found out that they were together. I have no problem with you staying with my mum, but I think, before you make up your mind, it might be a good idea if you met her first.”

“Why is that, Sir Richard?”

“Grandma can be a bit eccentric and overbearing at times,” Richard spoke up.

“In what way?”

“She likes to be... in control of things.”

“She’s pretty set in her ways,” Sir Richard added. “And if she gets an idea in her head, that’s it. Even if you know she’s wrong, you’ll never convince her otherwise.”

“It’s best to appease her than to try and argue her down,” Richard chuckled.

“That’s putting it lightly,” John added.

“If you’re OK with it, I’ll have Ricky and John go out there with you, first thing in the morning.”

“Oh no! Not the Langston witch before breakfast!” John groaned. “Can’t they just take Terminator?”

Sir Richard laughed. “I’m not sending my dogs. She might *bite* them!”

Donna sighed. “Surely a sweet little old grandmother can’t be that vicious!”

“No... she’s *really* not that bad. Before we leave, just give me time to collect my equipment,” John said.

Donna looked confused. “Equipment?”

John counted them off on his fingers. “My crucifix, my wooden stake, my holy water and a fresh clip of silver bullets. Did I forget anything?”

Donna’s mouth gaped. “Are we going to see Richard’s grandmother or trying to flush out a vampire?”

John grinned. “The vampire would be safer.”

Donna swallowed hard. “That’s me taken care of, but what about Sam? What are you going to do with him?”

“Since you clearly don’t want him around you, at the moment,” he replied, glancing at Richard, “...I’ll move him and the senior members of his medical team to the complex as prearranged. There is another... matter. Alan, my butler.”

Donna’s eyes widened. “What happened to Alan?”

“He has a heart condition, Donna. He collapsed during the attack. Although we’re not quite sure how, yet. Whoever killed Wilson and his wife, also managed to immobilise my entire house staff.”

“Where is Alan?”

“At the complex. Jared and Juanita are... treating him. Juanita says he’s stable, for now, but she would prefer that you had a look at him. I’ll tell her that you...”

“...No. If Alan needs me, I’ll go. Richard can take me to the castle afterwards.” She slid to the edge of her seat. “What kind of heart condition does he suffer from, Sir Richard?”

As soon as Sir Richard had finished explaining, to the best of his ability, what was wrong with Alan, Richard and Donna stood to leave. Gary and John stood, as well. “I almost forgot,” Sir Richard said to Donna. “Do you still want to help Sam examine Tina’s body?”

Donna sighed and shook her head. “It’s just an autopsy. Sam can handle that. I’d rather not be around him anymore than I have to, Sir Richard. That is, unless you want me to help him.”

“No, it’s fine. You’re right. Sam doesn’t need your help. John, take Tim with you in the morning... just in case.” John nodded. Gary followed Richard and Donna to the door.

Sam, who had been waiting in a chair outside Sir Richard’s office stood as they stepped through the doorway. He glanced at Gary, and then Richard and John, before turning his attention to Donna. “So what’s going on, sweetheart?

Donna swallowed the lump in her throat. Sam watched with confused eyes as she removed her necklace and placed it in the palm of his hand, closing his fingers around it. “I’m sorry, Sam,” she said. “Sir Richard will explain. I’m going to bed.”

“I’ll be up as soon as I’m done here.”

“No, Sam – you won’t. Your things will be put on the landing. It’s done – we’re over.”

Sam frowned and glanced at Gary from the corner of his eye. Gary’s expression remained impassive. “Just like that?” he asked, turning his attention back to Donna. “No explanation, no second chance, no nothing?”

Donna sighed and shook her head. “Goodnight, Sam.”

Sir Richard stood in the doorway. "I'll let Jared and Juanita know you'll be there, in the morning."

"Thank you, Sir Richard, but I'll call Juanita. That way I can find out a little about Alan, so I know what I'm dealing with before I get to the complex."

Sir Richard nodded. "Sam, would you come inside now, please."

Gary and John walked past and went into the lounge. Richard shared a look with Sam. He rested a hand at the small of Donna's back and guided her upstairs. "So when are we going to tell Dad?" he asked as he opened the door to her bedroom.

Donna stepped through the doorway. "When we know for sure that it's yours. How do you think he's going to take it?"

Richard smiled. "Once he realises it's what we both want, Dad will be over the Moon. My grandmother will be beside herself."

"I'll follow this through, Richard, but I need to know why it happened."

Richard pulled her into his arms and held her. Donna rested her head against his shoulder and wrapped her arms around his waist. "We'll get to the bottom of this, pet."

Sir Richard didn't wait for an explanation. "Sam, as soon as you're finished with Tina's post-mortem at RVI, you and your senior medical team will be moved to the complex. For the time being, you'll be working with Jared and Juanita, until they go back to the States."

"Oh, I see. Jared has changed his mind about seeing Donna."

"No, Sam. She's changed her mind about you. First thing in the morning, Donna and Richard, will be going to the complex. Once Donna has consulted with Juanita on Alan's case, Richard and Donna are going somewhere else. Having everyone in the same place at the same time is not in our best interest, so I'm splitting you up. Gary will make the move to

the complex, as well. He and the rest of the genetics team will continue working via VICi's satellite."

"You're taking me off the project? Was that Donna's idea, too?"

"Yes, Sam. It was. I don't know what happened between you and Donna, and I didn't ask. Unless she decides to tell me, as far as I'm concerned, it's none of my business, but Donna doesn't want to be anywhere near you. She's done. To her credit, Donna cared enough to ask that you be put in a protected environment, as well. Because of the incident tonight, she recognises the threat we're under, and she doesn't want anything to happen to you. That's why you're going to the complex. I assure you, I had nothing to do with this decision."

"Where is she going?"

"Well, Sam, it's like this. Donna doesn't want you to know, and I'm not going to tell you."

Chapter 61

Richard helped Donna get Sam's things together and put them on the landing. John and McGowan moved them to the west wing for him. Sam took a shower, put on his pyjama bottom and laid on his bed. He suspended the chain of Donna's necklace on his index finger and stared at the tiny gold heart. "Why in the fuck did I sleep with Joyce? What came over me? I don't want Joyce. I want Donna. I love her. What made me do that?"

Gary went into Donna's room and talked to her for a while before he went to bed. He could tell she was not looking forward to the night alone. Richard knew this, as well. It was one of the things Jared had told him before he left Donna. After he'd showered, put on his bed clothes and robe, he went to her room and softly knocked on the door. "Donna... can I come in, pet?"

"Yes."

Richard took a deep, steadying breath and pushed the door open, gently closing it behind him. He approached her bed. Donna was sitting up reading on her Kindle. Richard took it and laid it on the bedside table. "I thought you said you were sleepy." He lifted the covers and slid in beside her.

Donna made room for him. "I am. I'm just...."

Richard pulled her into his arms and kissed her temple. "I thought you might need something warm to cuddle up to."

Donna snuggled up to him and rested her head on his shoulder. "Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?"

"For always being there for me. For looking out for my best interests, no matter what I did."

Richard rubbed his cheek against the top of her head. "I love you Donna. I've always loved you. I know you don't feel the same, but that's OK. Just to be here with you like this. To hold you in my arms is enough for me."

“I wish I could give you more, Richard, but I just don’t have it in me right now.”

“I know, pet. Just sleep. Sleep and have sweet dreams. I’ll be here for you.”

Donna hadn’t said much, since they left the Hall. Richard knew she had a lot on her mind, so he didn’t force conversation. As they left a small town called Allendale, Donna noticed, instead of going to an area where you would expect to find an advanced medical research facility, such as she’d been shown in Richard’s virtual tour, of the complex, they seemed to be going further and further away from civilisation. She glanced behind her to make sure. John Sherriff and Timothy McGowan were still back there; following in one of Sir Richard’s black Escalades.

When Richard eased his Mercedes off the tarmac, onto what looked to Donna to be a narrow derelict road, she began to have her doubts. “The complex is out here? In the middle of nowhere?”

Richard chuckled. “Not where you would expect it to be is it?”

“No, it’s not. Why are we stopping in front of an open barn?”

“You’ll see,” Richard responded and pressed a button on his steering wheel. “VICi, open tunnel doors,” he said and pulled into the barn; John and McGowan followed close behind.

Turning to the right, Richard started down what looked to be a wide well-lit tunnel. Donna frowned. She looked, but couldn’t find a source. “Where does the light come from?”

“The walls of the tunnel are coated with carbon nanofibres and micro light-emitting diodes. They’re too small to be made out individually.”

Richard drove through a cavern and stopped. Barring their way was a swift underground river. Beyond it, nothing but a rock wall. Out of the river rose a metal bridge. Richard pulled forward. As he neared the end of the bridge, the rock wall slowly lifted, revealing another tunnel. The road began to

gradually slope down, but at a sharper angle than before. Once, at what apparently was the bottom of that level, the road turned back to the left.

Richard waited while another rock wall lifted and a pair of steel doors split in the middle, sliding to each side and disappearing into the wall. Pulling forward, they drove into a large parking area. "We're here," he smiled, switching off the engine and releasing the door locks.

John and McGowan pulled into the space beside them and got out.

Donna opened her door and slowly stood. "There are a lot of cars down here."

Richard placed Donna's hand in the crook of his arm and guided her inside the complex. "Pet, there are a lot of people down here, too. If we have time, I'll give you the tour."

Donna smiled. "I'd like that."

As they approached a pair of double glass doors slid open. John and McGowan followed. "Ricky, I'm going to spend some time with Missy." John said.

"And I'm going to the cafeteria to grab some breakfast," McGowan added.

"Where is Missy?" Donna asked.

"In our quarters a short distance from my security room. She's supposed to be resting in bed, but I doubt she will be. Missy is not one to lie around. Have Ricky bring you by for a visit, when you're done at the infirmary."

"I will," Donna responded.

Richard approached another door. "VICi, notify Juanita Walton that Donna and I are waiting for her in my quarters. Lights on," he said as they stepped inside. "VICi, lock door, OE mode."

VICi; Dr. Walton has been notified and is on her way. Door lock is now under owner entrance mode. Do you wish to include Dr. Rigden under your owner entrance list?

"Yes, VICi."

VICi; Dr. Rigden, please state your full name, authorisation code and name you prefer to be called.

Donna furrowed her brow. "Authorisation code?"

"The one Dad gave you at the Hall. It's on the front of your security card."

"Oh!" She grinned and took it out of her wallet. "Donna Marie Rigden, DRMB1B, Donna."

VICi; Donna Marie Rigden, DRMB1B, Donna, added to main database, owner confirm."

"Data entry confirmed. Richard Triplet, authorisation code RT1B."

VICi; Welcome to the complex, Donna.

"Do I need to acknowledge that?"

"Not unless you want to. It's just a mannerism routine Gary added to make VICi appear more human."

"I assume that's the computer. Why did Gary name it Vickie?"

"It's not a real name. It's spelled uppercase V I C, with a lowercase I. It stands for Voice Integrated Computer Interface. We use a lot of acronyms for technology in the complex. It's easier to say HIC, or hick, than Holographic Imaging Chamber."

"What exactly is a holographic imaging chamber?"

"Well," Richard snorted. "When it comes to that, it's easier just to show you. We'll drop by the genetics lab, before we leave."

"Right," Donna responded. "So everything in the complex is voice activated and motion sensed?"

"Most of it," Richard grinned. "Do you want to see the kitchen, or would you rather wait on the settee, in the lounge?"

One side of Donna's mouth turned up. "Kitchen, of course!"

Richard chuckled. "I figured as much." The door panel chirped.

VICi; Dr. Walton is at the door. Should I release the lock?

"Yes, VICi," Richard said and turned.

The door slid open. Juanita stepped into the foyer. "I've missed you." Donna smiled and hugged her.

"Come in Juanita," Richard said. "I was about to make a cup of coffee and some scrambled eggs. Can I interest you in some?"

"Sure," Juanita smiled.

"Why don't you girls sit in the lounge and chat while I take care of breakfast."

Donna grinned. "You're not going to burn the toast, are you?"

"I'll try not to," Richard said and left.

Juanita followed Donna into the lounge and sat beside her. "Juanita, where's Jared?"

"He's staying out of sight," Juanita responded. "He thought it was best."

Donna swallowed hard. "So... what do you think?"

"What do you mean?"

Donna's eyes glossed. She blinked the tears away and put on a plastic smile. "He makes you feel like a queen, doesn't he?"

Juanita furrowed her brow. "I don't follow."

"Jared. Apart from his arrogant overbearing control problem, he treated me like a queen."

"Donna... I can't do this. I love you too much, to lie to you."

"What do you mean, lie to me?"

"When we found out you were coming to the complex, Jared and I were going to pretend to be a couple. He figured if you thought he'd moved on that you wouldn't try and confront him about leaving. I went along with it, so Gary wouldn't try to fix things between me and him. Donna, I don't want to have to hurt him, but like I told you the day I moved into Carl's place, there's nothing left for me and Gary. If there had been, I wouldn't have given him back his ring and called off our engagement."

Donna studied Juanita's eyes. "So, you and Jared aren't...?"

Juanita slowly shook her head. “No, honey. Jared is still deeply in love with you.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “If that’s the case, then why in the hell won’t he talk to me? Never mind,” Donna waved it off. “It doesn’t make any difference now, anyway. It’s too late for us.”

Juanita’s eyebrows shot up. “What do you mean?”

“I’m pregnant, Juanita.”

Juanita’s mouth gaped. “Donna, you can’t be. You were on oral contraceptives and you’ve had the shot – I gave it to you – remember? You can’t be pregnant!”

“Trust me. I am. I did an EPT last night when we got back from the carnival.”

“And it tested positive?”

Donna nodded. “Yep!”

“Oh my God. Then Jared *has* to talk to you. You have to tell him about the baby. He can’t do this to you!”

“Juanita... it’s not...” she broke off, swallowed hard and started again. “Jared is not the father of this baby. It’s either Richard’s or Sam’s. I’m hoping you’ll do an ultrasound and examine me. I need to know how far along I am, so I know what to do next.”

“Do you want to do it now, or wait until after breakfast? Have you had any morning sickness, yet?”

Donna shook her head. “No, but I got sick on a carnival ride – something called Top Buzz. Man! Talk about churning your stomach.”

“As you know, a small percentage of women who never suffer from morning sickness. Maybe you’ll be one of the lucky ones.”

Donna arched an eyebrow. “I haven’t been lucky in anything else. I wish you were staying.”

Juanita pressed her lips into a thin line. “I do too, honey, especially now. I’d love to be here to help you through this, but I have to get back to Mama. Are you going to tell Jared?”

“No! Please don’t. It’ll just give him one more reason not to forgive me. I still love him, Juanita. I wish I didn’t, but I do.”

Juanita’s eyes glossed. “I’m so sorry, honey. I wish things could work out for you two. I know he loves you. He’s just so... stubborn about some things. He keeps talking about destiny, and choices and consequences. It makes little sense to me, but he lives by it. I tried to convince him to at least talk to you, but he won’t.”

Donna shook her head. “Like I said, it doesn’t matter. I have to think about the baby and what’s best for it.”

“What about what’s best for you, Donna?”

“My wants and needs just got put on the back burner, Juanita. My main concern now is the welfare of this baby. Happiness and love take second place.”

Juanita smiled. “If it’s Richard’s baby, I don’t think you’ll be lacking in either of those things.”

Donna sighed, remembering how it felt to sleep in Richard’s arms last night. “I know, but if it turns out to be Sam’s....”

“Come get them while they’re hot!” Richard called out from the dining room.

“Guess we’d better go and at least attempt to eat his eggs,” Juanita commented and stood. “If he’s as good at cooking as Jared is....”

Donna’s eyes widened. “I thought you said you weren’t together.”

“We’re not, Donna. He made breakfast for me one morning – that’s all.”

Donna stood and softly smiled. “How did it turn out?”

“We decided the next time we shared breakfast that I would do the cooking.”

“Richard... I can tell you right now, you’re a much better cook than Jared,” Juanita commented.

“Oh, I wouldn’t go that far, Juanita,” Richard responded. “I’m afraid my skills are limited to salads and scrambled eggs.”

Juanita laughed. "Like I said, you're a much better cook. I don't think I've ever eaten drier scrambled eggs than the ones Jared made."

Donna cleared her throat and stood to put the dishes away. "So, what have you found out about Alan?"

"According to his medical records, Alan suffered from rheumatic fever as a child. As a result of that, he has atrial fibrillation. Whatever happened to him during the attack almost took him out."

Richard frowned. "Exactly what is atrial fibrillation?"

Donna smiled. "Atrial fibrillation is faulty communication between the atria - the top half of the heart, and the ventricles - the bottom half of the heart. Between the top and bottom of the heart, there's a valve that controls the flow of blood between them. If it's not working properly you get an irregular heartbeat - atrial fibrillation. Donna paused momentarily, and then continued.

"Without correcting this, it increases the risk of a stroke."

"*Can* you correct it?"

"Yes," Juanita added. "Normally with a patient Alan's age we try and treat it with drugs. There is an operation to *repair* the faulty valve, but I wouldn't recommend it under the circumstances."

Donna sighed. "Let's go see what we can do for him."

Chapter 62

Donna examined Alan. Like Juanita, she agreed, fitting him with a pacemaker and treating him with drugs would only be a temporary solution, but, at his age, the surgical procedure to correct the problem would be just as risky. If they didn't correct the problem, eventually Alan would require a heart transplant, or he would die. As Donna and Juanita saw it, Alan probably couldn't survive either procedure.

Donna sat on the side of Alan's bed. She softly smiled at him. "How are you feeling Alan?"

"I'm a bit winded, and I have the occasional chest pain, but I'm fine, Miss Donna. When can I get out of here, so I can return to me duties? I'm bored rigid. There's not even a bloody telly in here!"

Richard laughed. "You mean your lovely little lady doctor hasn't explained to you how to use the wallscreens?"

Alan frowned. "What's a wallscreen, Master Richard?"

"VICi," Richard said. "Wallscreen on. Display BBC1, current broadcast. Focus, Alan Jones."

The wall across from the foot of the bed started broadcasting the news. Alan's mouth gaped.

"If you don't like the channel, or it's too loud, or not loud enough, then just tell the computer. Always remember to say VICi, first and then what you want her to do."

Alan sighed. "That sounds easy enough."

"It works sort of like our smart TVs at the Hall, but it can also display scenes real-time. For example. VICi, display view from back portico at Triplet Hall."

The wallscreen changed, and Alan watched a gardener, at Triplet Hall mowing the grass, between the back garden and the duck pond.

"Wow!" Donna commented. "That's actually happening now?"

“Yes. VICi uses her satellite in the same way as Google Earth, only she doesn’t use digital images. She connects with the security cameras at the Hall and displays that.”

Juanita grinned. “I can see where that feature might be a little embarrassing.”

“Don’t worry, Juanita,” Richard chuckled. “It doesn’t pick up what’s happening inside the house.”

Donna visibly breathed a sigh of relief.

“But…” Richard grinned, glancing at Donna from the corner of his eye, “Should you put yourself in a… compromising position outside, then yes, VICi would pick that up.”

Donna’s breath caught; her face turned red. “Oh shit!” she murmured under her breath and looked down at her feet. “For right now, could you turn it off? I need to talk to Alan about his condition.”

“Of course,” Richard smiled. “VICi, wallscreen off.”

“Thank you. OK, here’s the situation, Alan,” Donna began. “This problem with your heart isn’t going away – not this time. I know Sam has been treating you with drugs, but I think the time has come that we need to fit you with a pacemaker. Juanita and Jared will do that for you. Then, you’ll need to spend a few days in the infirmary, so you can build your strength up. After that, you’ll be released, but I do *not* want you to return to your normal duties, at Triplet Hall.”

Alan frowned and opened his mouth to protest. Donna softly smiled and held up a hand. “I know that’s not what you wanted to hear, but I’m afraid, for the time being rest is the best thing for you. I want to see how well you respond to the pacemaker and treatment, then we’ll talk about you going back to work. I know you’re worried about Sir Richard, but I’ve already spoken to him about this, and he said to tell you to listen to me and do what I said. He’ll be in to see you later on today.”

Alan groaned. “Yes, Miss Donna,” he sighed.

“Good,” Donna smiled, patted his hand, and stood to leave. Richard and Juanita followed her into the waiting area.

“Now that Alan is taken care of,” Juanita said. “Why don’t you go in here, change into one of the gowns and we’ll see how far along you are. Richard, do you want to stay?”

Richard studied Donna’s eyes. “I’d like to if it’s OK with Donna.”

Donna frowned. “He can come in after you’ve done the pelvic exam.”

Juanita chuckled. “Donna, I don’t have to do that. Just go change and I’ll show you what I’m talking about.”

Juanita waited until Donna closed the door. “I assume you want this fed to the HIC, so you can extrapolate on the baby’s growth?”

“Yes, please, Juanita.”

A couple of minutes later, Donna came out. “There’s no split down the back.”

“There doesn’t have to be,” Juanita said, gently guiding Donna to a biobed. She positioned Donna’s head, hands and feet, so they were inside the reading area. “Now, just relax and breathe normally. The first thing I’m going to do is take a body scan of you. That’s so VICi has your overall profile recorded in her database. VICi, full body scan. Display on wallscreen and above biobed. Do not remove clothing.”

Richard frowned at Juanita. “Spoilsport!” he groaned.

Juanita laughed. “Richard, if this is your baby, I’d say you’ve already seen more than you needed to.”

Donna laughed. A narrow beam of light started at her head, went down the full length of her body and back to her head. “I’m sorry, Juanita. I moved. Do you need to do it again?”

VICi; Initial body scan complete. Subject, Donna Marie Rigden. Data recorded. Awaiting further instructions.

“Do you want to know the baby’s sex?”

Donna glanced at Richard and nodded. “Yes....”

“VICi, enhance image. Focus on reproductive system. Determine stage of pregnancy and information on foetus.”

Donna held her breath. *Please, don't be Sam's.*

VICi; Subject is in first trimester of pregnancy. Foetus is male and in the third week of development. No abnormalities.

Donna let her breath out. “It’s yours,” she said and looked up at Richard through glossy eyes.

Richard reached for her hand, lacing his fingers with hers. “Looks like you were right about Daria. She’s not a fake.”

Donna swallowed hard. “Thanks, Juanita.”

“You’re welcome, honey, and congratulations. Looks like I’m going to be an honourable aunt.”

“I still don’t want Jared or Sam to know about this,” Donna warned. “Jared doesn’t need to know, and I’ll tell Sam, when I’m ready.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Richard said. “VICi, code and voice print record, authorisation, Richard Triplet, code RT1B, physician allowed, Dr. Juanita Walton, confirm.”

VICi; Authorisation and voiceprint confirmed. Medical record sealed.

“I have a question, Juanita. At this early stage of my pregnancy, what did you use to determine the baby’s sex?”

“VICi accessed your lab work to see if there was any Y chromosomes present in your bloodstream.”

Donna looked surprised. “And she analysed it that fast?”

“Yes - amazing technology. I’m going to miss it, anyway, you can go change now. I think Richard has a surprise for you.”

“I wish your dad had told me about this gadget. I could have found out about Linda Wilson’s baby.” Donna turned her attention to Richard. “That reminds me, have you heard from Sam, yet?”

“No, pet, I haven’t. We probably won’t hear anything until this afternoon. Now go get changed. Juanita is right. I have something I want to show you.”

After giving Donna a brief tour of the genetic labs, Richard led her to the back room. In front of them stood what looked to Donna to be some kind of decompression chamber. "VICi, initialise holographic imaging chamber. Load Donna Rigden's body scan. Focus on foetus. Extrapolate growth based on neural and structural development. Increase time by thirty-seven weeks and animate. Notify me when the chamber is ready."

Donna's mouth gaped. Her heart started pounding. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

Richard smiled. "How would you like to see our son?"

Donna's eyes glossed. She pressed her lips together and nodded.

VICi; Holographic imaging chamber is ready. Program loaded.

Richard took Donna's hand. "In that case, come with me and I'll show you our new toy. VICi, open chamber door."

Donna smiled and followed him inside. "VICi, close and seal chamber door." Richard put his hands on Donna's shoulders and guided her. "Stand behind that line on the floor and focus your attention in front of you. Back a bit - that's right. Now, bear in mind, this is a simulation and a rough estimate of what he'll look like after he's born. VICi, run program."

Richard stood behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Keep your eyes on the cylinder of light directly in front of us."

The chamber made a series of beeps and a sparkling display of static appeared in the cylinder. The static slowly started to connect, much like an interlaced image appears on a computer monitor, leaving behind an image that appeared to be in solid 3D format.

The baby's image appeared. Richard's eyes glossed. Donna covered her gaping mouth. "Oh my God!" she gasped. "He's so perfect, Richard. Can I touch him?"

Richard swallowed hard. "Gary and Jeff Wein, the head of our electronics department are working on getting us there, but

I'm afraid we haven't quite reached that stage yet. I know he looks... extremely lifelike, but it's not solid, as such. You can manipulate his image, though."

He positioned his hands under hers. "Until you get the hang of this – because it's very sensitive - relax your hands and let me guide you. We're going to use our hands and fingers, much like you would a computer mouse. Tap or pinch to move things around. Treat the HIC much like you would a multi-touch smartphone."

Richard slowly turned the image around, so they were looking at the baby's face. To their amazement, the baby opened its aqua blue eyes and smiled at them as if he already knew who they were. "This... is... amazing," Donna choked.

"Want to see him as a toddler?"

"Please," Donna nodded.

"VICi, based on same data, increase time to two years."

They watched as the image of the infant morphed to a small boy. "He has your facial features, pet."

"That may be true, but he has your beautiful blue eyes."

Richard swallowed the lump in his throat. "Let's just hope he has your singing voice, and musical talent," he softly chuckled.

"Can I see him at ten years?"

Richard furrowed his brow. "Why ten?"

"I don't know. I'd just like to see him at that age."

"Sure. VICi, increase time to ten years. Shorten hair to match my style."

Silent tears slid down Donna's cheeks. She slowly dropped to her knees, so her face was level with the image of the boy. Richard knelt beside her and held her. "He looks like a younger version of you, Richard."

Richard pressed his cheek to hers. "I know, pet. I think if more women had the opportunity to see their unborn child as you and I have, there would be fewer abortions in the World."

“Yes, there would be. It’s harder for some people to think of a tiny misshaped cluster of cells as a human being. This makes it real.”

“So, are you impressed with the HIC?”

Donna stared at the image of her ten-year-old son. “I’m more than impressed, Richard. I’m beyond words.”

Richard stood and lifted her to her feet. “VICi, save images to my personal area and end program. Open chamber doors. So, are you ready to meet my grandmother?”

Donna smiled and nodded. “Yes.”

“Let’s visit with Missy and John, and then we’ll collect Tim and go.”

Apart from Alan’s grim diagnosis, the day had gone well for Richard and Donna. Sam was in Newcastle, busy finding out what happened to Tina. Jared had not shown his face and Richard and Donna had spent several hours visiting with Melissa and John. Donna could see from the way they looked at each other, despite their divorce, and years of separation John and Melissa still appeared to be very much in love with each other. After seeing a clear image of what hers and Richard’s son would be like, Donna had given a lot of thought to being a mother. She couldn’t wait to hold her son.

Richard had given it a lot of thought, as well. Seeing their baby, and Donna’s reaction to it had convinced him. He loved Donna and wanted a future with her and their baby. He just wasn’t sure when and how to approach the subject. He decided to give her some time to get used to the idea, first.

Donna had basically told Richard that although she had strong feelings for him, she was not in love with him. However that had been before the carnival, and Sam and Joyce’s little act of indiscretion. Richard didn’t have a clue as to why that had happened, or who had been responsible, but he was grateful, nonetheless.

At first, Richard was afraid Donna might find out that he’d told Daria what to say to her, but that hadn’t happened either.

In fact, other than what Donna told him, Richard had no idea what Daria said, or what happened on the other side of those silk curtains. Now the only thing bothering Richard was whether or not his and Donna's rather tender-blossomed relationship could survive his grandmother. Other than Jared changing his mind, if there was one thing that could make Donna run away screaming, it would be his grandmother, Lady Annabelle Triplet, Sir Richard's mother.

Chapter 63

Richard parked his black Mercedes in front of Langston Castle. John and McGowan pulled in beside them in the Escalade. Donna looked up in awe at the huge stone slab facing her. It was the first time she'd been near a real castle.

Donna and Richard walked up the steps to an impressive iron-studded oak door. Donna turned to John and McGowan. "Aren't you coming?"

"We'll wait out here to guard the ah – the threat." John responded. *It's safer out here. The real threat is already in the castle.*

Just as Richard reached for the door-pull, the door swung open revealing a well-dressed frail looking little lady with silver hair. "At last we meet!" Lady Triplet said to Donna and glanced out at John and McGowan. "Why did you bring the Reavers?"

Richard softly chuckled. "Grandma, you're looking well."

"Come on in Donna. Let's get acquainted. Ricky you can come too. Leave the lumps outside." Lady Triplet took Donna's arm and despite the cane in her other hand, practically yanked her inside.

Lady Triplet led them through the huge entrance hall to a door at the right-hand wall. Beyond the door was a large, impressively decorated parlour. "You can sit by me, my Dear." Lady Triplet led Donna to the sofa in front of a huge fireplace.

Donna still hadn't had a chance to speak. Lady Triplet rattled on. "Now I know you're American, Dear, but I won't hold that against you. You've only been here since - let me see - the fifth. Yes, that's right. Now tell me, Dear, what do you think of England?"

"How should I address you? Lady Triplet or Lady Annabelle?" She's exhausting me just listening to her. Is she ever going to take a breath?

“Grandma will do nicely, but whatever you prefer is fine. Will you take some tea? Ricky ring the bell for Vera. Stop standing there gawking lad. Give Donna a chance to speak. Now Donna, tell me, what part of Louisiana were your family from? Were they Creole? They’re such interesting people. It was very hot when I visited New Orleans. I had a wonderful time. I was just a bit disappointed that I didn’t get to see a cotton plantation.”

How did she know my parents weren’t alive? This woman must have a wound-up spring in her somewhere. Wonder where the off switch is – if she even has one. “Well there really aren’t that many cotton plantations until you get to....”

Lady Triplet interrupted her mid-sentence. “I don’t know how you stand it being so hot there!”

Vera wheeled a tea cart next to Lady Triplet.

“Oh! Our tea is here. Vera just put it down on the table here, and I will serve. Cream, milk or lemon - Do you take sugar Donna - one lump or two?”

Richard chuckled. “Grandma, slow down. You’ve hardly let her say a word.”

“Oh nonsense Ricky, we’re having such a nice chat, aren’t we Donna Dear? Don’t interrupt. Go tell Vera to take some tea out to those goons. No! Wait a minute, you take it and leave us ladies to get to know each other. And tell the ‘Sherriff of Nottingham’ that if he breaks my china I’ve got a new rack in the dungeon that I’m just itching to try out.”

Richard shook his head and smiled. He went into the kitchen, prepared a tea tray and took it out to John and McGowan. He gingerly sat the tea tray on the bonnet of the Escalade.

John suspiciously looked at his tea. “What kind of mood is she in today? Is it poisoned?”

“I really don’t know what sort of mood she’s in. As for the tea, it’s alright. I poured it myself, but I have to warn you, she threatened you with the rack if you broke her china.”

“What was Donna’s reaction?” Bet she’s ready to run. Richard, you never should have brought Donna here! After this, she’ll run straight to Sam’s arms and won’t look back!

“I’m not sure. She’s hardly had a chance to say anything.”

At that moment, there was a loud smack as a series of water bombs fell around them. Most hit the ground, apart from a few that had been precision-aimed. One hit Richard square on the top of his head. He was not happy.

Cackling laughter and giggles rang from the turrets. Donna called out from the top of the castle. “Did we get you?”

Richard looked at John in disgust as the green water dripped down his face. He took out his white handkerchief and started dabbing it off.

John attempted to wipe his drenched head with his sleeve and slowly looked up. “Just a lot!” He shook his fist at Lady Triplet. “You evil old witch you’ve led her astray already!”

Peals of laughter echoed from the turrets. “Come on up, you boys. I couldn’t resist that. I’ve been itching to try these water bombs since the scouts left them here,” Lady Triplet chortled loudly.

Vera met them with towels as they climbed the castle stairs. “She has a pretty good aim for a lady nearing her centenary. You should have seen her running up the stairs. It was all Miss Donna could do to keep up with her.”

Donna fought to keep a straight face, but it wasn’t easy with bits of algae matted in Richard’s hair. From the incredibly innocent look on Donna’s face, he wondered whether she’d hit him on purpose or if it were just a lucky shot. “I see you’ve had the roof repaired,” Richard commented.

“Well, I guess your father is good for some things. She dragged him by the arm. “Now Ricky,” she said pointing to a cell phone tower about half a mile away, down the valley. “I want you to look over there at that awful monstrosity that we can see from the ramparts.”

Richard shielded his eyes with his hand and tried to focus in the direction Lady Triplet was pointing. All he could see was something about the size of a pencil, if that big.

“Did you know they had the cheek to ask me if they could put one on top of here? Awful, ugly things. I told them if they had to have one of those things, they should put it in the church steeple and not spoil the look of the place, but no, they said it was too expensive to do that and everyone wanted their cell phones to work - dreadful things.” She glowered at John.

John sheepishly put his cell phone back in his pocket. She’s just a little old lady. Why does she intimidate me?

“You know you two make a lovely couple. Ricky, why haven’t you got a ring on this girl’s hand?”

Richard coughed into his fist and cleared his throat. *God I’m going to kill her!* “I’m... working on it Grandma.”

“Well get up the nerve Lad, before somebody like that gigolo of a doctor at the Centre beats you to it! Ricky is so sweet, Donna, and he would make a lovely father to your children. Don’t you agree?”

Donna’s eyes widened. “Um... yes, Lady Triplet. I suppose he w....”

“Now all we have to do is decide on a date! I think sooner is better. I’ve never been one for long engagements. Sometimes people just have to do what they have to do and get on with it. Isn’t that right Donna Dear?”

Donna frowned. “I suppose if you’ve made your mind up to....”

Lady Triplet rattled on. “I know just where you could have the ceremony. In my chapel. Did Ricky tell you I had a chapel in the castle, Donna? Would you like to see it? What about your wedding dress? Have you picked one out? You know you’re welcome to use mine. It might need a nip and a tuck here and there, but I’m sure it would fit.” Lady Triplet giggled. “I was quite the dish in those days. Oh you’d look so lovely in it.”

Donna was feeling trapped. She and Richard hadn't even talked about the baby yet, and now his grandmother had them practically engaged. Richard noticed she looked a little apprehensive.

"Grandma," Richard interjected, "Donna is a lot taller than you. The dress would be up to her knees! Besides, we haven't even talked about getting married. Stop putting words in her...."

"...Nonsense Ricky! It was too long on me, and there's a two-inch tuck just under the bodice, we could let that out and...."

Richard groaned at her persistence. "Even with it let out two-inches it would still be too short! You're not listening to me. Donna and I aren't even engaged. At this rate, we never will be!"

"Oh well, then, never mind." She patted Donna's hand. "I'm sure you'll be lovely in whatever you wear. It's just getting to the altar that counts, isn't it Dear?"

God! Talk about overbearing and eccentric. Richard, they're understatement. Why does she keep looking at me that way? "Yes... I suppose it...."

"Well Ricky, I want you to know I approve of your young lady here. You've made a wonderful choice, unlike that father of yours. Now if he'd married a girl like Donna - come to think of it - he almost *did* marry a girl who looked just like you Donna. Well that's a long time ago. We won't go into that." Lady Triplet stood and glanced at her watch. "Well you really must excuse me Dears. Ricky, why don't you take Donna up and show her your apartment. I need to check on the farm. It's been so nice to meet you Donna. We'll talk again later on. Where you sleep is entirely up to you, but the apartment has three bedrooms. It's on the third floor. I've had it prepared since Ricky's twenty-fourth birthday. It's yours for the duration of your stay here. Jack has moved all your things in there. Oh! You might need this." She handed Richard a key. "Away you go Dears! If you don't mind, I'll go down in the

lift. These old bones of mine aren't getting any younger. Vera, let me know when my son arrives."

Donna turned to Richard. "Where's the farm?"

Richard waved it off and led her to the stairs. "I'll explain later."

"You didn't tell me you had an apartment in the castle."

"After you and Jared got together, I didn't expect to ever use it. I must say, I'm pleased for the opportunity. By the way, I'd like to apologise for Grandma's match-making session. At times, she can be blunt. She obviously approves of our being together here. Now you understand what I meant when I said it's better to appease her than trying to argue her down."

Donna laughed. "Yes, I do, but, all-in-all, I thought she was nice – eccentric, but nice."

Richard stopped in front of an oak door, similar to the one at the entrance of the castle. "Brace yourself and bear in mind, I had nothing to do with the design of this apartment." Richard pushed the door open and scooped Donna into his arms.

Donna narrowed her eyes and wrapped her arms around his neck. "What are you doing?"

"Following tradition," Richard grinned and carried her across the threshold. Setting her on her feet, Richard tenderly kissed her and took her hand. "So, do you think you can stand living here, for a while?"

Donna softly smiled and studied his eyes. "I can if you'll do me a favour."

"What's that?"

"Take a shower. You smell like a stagnant pond."

Richard grinned wryly. "That would be your fault. You could always take a shower with me."

Donna sighed and lowered her head. "I'm sorry, Richard, but not this time."

Richard lifted her chin. "It's OK. I was teasing. Do you mind if I show you around before I shower?"

"I guess I can hold my nose that long," she teased.

The third floor of the castle had been converted into a fully furnished apartment. It had three en-suite bedrooms, one with a dressing room. There was a lounge; dining room; fully equipped kitchen; study and plenty of room for storage. Even the refrigerator and cupboards had been stocked with food and drink.

A couple of hours later, Sir Richard's helicopter landed on the grounds at Langston Castle. He, Jason Howard and Joe Islington got out. John met him outside. "So what did she do to you this time, John?"

"Only stood on the ramparts and threw water bombs at us, but this time she didn't just get me. She got Ricky too. Or, better yet, Donna got Ricky."

Sir Richard sniffed John's hair. "How old was the water? You smell as if you just crawled out of the duck pond."

"I have no idea, but it was green with algae."

"If Donna hit Ricky with the same stuff, I hope he took a shower. Where are they?"

John grinned. "In Ricky's apartment. They haven't come down."

"So, I guess Donna is going to stick it out, then."

"Yes, Sir. I'd say they both are. They spent about two hours with me and Missy in our quarters at the complex. They seem as chummy as they were in the States before we left."

"What about Jared? Did she see him?"

"No, Sir. He decided to stay out of sight until she left. That man has more willpower in his little finger than Sam has in his entire body. I don't know how he does it."

"Well, let's get inside before Mum sends out a search party."

Forrest's doctor came in to check on him. The IV solution containing the harvested stem cells was almost empty. Checking his vitals, he noted Forrest had stabilised. He turned to Liu, who was sitting in a chair in the corner, casually reading his

newspaper. "He should start responding, soon," Dr. Phorrestson informed.

Liu impassively glanced over the top of his paper. "Has everything been set up? I'm tired of guarding a corpse."

Reaching into his pocket, Dr. Phorrestson produced a bottle of clear liquid and a hypodermic syringe. "This mixture should do the trick," he said, holding out his hand.

Liu took the bottle, read the name and put it in his pocket. He motioned to the bed. "When do you expect him to come round?"

"It's hard to tell, but possibly by morning. His vitals have stabilised faster than I'd expected. If he takes it easy, he should be able to return to his normal duties, within a month or so."

Liu clenched his teeth and nodded. Dr. Phorrestson left. He stood and leaned close to Forrest's ear. "Time to wake up, old man. You wouldn't want to miss your grand finale. I'll be glad when you're gone. You pathetic shell of a man. I'm going to enjoy your fortunes and your women."

As if it were only a reflex, without opening his eyes, Forrest's hand shot up and grabbed the front of Liu's shirt, yanking him forward and choking him. *You need to be careful what you say to a dying man, John Liu. Before you put me in my grave, perhaps you should wait until I've stopped breathing.*

Chapter 64

Vera showed Sir Richard, John, and the other three security men to the drawing room. Lady Triplet looked up from her book. She slowly closed it and tucked it in the side of her recliner. "You're early." She tilted her head to the side and waited.

Sir Richard sighed and lightly brushed his lips against her cheek, before sitting on the sofa, across from her. John and his men hovered a few feet from the doorway. Lady Triplet cut her eyes at John and frowned. "Oh do sit down, John," she ordered with a wave. "You're making me nervous standing up there like palace guards. Vera get these men some tea!"

John sat next to Sir Richard. His men sat on the small sofa to the side. Vera left. Lady Triplet waited until Vera was out of earshot. Her mood turned serious as she focused her full attention on her son. "You're in a real mess this time aren't you?" she rhetorically asked, shaking her head. "I suppose I'll have to sort you out again." She paused briefly to study his eyes, slowly arching an eyebrow. "It's strange how history has a habit of repeating itself," she continued, shifting in her chair and quietly clearing her throat. "I wasn't expecting you, until later."

Sir Richard groaned. "It's good to see you too, Mum," he responded, forcing a smile. "I'm early, because of what Sam Kaliea found out about Tina Phillips, one of our lab techs, at the Centre."

"You must mean the Korean girl who had been bedding Gary and feeding information to our enemies. She didn't die of an overdose of cocaine. Did she? You don't have a clue who killed her."

Sir Richard shared a worried glance with John. "Mum, how do you find out so much when you hardly ever leave the castle?"

“Richard, you should know by now, nothing gets past me. You sent Ricky and Donna here for protection, and you were right to do so. If they get the chance the hoodlums that slaughtered Wilson and his wife will go after them to get to you. With all the possible ways of getting into the Hall, you should have known it wouldn’t be safe.”

They? John arched an eyebrow. She knows there’s more than one!

Sir Richard frowned. “Mum, how did you know about Wilson and his wife? The police weren’t involved in that. Are you spying on the Hall?”

Do you have to ask? John tucked his chin and softly snorted. Of course, she’s spying on us. Probably by staring into her witch’s cauldron.

Vera served the tea. “Thank you, Vera,” Sir Richard said and gingerly sipped it.

“That’s all, Vera.” Again, Lady Triplet waited until Vera had left the room. “So go on. Tell me what the womaniser found out,” she continued, avoiding Sir Richard’s question.

Sir Richard slowly arched an eyebrow and set the bait. “The same substance that was used to poison Missy cleverly disguised by an overdose of cocaine.”

Lady Triplet narrowed her eyes. “Well... go on. Tell me what it was?”

It didn’t pay to play guessing games with his mother. She was a pro. Her logic was impeccable. Frustrated, Sir Richard groaned. “Cerbera, Mum – sap from what’s known as the suicide tree.”

“The mark of the enemy...” she muttered.

Sir Richard frowned and leaned forward. “Pardon...?”

John watched them out the corner of his eye; seemingly uninterested. The other security men glanced at John. He narrowed his eyes, cleared his throat and scratched his chin, covertly shaking his head.

“The Weng Fe Tong – suicide sap – it’s one of their methods of eliminating their enemies. You’re obviously doing

something they're not happy with, and the Chinese branch of The Order are voicing their opinion."

"So... you think we're up against Forrest and The Weng Fe Tong? Is that who you think killed Tina?"

"They'll likely be working for Forrest, or making him believe they are. Weng Fe Tong wouldn't be involved unless it was in their interest. From the amount of animosity at your last meeting in Kent, surely you sensed this."

"Mum, you're retired from The Order. You know I can't discuss what goes on in the meetings."

Lady Triplet smiled condescendingly. "Retirement does not mean ignorance, Richard. Don't assume, because I don't attend the meetings that I don't know what goes on in them! Do you think I would give our enemies that big of an advantage over us?"

Sir Richard's eyebrows shot up. "You have a spy in The Order?"

"Spy?" Lady Triplet shook her head and chuckled. "What makes you think there's only one? Anyway let's get down to business. This is what I know. You have your senior genetics team working on a medical project. You had that womaniser working on it too, but Donna came to her senses and gave him the boot, which was a wise choice. If he hadn't already, he would have eventually broken her heart. She's much better off with Ricky, and we both know that. Especially now that she's carrying his child."

Sir Richard's mouth gaped. "Ricky hasn't slept with Donna. She's been with Sam ever since she got here!"

Lady Triplet sighed, shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Oh Come on Richard! He's your son, for heaven's sake. You don't think Ricky spent all that time in the States, just so he could hold Donna's hand, do you?"

Sir Richard cut his eyes at John who looked as shocked as Sir Richard. "Sir, I don't know anything about this."

Lady Triplet laughed. "Like I said, Richard. He's your son."
"Did you ask them?"

“No, I haven’t, and neither are you. They’ll tell us when they’re ready,” she waved it off. “Now... as to your project. I know you’re going after the death gene, and I know why. Others will want it, but that’s not what Forrest is after. He’s after our Donna. He’s under the impression that she can save his life by giving him a bone marrow transplant.”

Sir Richard narrowed his eyes. “Donna is *not* related to Forrest in any form or fashion. She’s not even a *possible* genetic match for him. Why would he think such a preposterous thing?”

“Because his doctor lied to him. Forrest knows Donna is not a genetic match. He screened her and every other employ at D’Netics when he was first diagnosed. This was probably the work of the Weng Fe Tong, as well.”

John scoffed. “As usual, Forrest is trying to save his worthless hide.”

Lady Triplet glanced at John out of the corner of her eye. “Yes! And in Forrest’s condition, it seems his judgement has been impaired. Otherwise, he would never have teamed up with them. They’ll stab him in the back and us as well if we give them the chance.”

A slow smile spread across Sir Richard’s mouth as his mind drifted back to the revelation about Donna. Everything else in the room faded out. *Donna is pregnant? Richard is going to be a father. His eyes glossed at the thought. I’m going to be a grandfather!*

“Richard! Are you listening to me?”

“What? Oh – yes, Mum. I agree. Where are Richard and Donna? I need to talk to them. I’ve brought the DVD.”

Lady Triplet smiled and stood. “In their love nest. They haven’t poked their heads out for the last two hours.”

“Were you planning on being there, as well?”

“Does that bother you?”

“Of course not, Mum. You can help me explain. Just remember, this will likely come as a shock to Donna.”

“I’m not going to spoil my chance at becoming a great-grandmother. Let’s go refresh their memories.”

“John, you can come to. The rest of you find something to do until we’ve taken care of this,” Sir Richard added as he turned to leave.

Richard was sitting on the sofa reading his Kindle. There was a knock on the door. He frowned, finished reading the rest of the paragraph and laid his Kindle on the coffee table. “Looks like we’ve got our first visitor!” he called out. “Better put the kettle on for tea. It’ll probably be Grandma.”

“I’ll put the kettle on!” Donna yelled back. “You can make the tea.”

Richard grinned as he greeted his guests. “Make that our first *visitors!*” he called out, turning his head slightly. “Come in and sit down. Donna’s in the kitchen, making a snack.”

Lady Triplet sniffed Richard’s head and smiled. “I see Donna made you take a shower.”

“I need to do the same,” John groaned.

Sir Richard turned up his nose and followed them into the lounge. “Yes, you do....”

John leaned close to Sir Richard’s ear. “Remind me to add a raincoat to my list of equipment, before visiting your Mum again.”

“Sit down,” Richard said, motioning to the sofas. He helped Lady Triplet to one of the recliners. “I’m going to pop in the kitchen and help Donna with the tea.”

Approaching her from behind, he waited until Donna set the baking sheet on top of the cooker, and then wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing the side of her neck. “These smell lovely. What are they?”

Donna softly smiled. “Syrup cookies – my grandmother’s recipe - at least that’s what they’re supposed to be. I had to substitute the type of syrup she normally used with golden syrup. There’s no telling what they’ll taste like.”

“I’m sure they will be lovely, pet,” Richard responded and took out some teacups with matching saucers.

Donna turned off the oven. “I hope so. It’s been years since I last made them.” She started stacking the biscuits on an oval platter.

Richard cupped her chin and softly kissed her. “You know, pet... this would be a perfect opportunity to tell them about the baby. The only person missing is Gary, and we could tell him the first chance we get.”

Donna sighed. “Maybe – we’ll see.” She picked up the platter of biscuits and followed Richard into the lounge. “Good!” she grinned. “I’ve got guinea pigs.”

“Hello, petal,” Sir Richard smiled and sniffed. “Those smell familiar.”

“Well, considering what Richard told me about my past, you might have had them before. They’re my grandmother’s syrup cookies.”

Sir Richard took a bite of one of the biscuits and closed his eyes, savouring the flavour. “Oh yes! I remember these. John?”

John chuckled. “It’s been a while, but there are certain flavours the palette never forgets.”

Richard sat in the other recliner. Donna sat on the arm. Sir Richard looked at John and nodded. John stood. “Donna, why don’t you sit over on the settee with Sir Richard? I’ll get a chair from the dining room.”

“I’m fine here,” Donna responded.

Sir Richard reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a jewelled DVD case. “You can probably see better from over here,” he said, holding it up. “I’ve got something I’d like you and Ricky to watch.”

Donna studied his eyes. “Is this what you were telling me about at the Centre?”

“Yes, petal, it is,” he said, sliding down and making room. “John, why don’t you move the recliner around, so Mum can see the screen, too?”

Lady Triplet propped one hand on her cane and the other on the arm of the recliner, rising to her feet. Donna sat next to Sir Richard on the sofa. Richard sat next to her and laid his arm across her shoulders.

Sir Richard turned. “Donna, I know you’re probably confused that I didn’t say something about this when you asked me to help you find out about your mother, but trust me. If there’s anyone, other than you who wants to know if your mother is alive, it’s me. After you see the video, you’ll understand.”

Chapter 65

Donna was surprised to see an image of her mother appear on the screen. Her mother began to speak.

‘Hi D, There’s so much I want to tell you, but I’ve run out of time. If you’re watching this, then I’m no longer there to protect you, and the responsibility has been passed to your grandmother and your godfather. Listen to your grandmother. She is wise beyond imagination. She holds secrets in her heart, I never shared with anyone.

Although your birth was not planned, I have never regretted it for one second. You have been my rock and my safety net to reality. I love you, more than you could ever imagine.

Donna, most of the time, things are not always what they seem. Remember this - stand up for yourself! Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Don’t be afraid to say ‘no’ when you don’t agree and most of all don’t let anybody tell you, you can’t do something. You can, you just have to try. Be persistent no matter the odds. Above all things always follow your heart.

Things might sometimes get a little sticky, but I’ve learned in the end, love is the only real reality. When true love finds you, and I’m sure it will, be prepared to take a leap of faith. Often love can be staring you right in the eyes, and you miss it because you’re blinded by reality. Love has nothing to do with reality. It’s in a realm all its own, and therein lies the secret to peace and happiness.....’

Donna’s eyes glossed as she continued to stare at her mother’s image, frozen on the screen. Richard lifted her chin, so their eyes met. He smiled. “I know where you got your pretty looks.”

“She said my grandmother and my godfather. I don’t *have* a godfather, at least not that I know of. What does all this mean?”

“There’s more Donna, just wait,” Sir Richard said. A few seconds later an image of Donna’s grandmother appeared.

‘My dear, precious little girl. I can call you that because since your mother and father were taken, that’s what you’ve been - my little girl. Although I could never fill your mother’s shoes, I hope I have at least done my best.

I know you’re feeling very alone right now but, you’re not an orphan, at least not yet. There is someone else who will watch over you - your godfather. He has always been there, and he always will be, even if he stands in the shadows at times.

Donna, what I’m about to tell you is going to seem harsh. You may not want to believe it, but the man you knew as your father, was not by any means an honest man. He was involved with some pretty shady people that hold little regard for human life. His and your mother’s marriage was one of forced convenience.

Your mother endured a lot to give you as normal a life as possible. She didn’t love your father and never would.

Your mother and godfather were in love and had planned to marry. They were working together to expose Forrest and your father.’

The scene shifted to an image of Triplet Hall at Christmas. A young Sir Richard, remarkably similar in appearance to Richard was playing chess with another man in front of the fire. Donna recognised him as her father.

The view shifted to a woman at the dining room door. Donna didn’t know who she was. Richard recognised her as his mother.

... ‘Time to eat! Ricky, Donna, Ken, Trip. Come on,’ Martha called from the dining room.

Ken gave a sigh of relief. ‘Saved by the bird!’

‘You lucky sod,’ Sir Richard said. The camera followed them through into the dining room and watched them take their seats.

Marie started to seat a little girl next to her, and she protested.

Donna decided the little girl was her.

“No! Want to sit next to Unc Tip.”

The little girl jumped down, skipped to the other side of the table and climbed in the chair next to Sir Richard. A little boy beside her waited patiently as his mother prepared his plate and set it in front of him.

Sir Richard smiled at Donna and pinched her button nose. ‘Now, let’s see if we can get you started shall we,’ he joked, picking up her plate and filling it with food.

The little girl smiled and bounced in her chair with anticipation until the plate was set in front of her. She took one look at the plate’s contents, pushed it away and turned to Sir Richard. Glaring at him now as she had then, the little girl folded her arms and said in a very mature and determined tone, “Unc Tip If I’ve telled oo one dime, I telled oo a towsun me no ike dem ittle geen babbages!” Everyone laughed.’

Sir Richard softly laughed to himself.

The screen cut to a still image of two children on a beach; the boy with his arm wrapped around the girl.

“Do you remember this, pet?” Richard softly asked. “It’s us.”

“No, I’m sorry. I didn’t even recognise at first, who the children in the movie were.”

Richard smiled. “That’s us when we were kids! Think, Donna - think back. Alright, listen. One day we all went down to the beach. You and I built a sand castle together. You used the red ribbon from your hair to make a flag for the top of the castle. The tide came in and washed it away. You cried, and I held you. I told you not to worry that I would build you another castle. My mother thought it was so cute that she took a picture of us. That’s the picture.” He pointed to the screen. “You couldn’t pronounce the R in my name, so you called me Icky.”

Donna grinned. “I can’t imagine you liked that?”

“I hated it! That’s why I still don’t like being called Ricky today.” He glanced at Sir Richard.

“But if that’s me then...?”

“There’s one more bit then we’ll get to the questions,” Sir Richard said. “This was recorded about a year ago.”

The screen faded, Sir Richard clicked on the next chapter in the menu. Richard was stunned to see an image of his father.

“Hi Donna, this part of the movie and the rest of what you will see on this DVD, was not part of your original video. Through the years, I’ve kept close tabs on you. I’ve used some of my old movies to compile a digital scrapbook for you.

Your mother was my best friend, my lover and would have been my wife. Our plans for the future were destroyed when she was taken from me by the very organisation she and I were working together to expose. I should have pulled her out, but she was like you - high strung and full of fire. I will always blame myself for her death. For that, I will never forgive myself.

No matter what the future may hold, as long as I live, I will always be here for you, and see that you want for nothing. Above all, I promise, Unc Tip will never, ever, try to give you any more of those’ ittle geen babbages.’

Donna pressed her lips together and swallowed the lump in her throat. “I still don’t like Brussels sprouts, Sir Richard.”

“What about Mum, Dad?” Richard asked.

“I didn’t love your mother when I married her. It was a marriage based on duty. After Marie’s death, we grew together and learned to love each other.”

Donna furrowed her brow. “What was my father involved in?”

“Control, Donna,” Lady Triplet spoke up. “You may think that governments control the World, but they don’t. Governments are the mere puppets. It’s the puppeteers that control the show....”

“...This is not going to be easy for you, but you have to know anyway,” Sir Richard interjected. “Kevin Wilson used to

work for me. We fell out over a personal matter, and he moved to the States, and started running D'Netics. Forrest has been behind D'Netics the entire time. It was Wilson who was responsible for your parent's 'accident'."

Donna narrowed her eyes. "How?"

"Forrest recruited ex-service men involved in operation desert storm who had contracted Gulf War syndrome. These men were promised a huge compensation for their families since there was little that could be done for them. They had nothing to lose and Forrest found them easy prey."

"I discovered Forrest was using them to set up a drug trafficking triangle," John said. "They were using ships to move cocaine, from Port Canaveral to Novorossiysk, the main Russian port on the Black Sea. The cocaine was traded for arms, which were then transported by air to Afghanistan, and swapped for opium. On its journey, back to the States by ship, the opium was processed into heroin using a drugs lab, on-board. At each stage of the journey, they made a huge profit. It was the modern equivalent of the slave triangle." John looked to Sir Richard.

"In the beginning, your father was completely unaware of the contraband. As far as Ken knew, what he was doing was legit. He never knew he was involved in an illegal drug ring. I'm sure he had his doubts, but, like all the others working for Forrest, the compensation was worth a little risk and his silence."

Donna frowned. "And the authorities knew nothing about this?"

"They knew it was going on, but they could never figure out how the cocaine left or the heroin entered the USA."

Donna shook her head. "Is the American justice system that inept?"

"Just because the authorities *know* an illegal operation is taking place doesn't mean they can, or *will* act upon it immediately," Lady Triplet interjected.

“To expose an operation like this can take years of planning and hundreds of hours of surveillance. Trust me,” John said. “Twice the ships involved were searched when they reached port. They found nothing. Donna that’s where your mother and Sir Richard were when things went pear shaped.”

Sir Richard set his empty teacup on the coffee table. “Years later, your father decided to do a company audit and was astonished to discover that the sewage company he purchased on behalf of Forrest was actually registered in his name rather than Forrest’s. He told your mother, and your mother told me. The only reason I could think of for the business to be in your father’s name was that Forest didn’t want it in his, to protect himself. It’s a technique often used in a dubious business.”

Sir Richard paused briefly. “My agents were investigating the sewage business. On the surface, it seemed legitimate. Forrest had put a lot of money into modernising the system. In fact, he’d put so much money in it; the sewage company was barely showing a profit. It just wasn’t the sort of business I would have expected Forrest to get in, and certainly not to keep unless he was trying to improve his image. If that was the case, why did he put it in your father’s name?”

“It wasn’t until we delved into the sewage company’s history that we discovered the reason. In the past, there had been little treatment of the sewage produced by the town. It had basically been put through the system, and then pumped out to open sea. There were a number of pipes, which in some cases, were up to five miles long. The local residents had apparently complained, when sewage was washed up on the beach.”

“Since the investment in the sewage company, the pipes were no longer used, but we discovered pumping stations still working on them for no apparent reason. Then we discovered Forrest Enterprises had a number of vehicles travelling in and out of the sewage company going to the pumping stations. The outlets of the pipes just happened to be where the ships anchored, when they queued at the port. We suspected that

somehow, they were transferring the drugs to and from the pipes, and retrieving them at the sewage company. The Drug Enforcement Administration hadn't considered that drugs could be transferred through a sewage pipeline."

"Ken decided to go on an impromptu inspection of the business he *apparently* owned. Despite my better judgement, your mother insisted on going along. She wanted to get photographic evidence of what they found. They hoped to discover the means by which the drugs were transferred at the pumping station. This would have ended the operation, and we would have had Forrest by the testicles. At this point, Wilson became aware of your parents' interests in his clandestine activities."

"He of course, passed the information on to Forrest, and the rest is history. Forrest was forced to shut the operation down, which he did quite expeditiously. After unloading the final shipment, there was a methane explosion at the sewage company, which killed your father instantly. Your mother died on the way to the hospital. I don't know if you remember, but we had to give your parents a closed-casket funeral, because of the damage done to their bodies."

Donna nodded. "Yes, I remember. Didn't anybody ask why my parents were there at the time of the explosion?"

"It was blamed on faulty pressure valves, and of course, the explosion destroyed the evidence. Forrest re-routed the business elsewhere. Wilson arranged the explosion, but always denied knowing your parents would be there."

Donna tightened her jaw. "Their deaths weren't accidental."

"They were too convenient, and timely to be a coincidence. When I couldn't prove anything either way..." Sir Richard said, giving his mother a quick glance, "I was forced to abandon any further action against Forrest *or* Wilson."

"Why didn't you tell me about Wilson's involvement if you knew he was responsible for my parent's death?"

"Because petal, it would have put you in danger. Until Forrest saw you at D'Netics, I don't think he associated you

with Ken and Marie. You were just a young girl when they were killed. Wilson knew who you were, but for some reason, said nothing. That's the one thing that cast doubt on his involvement in their accident. I don't think he realised that Forrest would kill them, and felt guilty for participating."

"But you still could have told me when I got over here instead of waiting until now. You're not involved with Forrest, are you?"

"Not directly," John interjected. "But they are part of the same organisation."

"I'm trying hard to comprehend all this," Donna sighed.

"You see, petal. There is within The Order, a group of people like me who try to control its direction. We try to prevent the worst of the excesses. We can't do this, unless we're part of The Order. If we were on the outside, we would be either powerless or dead." He hesitated, seeing the confusion in her eyes.

"Let me see if I can explain it in simpler terms," Richard added. "I know you won't like this analogy, but imagine a spider's web. The threads radiating from the centre are members of The Order. Dad's organisation is the spiral thread which holds it all together. As separate threads each would follow a different path. Like the spider's web, when the wind blows; the threads become tangled. This leads to conflict and chaos. With the spiral thread, the whole web acts as a unit and is stronger and in harmony with itself. While Dad can't obviate The Order, by working from the inside, he can at least lessen the maliciousness and maintain some sense of balance."

"Donna," Sir Richard interjected. "I'm not bad, and what I do is not bad either, but sometimes I have to make... *difficult* choices. Like the one not to be involved in your life. I wanted to be more than a shadow."

Donna sighed. "I've made a few of those difficult choices myself, lately. What counts is you're here for me now – both of you," she added looking up into Richard's eyes.

He smiled and kissed her forehead. "I'll always be there for you, pet."

"We all will," Lady Triplet added.

"Do you have any questions, Donna?" Sir Richard asked.

"No... I'm fine, for now. If I think of anything, I'll let you know."

"If I should be away, you could always ask Ricky."

Donna softly smiled. "I will..."

"So tell me," Sir Richard said. "What do you think about the apartment and living at the castle?"

"I like the apartment, and the idea of living in a real castle is intriguing. It kind of makes me feel like Lady Guinevere in the movie *First Knight*."

Sir Richard chuckled. "Good, because I don't want you or Ricky to leave the castle grounds for any reason."

Donna's eyes widened. "You found out something about Tina!"

Chapter 66

As soon as Liu had pried Forrest's death grip from the front of his shirt, he got out of the room as quickly as possible. Being choked by a man he'd assume to be at death's door had shaken him. He stood in the corridor of the hotel while he regained his composure and pulled himself together. "Did he actually hear what I said, or was it just a reflex? If it had been a reflex, it was a pretty lucky shot," Liu mused as he leaned his back against the corridor and waited for his heart rate to slow. Before he went back to Forrest's room to make sure, Liu decided he needed a drink. He knocked on Dr. Phorrestson's door and waited.

"Is something wrong with Mr. Forrest?"

"No. I just wanted to let you know I was going down to the bar for a drink. If anything should happen, ring me on my cell phone."

"Why would you think anything would happen to Mr. Forrest? Like I told you before, he should be coming around by morning."

"For someone in a coma, as Mr. Forrest is, would it be possible for him to reach out and grab something?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Liu?"

"I know that some people have been known to move, but to what extent? Would they be able to reach out and grab something and hold on to it?"

"Well, Mr. Liu, that all depends on how much brain damage the patient has suffered, or how long the brain has been deprived of oxygen. According to Dr. Mobley's reports, the first stroke Mr. Forrest had affected the left side of his body, which suggests damage done to the right hemisphere of his cerebrum. There have been documented cases of people being in a coma for as long as nineteen years and coming out of it. That's not to say Mr. Forrest will, but as I've said, if these new stem cells work, he should be waking up by morning. If not,

then he may never wake up. As to him grabbing and holding on to something, I think it's possible but highly unlikely. Why, has he experienced anything that might suggest he's coming out of the coma?"

Liu mulled that thought for a while. "No," he lied. "I was just curious. I'll be back shortly."

After several shots of scotch, Liu's confidence returned. He went back upstairs to Forrest's room. Closing the door he turned and stared at Forrest, determined to find out if he'd been faking. Liu watched the respirator piston rising and falling with a steady rhythm. He picked up a metal kidney dish from the crash cart near Forrest's bed. Holding his hand high above the dish, Liu let several pound coins drop in it. Forrest didn't flinch.

"Mr. Forrest. It's John Liu. You can stop pretending now," he said in a loud voice. Forrest didn't respond.

Cautiously, Liu approached Forrest's bed. "We'll see if you're faking," he said and took the hypodermic needle Dr. Phorreston had given him earlier. Glancing over his shoulder toward the door, Liu stuck the needle in the back of Forrest's hand and wiggled it around. Forrest still didn't respond, but a drop of bright red blood pooled on top of Forrest's hand where Liu pulled the needle out. He yanked a tissue from the box on Forrest's nightstand and dabbed the blood away.

Liu glanced across at the respirator. The setting was on full assist. He pressed his lips into a thin line and narrowed his eyes. Again, he glanced over his shoulder toward the door and turned the respirator off. Immediately the diaphragm dropped all the way to the bottom of the glass cylinder. Forrest's chest fell with it. Liu kept an eye on his watch and another toward the door. He waited. One minute passed. No response from Forrest. Liu's heart began to pound. He waited another minute. Still no response.

Liu groaned and turned the respirator back on. "I don't buy it, old man. Either you're faking, or you slipped something in

my drink when my back was turned. If I find out you did, orders or no, I *will* switch the machine off, and you *will* die.”

“So, the same people who tried to poison Missy also killed Tina?” Donna asked.

“According to what Sam found out, there was cocaine in her blood and urine, but that’s not what killed Tina. Sam also found cerbera, using the same method he did to detect it in Missy. Tina was dead before her killer injected her with the cocaine.”

“What about the Wilson murders? Do you think that was the same people?”

Sir Richard shook his head. “No, Ricky. I don’t. Tina didn’t shed a single drop of blood. It seems whoever killed Kevin and Linda wanted it to appear as brutal as possible.”

Donna sighed. “Well they certainly succeeded in that task. What about my research, Sir Richard. We may have to end up using the EHG and CTZ5 on Alan if what we’re trying doesn’t work.”

“I’ve spoken to Gary, and according to him, until I can get you an active sample of the HIV1, you’re at a stalemate. Why don’t you take a few days off? I can set up a small lab for you here in the apartment. You could still communicate with Gary as you’ve done before when you were in America. Ricky can stay here with you. Going back and forth to the Centre is too risky, especially now.” *The last thing I need is to have Ricky, Sam, and Jared at the same place at the same time!*

“What are you going to do? Isn’t it risky for you, as well, Sir Richard?”

“I’m moving operations, as well. I will still appear to be at the Centre – with a little help from Gary - but I’ll actually be here. That is, unless Mum has turned my old bedroom into another torture chamber,” he teased.

Before he left for Langston Castle, Sir Richard had met with Gary and discussed what they found out from Tina’s post-

mortem. Gary hadn't seemed overly surprised that Tina died from cerbera poisoning and not cocaine as Sir Richard was letting the police believe. Like Sir Richard, Gary knew if Forrest had been responsible, to tell the police, otherwise would not solve anything. When possible, they would conduct a more thorough investigation, of their own.

Between them, Gary and Sir Richard decided, as soon as the police had released Tina's body, private services would be held for her in the church, at Corbridge, and then her body would be buried in the cemetery there. They would not be publishing the event.

Although Sir Richard had given them their orders, Gary knew, eventually, Sam would corner him and ask about Donna. For that reason, he had been purposely avoiding Sam throughout the day. Gary was almost to his car when Sam caught him. "Gary, I need to talk to you."

Gary groaned. "What is it, Sam? If this is about Donna, I can't tell you anything."

"Did she tell you why she wanted me off the project?"

"No, Sam, she didn't, but since she's the one who asked for you to be put on the project, it's her right to ask that you be taken off."

"Are you allowed to see Donna, or am I the only person banned from her royal presence?"

"You haven't been banned, Sam. If you had, you would be back in your apartment, at Whitley Bay or confined to the Centre."

"Are you going to see her, now?"

"Yes, Sam. I'm having dinner with her and Richard, and then I'm coming to the complex."

"Gary, if you won't tell me where Donna is, would you at least help me prove something?"

Gary forced the air from his lungs. "What, Sam?"

"That I was drugged when I took Joyce back to my apartment, last night."

Gary narrowed his eyes. “You took Joyce back to your apartment last night – when? I thought you were at the carnival with Donna.”

Sam arched an eyebrow. “You mean Donna didn’t tell you what happened?”

“No, Sam and I really don’t want to know.”

“Well, I *need* you to know. I’m not proud it happened, and I don’t think I would have had sex with Joyce if I hadn’t been drugged.”

Gary held up a hand. “Whoa! That’s more than I needed to know. I’m not interested in your mating sessions with Joyce or any other woman, Sam, but what makes you think you were drugged?”

“Because I almost made the same mistake with Ruth Clarke, here at the Centre. I was pissed off with Donna, but I stopped when I realised how close I was to doing something stupid, and I didn’t want Ruth. I want Donna. I love her, but last night, with Joyce, I couldn’t stop myself. It was as if I wasn’t thinking or couldn’t think. Gary, you have to help me. This isn’t fair. Donna wouldn’t even let me explain.”

“What do you expect me to do Sam? Get Ian to take a blood sample and run a chromatograph on you. I don’t have time. I have to go.”

“I’d rather you did it, that way you can see for yourself, and you can tell her for me. She won’t see me. She’s being just as stubborn about seeing me as Jared is about seeing her. They are one in the same when it comes to forgiveness. I love Donna, Gary. I might make her think I’ve cheated on her, but I swear, I would never go through with it.”

“OK, Sam. If you want me to do it, you’ll have to wait until I get to the complex, tonight. Now, I have to go. Try and stay out of trouble between now and then – OK?” Gary closed the door and pulled away.

Instead of going back to Triplet Hall to get his things, and then go to the complex as he’d been ordered to do, Sam went back

into the Centre and looked up Ruth. Like Jasmine, she didn't give Sam the warmest of welcomes, but she did agree to drop by his office on her way home. Joyce saw Sam go into his office and knocked on the door. "Sam, can I talk to you?"

"About what, Joyce? I'm a little busy right now."

"Well... about what happened last night, at your penthouse."

"I suspect we were manipulated by a pro, but until I can prove it, I'd appreciate it if you would drop it. As far as I'm concerned, it didn't happen."

"Did you tell Donna, about it?"

"No, and you'd better not either until I've figured out why it happened. Now," he said, ushering her out the door. "I have an extremely important meeting with someone. We'll talk later." Sam practically shoved her out the door. As she was leaving, she met Ruth in the corridor.

"I thought you were on your way home," Joyce said.

"I was, but Sam asked me to stop by his office. He said he had something important to ask me."

Joyce arched an eyebrow. "Really? So the important meeting is with you," she muttered under her breath.

Ruth frowned. "Excuse me?"

"Oh – nothing. I was just thinking out loud. Could I have a word with you when you're done *talking*... with Sam?"

"Sure. Why don't you grab us a cup of coffee and wait for me in the cafeteria?"

"OK," Joyce smiled. "Thanks, Ruth." She was about to walk away; when she realised Sam hadn't closed his office door. She grinned and pressed her back to the wall, leaning her head so she could eavesdrop on their conversation.

Sam waved Ruth to a chair in front of his desk. "Ruth, how would you feel about having dinner with me tonight, at my penthouse?"

"Aren't you concerned that Donna will find out?"

Sam snorted. “Won’t make any difference either way. At the moment, we’re not together, but I’m hoping you can change that.”

“Oh – and how’s that?”

“Be at my penthouse in an hour and I’ll tell you.”

“Sam, in case you haven’t looked at your schedule, I’m on call tonight.”

Sam took out his cell phone. “Easily arranged, when you’re the boss,” he grinned. “Hi, Julie, it’s Sam. I need a favour, Babe.”

“Sam, you always need favours. What do you need now?”

“I need you to swap with Ruth and take call tonight.”

“Oh really – do you? What’s in it for me – you?”

Sam cleared his throat and chuckled. “I’m afraid I’m off the menu, but I’ll find another way to compensate you.”

“Like what – a date with Richard Triplet?”

“I’m afraid I may not be able to deliver on that one either. How about I talk to Sir Richard and get you added to my senior team? It comes with fringe benefits.”

“Would I be able to spend more... quality time with you.”

Sam swallowed hard. “Oh yes – you definitely would.”

“What time do I need to be there?”

“As soon as you can, Babe. Ruth and I have to be somewhere by six.”

“I’ll be there, but you’d better deliver. I want VIP quarters next to yours.”

“Can’t promise that much, but I’ll do my best. Thanks, Babe,” Sam said and ended the call. “Settled – do you want to leave your car here and ride with me?”

“No, that’s OK. I’ll take my car. I promised I’d have a coffee with a friend before I left. Go on ahead. I won’t be too long.”

“Thanks, Ruth.”

Chapter 67

Joyce hurried to the lift. She approached the counter in the cafeteria. “Harry, two lattes please.”

“You don’t often come in here for coffee at home time, Joyce. Meeting Sam?”

“Yeah – right,” Joyce scoffed. “Thanks Harry.” She sat to a table, grabbed her cell phone, and pretended to be reading. Ruth approached and sat across from her. She sipped her coffee. “I don’t mean to be rude, Joyce, but I’m kind of in a hurry.”

“So I heard.” Joyce studied Ruth’s eyes, a slight smile turned up the corners of her mouth. “Sam forgot to close his office door. How would you like to make your evening a bit more... interesting?” She slid a vial of perfume across the table.

“If this is Euphoria, it doesn’t work on Sam.”

“Until last night, I didn’t think so either. It seems for some, it takes longer to get into their system. Take it and try it, what have you got to lose? Just one word of advice. If it works, it works fast, so make sure you don’t have any distractions. If you do, Sam will leave you high and dry if you catch my meaning.”

Ruth picked up the vial and narrowed her eyes. “Are you pissed off at Sam?”

“Let’s just say, I’m getting my own back.” Joyce stood to leave. “Let me know how it turns out,” she grinned and walked away. Ruth stuck the bottle in her pocket, finished her coffee and left.

Toward the back wall of the car park, in a rented car with dark tinted glass sat a man with a cell phone pressed to his ear. Joyce’s car was just in his line of sight.

Joyce opened her car door. On the driver's seat, facedown was a brown envelope. Her eyes widened as she picked it up and read what was written on the other side. *'Get in the car and wait for the call. No peeking! It's a surprise.'*

As if on cue, Joyce's cell phone rang. Instead of answering it straight away, Joyce popped it in her car cradle and pressed a button on her steering wheel. "What do you want now?"

"I want to commend you on your decision to take matters into your own hands. They're apart, but they must stay that way. I trust you haven't opened the envelope?"

"You told me not to. For all I know, you may have rigged my car to blow up when I start the engine."

"You're learning, Joyce. I'm proud of you. You're becoming a pro. I found your little performance with Sam, at his penthouse to be quite entertaining. Too bad you were disappointed."

Joyce gasped. "How are you doing this? How can you be in so many places at the same time?"

"My methods are beyond your understanding. Trying to explain how they work would be a waste of time. Just remember this, I see and hear everything. Here's what I want you to do. Donna needs to see Sam's true colours, but he's not stupid. He needs some strong convincing, and I need some more pictures for my centrefold collection."

"I'm not posing nude for you or anyone else!"

"Yes you will. I know you want revenge, but I don't think you want to see Sam die. Open the envelope, Joyce."

Joyce took a deep breath. With trembling fingers, she bent the clasps and peeled off the flap. From inside, she pulled out several colour photographs. Among them were pictures of her and Sam, in the queue at the carnival. Her and Sam at his penthouse. Sam and Donna sitting in the back of Richard's Mercedes, before the carnival, and one that made her stomach curdle. A picture of Sam and Donna making love on horseback. In each shot, a dot of red light appeared on the back of Sam's head; a laser sight.

Joyce's eyes glossed. She swallowed hard. "What do you want me to do?"

"Sam doesn't realise how lucky he is to have such a cooperative friend who's willing to forego her dignity just to save his life. I wonder if he would do the same for you."

"Just answer one question for me. When is this going to end?"

"When I say it ends. Listen carefully. I'm only going to say this once."

Sir Richard, Lady Triplet, and John went back downstairs, leaving Richard and Donna alone in their castle apartment. Richard was sitting on one end of the sofa, reading his Kindle; Donna was sitting on the other, resting her bare feet on his lap. The video had stirred something inside her. She felt warm and comfortable, just sitting there with Richard. She rested her Kindle against her chest and wrapped her arms around it, watching him, remembering the holographic image of their son. There was no doubt; the baby she carried was Richard's. She softly smiled. "What should we name him?" she asked, catching his attention.

Richard looked up. "What?"

Donna wet her bottom lip with the tip of her tongue, shook her head and snorted. "The baby – what do we name him?"

Richard put his Kindle on the coffee table, moved her feet and slid closer. "Pet, don't you think it's a little soon to be thinking about a name?"

"No, I don't. We've seen him as an infant, a toddler, and a ten-year-old. That's special, Richard. Most women only see a grainy ultrasound image. Thank you for that."

"Donna... I wanted to see him, too. I guess I was being a little selfish."

Donna tilted her head and studied his eyes. "In what way?"

Richard sighed. "Well, with everything you were doing to prevent it from happening, I didn't know whether or not you

would want to keep the baby. I know you don't love me, and I figured, by seeing him, it might make a difference."

"I never said I didn't love you, Richard. I've always been attracted to you - clearly long before I realised it - and I still am. Seeing the video and listening to your father talk about how in the beginning he wasn't in love with your mother made me realise something."

"What's that?"

"That sometimes there are more reasons to be with someone, than being madly in love with them. I like being here with you. I like *being*... with you, Icky," she added with a grin.

Richard pressed his lips together and shook his head. "Icky?" he echoed, reflecting her mischievous grin.

Donna laughed. "I'm sorry. It's been so long, I couldn't resist."

Richard pulled her into his arms and nibbled the side of her neck. "I'll let you by with it this once, but don't make a habit of it."

Donna rested her head against his shoulder. "I'll try."

"According to Triplet tradition, which Grandma will expect us to follow, he should be named after me - Richard Harold Triplet VI."

Donna sighed. "Do you think she would be upset if we called him Rick or Rich? Having three Richards in the same family could get a little confusing."

"There's just one problem. Unless you marry me, legally, his surname will be a Rigden."

"Rich Rigden?" Donna twisted her nose. "I don't like the sound of that. Doesn't roll off the tongue well."

"Are you hinting for a proposal, Miss Rigden?"

Donna grinned. "Yeah. Too bad you don't have a ring."

"What if I did?" Richard's mood changed. "What if I told you I've been carrying it around in my pocket, for months now, hoping for an opportunity to give it to you?"

For a few seconds, Donna froze. Slowly she turned to face him, gazing into his eyes. “You’re not kidding anymore. Are you?”

Richard shifted slightly and took a small velvet box from his pocket. “I’ve never been kidding, where you were concerned,” he said and placed it in her palm.

Donna looked at it in shock. She wasn’t expecting this.

“I may be doing this too soon, but I’m going on *my* intuition, and it feels right. I love you, Donna. I want to be with you. I want to give you a life beyond your wildest dreams, and I won’t walk away from you. I won’t lie to you. I won’t cheat on you. This very moment, I promise you my life, my heart, my soul and my body. I will be completely devoted to you. Not just because of our son, but because I know we want the same things out of life. I will never do the things to you that Sam would have. Marry me, Donna.”

“Richard, I... don’t know what to say. The ring is beautiful, and I sense you mean what you’re saying, but I’m not capable of that kind of love, right now. I may never be. You should be with someone who can give you what you deserve.”

“No I shouldn’t. It’s always been you, Donna. People learn to love each other every day, and I think it will be the same for us. I already love you, and I want our son to carry the Triplet name.”

“Richard, I have to be honest with you. I still have feelings for Sam, and despite everything he’s done, I still love Jared. I don’t think that will ever change. I understand your wanting the baby to be born a Triplet, but...”

“Then marry me for that reason. After he’s born if you haven’t learned to love me by then, and you want out, I’ll let you go. You and the baby will want for nothing. All I ask is that you let me be part of his life. It makes sense Donna. He’ll be the heir to the Triplet fortunes. Do you have any idea what that means?”

Donna softly smiled. “You put up a convincing argument – very convincing. It’s not easy to combat your logic.”

“Then don’t. Agree to it. Say yes. I’ll make you happy, Donna. I promise I will.” Richard patiently waited.

Donna slipped into data-mode. He makes sense – good sense, but can I ever learn to love him the way I loved Jared? Could I ever love anyone that much? If the man from my dreams is Sam, why am I carrying Richard’s son? Did I make a wrong choice and change everything like Jared warned me?

Daria’s words interrupted Donna’s silent reverie. ‘Your seer sight has been blinded by crimson power. You must look harder into the eyes of this man and see that he is not who you thought he was, for there are two. You seek a man with dancing aqua eyes, but what you seek is a shadow. You must be patient, Donna. Open your heart and test the possibilities. Grow, Seer. Grow. Learn and love. When the time comes, you will understand all.’

Donna inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. She swallowed the lump in her throat. Her eyes glossed. “Richard... I’m not saying no, but before I can accept your proposal, I have to speak to Sam. I think I owe him that much. I won’t do him like Jared is doing me.”

“Since you don’t want Sam to know where you are, probably the easiest way would be to fly out to the complex and talk to him there. When did you want to do it?”

“In the morning? We *could* go in your car.”

“Faster by chopper and that way, if Sam got it into his head to try and follow us, he wouldn’t be able to.”

“Do you really think he would do that?”

“Take my word for it, pet. I would,” he grinned. “I’ll talk to Dad tonight, and let him know we want to ride out to the complex with him in the morning. Then we’ll bring the chopper back here.”

“OK. I’ll let Juanita know so Jared can hide in his quarters until we leave.”

“Why do you think you owe Sam anything?”

“Because, I’m not entirely convinced that everything he’s done was Sam’s fault. Remember what we found out about the

Euphoria. It works on a higher level than other perfumes. I suspect the reason it doesn't work on me is because of the EHG."

"And... Euphoria honestly smells like rotting fish to you?"

"Yes, Richard. Trust me, it's a definite turnoff."

"You know, pet. That suggests to me that, for some people, Euphoria could be harmful. Especially if you think the reason it doesn't affect you is because of your enhanced healing gene."

"If that's the case, then what we should be doing is seeing if we can come up with an antidote. If Forrest is behind the Euphoria, and he's somehow figured out how to use the EIA in conjunction with pheromones, you're absolutely right. For people with incompatible brain patterns, Euphoria could kill."

"Getting back to our previous subject. When are we going to tell Dad and Grandma?"

"About what – the baby, or our getting married?"

"Both, actually," Richard smiled. "Tonight would be a good time. They'll all be together, including Gary."

Donna sighed. "I suppose we could tell them about the baby, but I'd rather not mention the other until I've talked to Sam."

"OK, we'll do it your way," Richard responded and glanced at his watch. "We better get changed and get down there, before Grandma sends Jack after us."

Not wanting to waste any time on cooking, Sam had picked up pizza on the way home. Ruth arrived on time. She parked in the space next to Sam's red sports car and shut off the engine. Checking her reflection in the visor mirror, she added a hint more lip gloss and fluffed her hair. She smeared some of the perfume Joyce had given her at the Centre down the sides of her neck and over her wrists. She approached the back entrance to Sam's apartment complex and buzzed the intercom. "Sam, it's Ruth."

Ruth heard a click and the lock released. Using the lift, she rode up to the top floor. After a couple of knocks on Sam's

door, he opened it. "Come in," he said, inhaling her perfume, as she walked past him. "If you're wearing that perfume for my benefit, Ruth, you're wasting your time." He grinned and closed the door. "But... it just happens to be what I want to talk to you about."

Richard led Donna into the parlour, where everyone waited. "Don't they make a cute couple," Lady Triplet commented.

Sir Richard smiled and stood. "Yes, they do. Donna, you get more beautiful every time I see you."

Donna softly smiled. "Thank you, Sir Richard, but as my godfather, don't you think you might be a little biased."

Richard kissed her temple. "If he is, so am I."

Donna pressed her lips together and shook her head. "I *know* you're biased."

Richard grinned. "And I *know* you're beautiful."

Gary cleared his throat. "You look lovely, D."

Lady Triplet reached for Sir Richard's arm and steadied her weight on her cane. "Shall we go and have our meal?"

Sir Richard seated his mother at the head of the table and sat next to her. Gary sat next to Sir Richard. Richard seated Donna next to Gary and sat on the other side of her. Vera and Jack appeared with their plates. Donna leaned close to Richard's ear. "Why do I feel like I'm dining with the Queen?"

Richard chuckled. "You'll get used to it. Grandma takes meals very seriously. It's always a formal event."

Donna sighed. "So I've noticed."

"We don't have to eat all our meals with Grandma while we're here pet. I'm perfectly happy to sample more of your delicious Southern cuisine."

Donna smiled. "I did like it when it was just us back at my apartment in Shreveport. We seem to do better when we're on our own."

"I don't have a problem with that."

Vera and Jack served dessert; apple crumble with custard, followed by glasses of white wine. “No, thank you,” Donna said as Jack aimed the neck of the wine bottle at her glass.

“You don’t like white wine, Dear?” Lady Triplet asked.

“No, Lady Triplet. It’s not that. I’m alcohol intolerant, and I’m – ah – I’m refusing for another reason,” Donna said, looking to Richard.

Richard laced his fingers with hers and kissed the back of her hand. “Donna’s pregnant, Grandma. The baby’s mine.”

Gary’s eyes widened as he looked from Donna to Richard and then back to Donna. “D, you told me....”

“I know Gary, and I’ll explain later. This shouldn’t have happened. Something went wrong somewhere, and believe me, I intend to find out, but right now, I have to deal with this. Are you staying at the castle?”

“No, I’m staying at the complex, D.”

“Maybe we can talk before you leave then.”

“Why don’t we go now, and we can talk in our apartment?” Richard asked.

“That’s fine by me,” Donna responded. “But won’t your father and grandmother be offended.”

“I’m following Dad’s example. I refuse to let Grandma run my life. Dad, Grandma,” Richard said standing. “Donna and I are going to show Gary our apartment.”

“Shouldn’t you be planning your wedding?” Lady Triplet asked.

Richard shook his head. “Goodnight Grandma.”

“Thank you for a lovely meal, Lady Triplet,” Donna said. “And thanks for letting me stay here with you. I love the apartment. Goodnight, Sir Richard.”

“Goodnight, petal.”

Gary followed Richard and Donna to the stairs. “Aren’t you going to get it in the neck for that?” Gary asked.

Richard chuckled. “Probably, but it won’t be the first time. Oh damn! I forgot to tell Dad about the chopper. Donna, why

don't you and Gary go on up to the apartment. I'll be there shortly."

"OK," Donna nodded and she and Gary continued up the stairs, chatting away.

Richard took a deep breath and went back into the dining room. Sir Richard and Lady Triplet were sharing a cup of tea. "Dad, I forgot to tell you. Donna and I would like to ride out to the complex with you in the morning. Donna wants to talk to Sam."

"That's fine by me, Ricky."

"Grandma, do me a favour. Stop pressuring Donna. Things are going good for us, right now. Don't spoil it. If anyone could make her change her mind, it would be you. So lay off her. OK? I'll see you in the morning Dad." Richard walked away.

Lady Triplet waited until he was out of earshot. "Maybe Donna is too much like her mother," she commented.

The corners of Sir Richard's mouth turned up as he finished the last of his tea. "Maybe Ricky is more like me than you thought." Sir Richard kissed her cheek. "Thanks for the meal. Goodnight Mum."

Chapter 68

Sam had been mildly affected by Ruth's perfume, but as before, he'd been able to control his urge. After some fondling, lingering kisses and an extremely close call; Sam learned that he couldn't afford to use his act of skilled foreplay to safely charm information from Ruth as normal. He had also learned by sitting on one end of the sofa and keeping Ruth on the other, it was easier to maintain his control. Distance seemed to be the key to preventing a night he would never forget, for more reasons than one.

Sam knew if Donna found out it would likely be their final curtain call. Theoretically, he'd already cheated on Donna with Joyce, the night of the carnival. Sam wasn't letting that happen again, with Ruth.

With great difficulty, on his part, Sam had solicited from Ruth that someone had purposely given her the Euphoria, and convinced her to seduce Sam at the Centre, but due to his sexual limitation, and Ruth's loyalty, she wouldn't say who.

Sam wanted a name from Ruth, but due to the combination of her perfume, and the scotch it had taken to get her to the talkative stage, Sam couldn't afford to push any further. His reasoning had already been impaired. The killer had been when Joyce conveniently remembered her missing bracelet; her excuse for dropping by. Sam had his doubts, but by that time, it was too late. One whiff of *her* perfume and Sam's fate was sealed.

Unlike Ruth, driven by love and her faceless tormentor, Joyce had come with a mission to fulfil. If Sam was too stupid to realise he was in over his head with Donna, Joyce wasn't letting him go down. Of course, saving her own life was a strong incentive.

Before Sam realised what was going on, Joyce and Ruth were out of their clothes, and he was coming on to both

women. Halfway through an explosive climax with Ruth, on the kitchen counter while Joyce eagerly awaited her turn with him, she'd let Jasmine in his apartment. Sam hadn't even noticed. Like Joyce, Jasmine had come with a purpose – revenge. She wasn't the least bit bothered that she wasn't the only woman there.

Due to Jasmine's slight bisexual tendency, Joyce and Ruth had added spice to the party. Whatever his reasons had been, seeing the compromising position Sam had put himself in, put a sadistic smile on Jasmine's face. She'd thrown back several shots of scotch, stripped and joined the orgy. Sam was so drugged up, he didn't realise when Jasmine traded places with Ruth and continued the ride. With so much exposure to the pheromones in their perfume, it didn't matter now. Sam didn't care. His testosterone level was through the roof, and he needed relief.

Five hours later, when the effects of the Euphoria wore off, Sam woke to three naked bodies tangled in the damp sheets with him. To his left lay Joyce. To his right lay Jasmine, and across the foot of his bed, stretched out like an alley cat, was Ruth. Her shapely mounds lay in full view. Sam swallowed hard and eased out of bed as quietly as possible. He then jumped in his clothes and left.

He sat in his car for a few minutes, trying to get his head together. He shoved a hand through his dark hair. "Just calm down, Sam. Donna will never know this happened. It wasn't your fault." He groaned and reached for the ignition. "If I ever find out who's doing this to me, I'm going to fucking kill somebody." He started the engine and headed for the complex.

By the time Sam got to his quarters, it was later than he'd intended. Gary wouldn't answer his door panel. Finally, Sam had learned from VICi that Gary wasn't even in the complex. Sam tried ringing Gary's cell phone, but all he got was voicemail. From experience, Sam knew when Gary set his

phone to voicemail; there was no way of reaching him. Unlike the other special cell phones on VICi's satellite system, Gary's or Sir Richard's couldn't be bypassed. Gary had purposely set them that way, and by now, he'd probably reprogrammed Richard and Donna's, as well.

Sam knew he couldn't wait until morning. By then, the drug would have worked its way out of his system and would have been almost impossible to detect. He decided to go to the medical lab and run the test himself.

Jared hadn't been able to sleep, so he'd gone for a cup of coffee in the cafeteria and then for a walk through the park to clear his mind. On his way back to his quarters, Jared noticed the light on in the medical lab, and had stopped to investigate. When he saw who it was, Jared had used his enhanced abilities to avoid Sam.

Sam caught movement from the corner of his eye as he drew his blood and loaded it into the injector port of the gas chromatograph, but when he'd turned, nothing had been there. Jared watched with aroused curiosity. He grinned as Sam kept glancing over his shoulder unable to shake the feeling he was being watched.

When Sam turned his attention back to his task - as if out of thin air - Jared appeared next to him. "Sam, why are you checking your level of oxytocin and testosterone at two in the morning?"

Sam gasped, and almost fell off his stool. "Where the fuck did you come from? You damn near scared the hell out of me!"

"As if that would be possible," Jared snorted.

"How did you get in here without tripping VICi's alarm?"

Jared gave Sam a wolfish grin. "You haven't answered my question. Why are you checking the levels of oxytocin and testosterone present in your bloodstream?"

Sam pressed his lips together and forced the air from his lungs. "As if it's any of your business, Geronimo, I think somebody is fucking with my hormones. It has to be that damn perfume!"

“What perfume? Jared twisted his nose and fought off a wave of nausea. “By the way, Sam, you could use a shower! You smell of rotting fish, *Bushboy*. Since when did you start wearing perfume?”

Sam lifted his arm and sniffed. All he could smell was a mingling of his scent and the remnants of Joyce’s intoxicating perfume. He shook his head. “I *could* use a shower, but I *don’t* smell of rotten fish. The name of the perfume is Euphoria.”

Jared backed up a few paces, putting some more distance between him and the smell. “Oh yes! I’ve heard about that stuff. It’s supposed to drive women *or* men wild. If that’s what you’ve been wearing lately, I can imagine your nights with Donna haven’t been going well. I happen to know she detests the smell of dead fish, but then most people do. If I were you, I would seriously consider using a different cologne. You should have stuck with the one you were using.” He turned and headed for the door.

“How would you know what cologne I use?”

Jared paused in the doorway. “Because I recognised the smell under all that other stuff. It’s the same brand I use. Happy hunting. Goodnight Sam,” Jared chuckled and left.

Because it was late when he, Richard, and Donna had finished talking, Gary had spent the night in one of their guest bedrooms. Sir Richard wasn’t surprised to see him come down with Richard and Donna the next morning for breakfast, but for some reason, Lady Triplet seemed mildly annoyed that she hadn’t been warned beforehand. Richard had brushed it off, thinking it was his grandmother’s need to be in control. He and John flew the chopper back to the complex while McGowan and the other security men followed in Gary’s car.

Again, Jared had used his abilities to avoid a confrontation with Donna, but hadn’t masked his presence from her. Just as she’d known he had been watching her from the observation area at the Centre, anywhere Jared had been, Donna knew.

On their way to Richard's quarters, Donna had paused by the door across from the infirmary; sensing Jared's presence there more than anywhere else in the complex. Threatening tears had stung her eyes, and a lump had formed in her throat, but she'd pushed it aside. As with Sam, now that she was pregnant with Richard's child, it made little difference for her and Jared.

Sam was pleased when VICi had notified him to meet Donna, but not pleased with the venue - Richard's quarters. That meant Richard and possibly his father would be there, as well.

Sam gathered his test results from last night and headed down the corridor. As the door opened, and he stepped into the lounge, he found Richard and Donna sitting on the sofa holding hands. Sam guessed any attempts at changing Donna's mind would be futile, but he had to try.

Richard motioned to the chair across from the sofa. "Good morning, Sam. Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thank you," Sam said and sat. "Since this is obviously not the meeting I'd expected, why have I been summoned here?"

"Because I needed to talk to you," Donna spoke up.

"Can I show you something first?" Sam leaned forward and handed her the test results.

Richard's attention peaked. He leaned closer so he could see. "What is this?" Donna asked.

"A sample of my blood after exposure to Euphoria. The stuff that you say smells like dead fish."

Donna grinned wryly. "Your oxytocin and testosterone levels are higher than normal, but all that tells me is that you have a healthy sex drive. I already knew that. Why are you showing this to me?"

"I think exposure to Euphoria affects my behaviour, makes me say and do things I normally wouldn't do."

“Yes, I agree with you. Euphoria does seem to impair some people’s judgement, but it has nothing to do with me, or us, for that fact.”

Sam frowned. “Yes it does, Donna! I don’t think I would have behaved so...”

“...Promiscuous?” Richard grinned, quietly clearing his throat.

Sam glared at Richard. “Donna, can’t we go somewhere and talk in private?”

“Considering that Richard is going to be a permanent part of my life, I don’t see any reason why I should keep things from him. Unlike you, he *hasn’t* kept things from me.”

“Oh... I see. Did he tell you why Jared won’t see you?”

Donna glanced at Richard out of the corner of her eye and sighed. “No, Sam. He hasn’t, but it doesn’t make any difference. Richard has asked me to marry him, and I’m going to accept his proposal.”

Sam’s mouth gaped. “What the fuck for?”

“That’s none of your concern, but I have my reasons. That’s what I came to tell you because I didn’t want you to hear it from someone else.”

“So that’s it! You’ve made up your mind. There’s nothing I can say or do to change it?”

Donna’s eyes saddened. “No, Sam.”

“I love you Donna. If marriage is what you want, then I’ll...”

Donna held up a hand and tightened her jaw. “No, you won’t! You’ve already voiced your opinion about having children. You don’t want them. Richard does, and so do I, so stop wasting your breath. It’s too late, Sam.”

“Oh yeah – Richard wants them all right,” Sam scoffed. “He probably has illegitimates scattered across the globe, right now.”

Donna groaned. “What Richard did before he and I got together, doesn’t mean any more to me than who you were with before. I’m telling you, it doesn’t matter,” she enunciated.

"I've made up my mind. My decision is final, and that's how it's going to be. I'm sorry you're hurt, but I never once misled you. You've known from the beginning exactly where you stood with me."

"Yeah," Sam snorted. "Nowhere - which is where he'll be if Geronimo changes his mind. I hope you have a nice life, but I think you're making a terrible mistake. When you figure that out... I'll still be here."

Donna sighed; the corners of her mouth turned up slightly. "I'm not making a mistake, Sam, but thanks for the advice. I'd like us to stay friends, or at least be civil toward one another, but I'll leave that up to you."

Sam stood and lifted Donna's hand to his lips. He flashed his sexy crooked grin and kissed the back of her hand. "Like I said, Pretty Lady..." he whispered, "...I'll still be here." He shook Richard's hand. "Congratulations, Richard. You won this round." Sam left.

Richard waited until the door closed. He slid closer to Donna and studied her eyes. "Did you mean what you said, about accepting my proposal, or was that for Sam's benefit?"

Donna took the ring box from her purse and handed it to Richard. Holding out her left hand, she waited. "I don't think this would be for Sam's benefit. Do you?"

Richard swallowed the lump in his throat and grinned slightly. "No. I don't think it would be."

Tears stung Donna's eyes as Richard slipped the two carat solitaire on her finger. "I promise Donna, I will never, ever let you down." He leaned his face closer.

Donna softly smiled. "I know you won't," she whispered and kissed him.

"Why didn't you tell Sam about the baby?"

"Because, it didn't feel right. He'll find out soon enough."

"You're not telling Jared?"

"Why should I? He doesn't need to know," she said and kissed him again.

Jared's cell phone rang. He stared at it for a few seconds, dreading the inevitable. His heart had already told him who it was and why she was calling. It was two in the morning in Arizona, and she wouldn't call, unless it was important. Putting it off wouldn't make it go away. Jared sensed the change when Donna strengthened her warning barrier. She didn't want him in her thoughts, and she was prepared to use all her mental energy to block him out. He wouldn't risk hurting her again. Tears glistened his eyes as he reached for the phone and accepted the call.

"Jared... it's time, Son. Events transpiring are out of our hands. She's made her decision, and your being there could cause severe consequences. I know you don't want to leave her while Forrest is still there, but it could change any future you might still have with her. Come home, Son. Let the love in your heart guide the path to your future. Have faith in your perfect match and the voice of our ancestors. They have spoken to her, as well." Jared ended the call and looked across the table at Juanita.

"Your mother?"

Jared inhaled deeply and let it out slowly as he lifted his head and fixed his glowing crimson eyes on Juanita's. He blinked to clear his vision. "Talk to Donna. Tell her about Alan. I don't think what we've done is doing a lot of good. I'll talk to Sir Richard about our travel arrangements."

"What about Wilson's diary?"

"You might as well come to Sir Richard's office when you're done talking to Donna. He'll probably want to speak to us about that before we leave, but I'm telling you right now, sweetheart, if Sir Richard wants the diary retrieved, I'm going in to get it – alone," he stressed. "I'm not risking anyone else getting hurt over this damn book. That's obviously what they were looking for at the Hall, when they slaughtered Wilson and his wife."

"Jared..."

“No, Juanita!” Jared sternly responded. “You will be under my care. I will not compromise on this issue. You are Donna’s best friend. The last thing I need is for something to happen to you. For that, I fear she would *never* forgive me.”

Juanita sighed in exasperation and nodded. “VICi, where is Donna Rigden?”

Chapter 69

Juanita pressed the door panel to Richard's quarters and waited. He met her and led her into the lounge. Donna studied the distant look in Juanita's eyes. "You're leaving, aren't you?"

"Yes, Donna, we are."

Richard cleared his throat. "Pet, I'm going to step out for a few minutes and give you some time alone."

Donna softly smiled and nodded. She waited until Richard was gone and turned her attention back to Juanita. Her eyes glossed. "When are you leaving?"

Juanita took a deep breath and swallowed the lump in her throat. "It depends on what Jared and Sir Richard decide, but I know it will be soon."

"Jared still won't see me?"

Juanita sighed and shook her head. "No, Donna. He won't, but he sent me to tell you about Alan. He doesn't think the pacemaker and drugs are going to save him, and I have to agree. Eventually, you'll have to decide whether or not to risk using your EHG and CTZ5 treatment, on him. Despite everything we've done, Alan is getting weaker."

"When I went in and examined him and saw VICi's analysis, I feared that would be the case, but I was hoping to wait until he was a little stronger. At this stage, if Alan's immune system rejects the EHG, I don't think he would survive."

"I know, Donna, but as far as Alan is concerned, we're running out of options. If you don't use the treatment, you should tell Sir Richard, to prepare for the worst. I think we're going to lose Alan."

"I'll keep a close eye on him. Hopefully, he can hang in there for at least another month or so. Have you... seen or talked to Gary?"

Juanita shook her head. “It’s better this way, Donna. That way Jared and I don’t have to pretend, and I don’t have to lie to Gary.”

“Are you sure you’re not avoiding him because you’re afraid there’s still something there?” Juanita sighed. “Honestly...” Donna persisted.

“I don’t know, Donna, maybe, but I don’t want to go there.”

Donna studied her eyes. “And... by leaving, you don’t have to...” she made it a statement.

Juanita softly smiled. “I guess so. I don’t know – I mean - I’m leaving, so it doesn’t matter. How are you?”

“Honestly?”

“Of course,” Juanita smiled.

Donna swallowed the lump in her throat and took a steadying breath. “Falling apart – inside – that is. I don’t let anyone see. No one, but you and Gary know the truth. You see, I might look fine, on the surface, but everything is just happening, so fast. First the threatening letters and then the phone calls.”

Juanita’s eyes widened. “Threatening letters and phone calls,” she echoed. “What threatening letters and phone calls? Against you?”

“No, not me – Sam. If it had been against me – at least before we found out about the baby - I wouldn’t have paid it much attention. I didn’t at first anyway, but someone doesn’t want me and Sam together.”

“Donna... could it be Richard?”

“At first, I thought it might be Richard, and I’m still not... sure about that. I mean, he’s sweet, and understanding and he comes across as genuinely honest, but there’s a ruthless streak in him that - I don’t know - sometimes it scares me. It’s like he would do anything to get what he wants.”

“What about Sam? Could he be doing this because he’s afraid of commitment – a way out?”

Donna softly smiled. “No, if it were Sam, he’s had plenty of opportunities to give up on me.”

“But... you don’t want him to. Do you?”

Donna pressed her lips together and shook her head. “Not really, but if he does... there’s not a lot I can do about it. After the car chase, and seeing what happened to Wilson and his wife, I won’t risk it. Besides, like I said before, the baby is what matters now. That’s why...” she broke off. “That’s why I’m marrying Richard,” she added with a happy note, displaying her engagement ring.

Juanita drew in a quick breath. “Oh Donna! It’s almost like....”

“...Like the one Jared gave me – I know. I noticed that, too. At least the stone is shaped differently.”

Juanita’s smile faded. “But, Donna, if you’re afraid of Richard, why are you marrying him?”

Donna sighed. “To protect Sam and to give the baby a name – the Triplet name. I know that sounds selfish, but he deserves the best start in life, and truthfully, Richard can give him that.”

“I’ve said this before, and I’ll say it again. What about your happiness?”

“I don’t know what will happen after the baby’s born. Children bring people together, don’t they? Who knows? I might grow to love Richard. Maybe not in the way I... loved Jared, but then that kind of love comes along once in a lifetime. Right?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Juanita sighed.

“I wish you could be here for my wedding. I was hoping you would be my maid of honour.”

“I’m sorry, Donna. Why don’t you ask Missy?”

Donna grinned. “She was my second choice.”

“Is Gary giving you away?”

“No, I’m sure he’ll be best man - him or John. I’m going to ask my godfather to give me away.”

Juanita furrowed her brow. “Your godfather?”

“Sir Richard – I know - it was a shock to me, too. Apparently, he’s the one behind my schooling. I thought the trust fund was from my parents, but apparently it was from my

godfather. My grant wasn't a government grant. It was from Triplet International. I got the apartment because Missy arranged it and because...."

"...Richard owned the building," Juanita smiled. "It's starting to make sense now."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, don't be offended, but I've always been a little jealous of how things just fell in your lap, and I had to struggle for everything. I mean the clothes you bought me a few months ago to wear to the convention, I loved them, but I was a little resentful that you were able to just...."

"...Go out and buy them like that? That's why I didn't want you to know. Anyway, that's all water under the bridge. Take care of yourself. I'm going to miss you."

"We can still keep in touch. Sir Richard gave us – me – one of his special satellite cell phones, and we can still talk over Internet."

"Yeah, I know, but it won't be the same thing. We've always been together for the holidays. Thanksgiving is coming up, and I don't even think they celebrate that over here. Then there's my birthday and Christmas. It just won't be the same, Juanita."

"Tell you what. If Mama is doing OK, I'll try to get back for your birthday, and maybe even Christmas. How's that?"

Donna swallowed hard and slightly smiled. "I'd like that."

Juanita hugged her. "No promises, but I'll try. I love you – you know that – right?"

Donna's eyes glossed again. "I know, and I love you, too. I couldn't have asked for a better sister."

"Nor could I," Juanita responded and left. She met Jared as he was coming out of Sir Richard's office.

"Did you tell her?"

"Yes, Jared. I told her. You and Donna have to be two of the most stubborn people I've ever come across."

Jared grinned. "In what way, sweetheart?"

Juanita glared at him. “Donna is clearly still in love with you, and I know you’re still in love with her. I would give anything to have what you have, and you’re just going to walk away from each other. You’re both crazy!”

Jared softly smiled and swallowed hard. “Love makes you do crazy things, Juanita. Let’s go. John is waiting to take us to the airport.”

Juanita’s eyes widened. “We’re leaving now?”

“Sir Richard and I talked, and we felt it was best. He wants us to try and get our hands on Wilson’s diary. I told him what we talked about, and he agreed.”

“I just didn’t realise we were leaving so soon.”

“I thought you wanted to get out of here before you ran into Gary.”

“I do, but before I go, there’s something I have to do. Wait for me in the chopper. I won’t be long. I forgot something in my quarters.”

Jared arched an eyebrow. “All right, but hurry. I need to get away from Donna. It’s harder than I thought. She’s blocked me out, but she’s hurting right now. That much I can sense. If I don’t get out of here now, I’ll never leave, and that wouldn’t be good for anyone.”

Juanita nodded and hurried to her quarters. “VICi, notify Sam Kaliea to come to my quarters.”

VICi; Dr. Kaliea has been notified, and he is on his way.

Several minutes later, Sam stood outside Juanita’s door. He was a little confused that she’d asked him there. He pressed the door panel and waited. “It’s Sam, cupcake. You wanted to see me?”

Juanita unlocked the door and stepped to the side. “Come in Sam, and I thought I told you to call me Dr. Walton.”

Sam gave her the once-over, slowly trailing his aqua eyes up her body as he stepped into her personal space. Juanita swallowed hard and stepped back. The door slid to behind him. “I’m sorry, but cupcake suits you better. What can I do for you?”

“Sam, I don’t have time for games. Jared is waiting for me in the chopper, we’re leaving.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, not about you, but...”

“I shouldn’t be doing this, but I don’t want to see Donna hurt again. She’s lost enough, and Donna always thinks about others first. I don’t want to see her lose someone else, she... loves, again.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“There’s something about Donna you need to know, but you have to promise never to tell her I told you. She didn’t want you to know, but I think she’s marrying Richard for the wrong reasons. I mean, I understand, but I think she’s making a mistake. Just like I think Jared made a mistake when he walked away from her, without explaining why.”

Sam followed her into the lounge. “Don’t bring Geronimo into this. I’m not sorry he’s leaving.” Sam’s voice turned serious. “Tell me about Donna.”

“I’m breaking my doctor patient confidentiality here. That’s why Donna can never know I told you.”

“OK, so tell me.”

“Donna is pregnant, and that’s one of the reasons she’s marrying Richard.”

Sam’s mouth gaped. “Donna is pregnant!”

“Yes, Sam, but don’t get concerned. It’s not yours. It’s Richard’s. They had a one bedside table, when Jared and Donna broke up.”

“One night - and you’re certain the baby is his? How far along is she?”

“She’s three weeks.”

“That certainly puts me out of the line-up,” Sam scoffed. “That would explain her mood swings and her getting sick at the carnival. I’m her doctor. Why didn’t she want me to know?”

Juanita glanced at her watch. “I don’t know Sam, but I have to go. If you love her, don’t give up on her just yet. She’s being practical, and that’s just Donna’s way. Whatever you decide to

do is up to you. I just thought you needed to know.” Juanita slung her purse over her shoulder. “Goodbye Sam.”

“Juanita...”

Juanita paused in the door way. She turned. “What is it, Sam? I really have to run.”

Sam flashed his sexy crooked grin and stepped closer, leaning his face to hers. “Thanks,” he said and kissed her cheek.

Juanita studied his eyes. “You’re welcome,” she smiled and left, touching her cheek. “You owe me, Donna...” she mused as she ran for the lift.

Jared reached for her hand and helped her in.

John turned in his seat. “Jared, are you sure about this?”

Jared looked at Juanita, sighed and nodded.

“OK,” John groaned. “VICi, open hangar doors,” he said and started the engine.

Chapter 70

The doors to his quarters slid open. Richard entered the lounge. Donna quickly wiped her eyes, on the back of her hand. “Are they gone?”

Donna nodded. “Juanita said she would try to visit for my birthday and maybe Christmas. It depends on how her mother is doing.”

Richard sat next to her on the sofa. Donna snuggled next to him and rested her head on his shoulder. “We’ll go get her.”

“It also depends on whether or not Juanita has the funds.”

“Juanita will have the funds. We’ll either fly over and get her, or I’ll make arrangements for John and McGowan to go pick her up. Trust me. If you want Juanita here for your birthday, or any other day – for that fact - she will be here if her mother is well enough.”

“Why does everyone I love end up walking away from me?”

Richard rested his cheek on top of her head. “Not everyone, pet. You don’t ever have to worry about that happening with me. I will stand by you when no one else will.”

Donna smiled. “Where’s your dad?”

“Probably in his office – why?”

“He might like to know that his only son is getting married.”

Richard’s heart turned over. “When do you want to have the wedding?”

“As soon as possible.” Before I lose my nerve.

“I’ll tell you what. Why don’t we go and tell Dad, and go from there? Normally, the banns take three weeks, but I’m sure we can find a way around that since my father and grandmother are both close friends to the Bishop of Newcastle. We probably could have the wedding in a couple of weeks, if that’s not too soon?”

Donna sighed. “No, that’s fine. Like I said the sooner the better. How much longer are we going to be in your apartment at the castle?”

“*Our* apartment,” he stressed. “Why, you don’t like it there?”

“No, it’s not that. I was just thinking, with Jared gone, we could move into your quarters – *our* quarters – here in the complex, that way we could continue working.”

“What about our honeymoon?”

“We could go somewhere for the weekend, and go on a proper honeymoon later.”

Richard grinned. “I’ll make you a deal. Give me a week and I’ll agree.”

“As long as it’s not too far away, in case something happens to Alan.”

“I promise it won’t be. Now, the next thing to do is decide where to have the wedding. Dad and my mom were married at St. Nicholas Cathedral in Newcastle. Would that be OK for you?”

“I don’t want something big, Richard.”

“Well, I’ll try to keep Grandma reined in, but I’m sure she’s going to insist that it be on a grand scale. After all, I’m her only grandchild, and I think she’s been planning on this wedding ever since I flew over to get you.”

“So you’re admitting that was why you came to America? It had nothing to do with business. Did it?”

Richard smiled and studied her eyes. “I *did* need to check on my apartment complex there, but... my main reason was because of you.”

“Richard, you didn’t have anything to do with Jared leaving me, did you? Please, be honest with me.”

“No pet, I didn’t,” Richard responded and kissed her.

“But, you’re glad he’s gone.”

“Of course,” Richard answered without hesitation. “With Jared out of the way, the only person I have to worry about stealing you is Sam.”

“Richard, you don’t have to worry about Sam or Jared. I want to try and make this work.”

“We will make it work, pet.” Richard stood and took her hand. “Let’s go talk to Dad.” He led her to Sir Richard’s office and pushed the door panel. The door slid open.

“Hello, Ricky, Donna. Have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?”

“We’d like to talk to you about organising our wedding. Donna has agreed to marry me.”

“Is this because of the baby?”

Donna glanced at Richard. “Not entirely, Sir Richard, but obviously, that’s part of it.”

Sir Richard sighed and leaned forward in his chair. “Ricky, Donna, I commend you for wanting to do the right thing for your baby,” he smiled. “And, of course, I want him to be born a Triplet, but Donna, I want you to understand, if this is not what you want, I will love him just as much if he’s born a Rigden. I will acknowledge him as my grandson and will see that he’s suitably taken care of.”

Richard frowned. “Dad, whose side are you on?”

“Sir Richard,” Donna interjected. “I appreciate what you’re saying, but I love Richard, and I want to marry him. He’s not forcing me. If I hadn’t wanted to marry him, I wouldn’t have accepted his proposal.”

Richard smiled and squeezed her hand. “You already know how I feel about Donna.”

Sir Richard smiled and sighed. “Yes, I guess I do. OK, first off, where do you want to have the wedding?”

“We were thinking about St. Nicholas Cathedral. The place where you and Mum got married.”

“That takes care of the where, now the when? Bear in mind, the banns take about a month. Unless, of course, you’re bypassing that.”

“We don’t want to wait *that* long, Sir Richard.”

“We were shooting for some time next week. Donna doesn’t want a big wedding, so we’ll keep it small.”

“That’s what your Mum and I wanted before Grandma took over. You know what’s going to happen, Ricky. I’ll do what I can. Donna, pick out the dress you want, make a list of things we’ll need and who you want to be there. I’ll speak to the bishop and see when the cathedral is free.”

Donna sighed. “I can do that, Sir Richard.”

“I’d like to fly one of the choppers back to the castle.”

“Sure, that’s fine. So, Donna, what do you think about the complex?”

“It’s a little overwhelming.”

Sir Richard chuckled. “I suppose it could be. Did Ricky show you the genetics lab?”

“Yes he did. He let me see our son. Sir Richard, it was so special.”

“I linked Donna’s initial body scan through the HIC and had VICi use the information on the baby to create a holographic projection of what he’ll look like after he’s born and at several other growth stages. Would you like to see your grandson?”

Sir Richard smiled. “Yes, I would.”

When Liu went back to his hotel room after having breakfast, he almost dropped the cup of green tea he was holding. Sitting in a chair, reading a copy of the Newcastle Journal and drinking a cup of coffee was Forrest. His face was still a bit pale, but the doctor’s treatment had worked. Liu’s eyes were wide with shock. Forrest looked up as Liu closed the door; a sadistic grin on his mouth. “Surprised to see me?”

Liu swallowed hard. “Pleased, would be a better description,” he said.

Forrest studied Liu’s eyes. “Really? I thought you wanted me dead. You really should be careful what you say around people in a coma, Mr. Liu.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course you don’t. Have you heard from our informant since you stopped by to see her?”

Liu furrowed his brow. "Sir?"

"Don't play coy with me, Mr. Liu. Sit, before you fall down. I know you went to see Tina Phillips. Did she tell you anything useful?"

"Mr. Forrest, Tina Phillips is dead."

"Then I'll assume what she told you wasn't useful. I didn't trust her anyway. I think she's been double-crossing us."

"I didn't kill her!"

Forrest arched an eyebrow. "She died of cerbera poisoning, didn't she?"

"No, Sir. She died of an overdose of cocaine."

"You're changing your methods, then. Going for something more practical these days, Mr. Liu?"

"Mr. Forrest, I did not kill Tina."

"OK, Mr. Liu, calm yourself. I trust you have a plan in place to get what I need from Dr. Rigden? You, do know where she's at, don't you, Mr. Liu?"

"Yes, Mr. Forrest. Donna is living at Triplet Hall with Sir Richard."

"Are you certain of that, Mr. Liu? My informants tell me they don't know where she is. She's no longer at Triplet Hall, and she didn't go to work today at the Centre. Are you lying to me, Mr. Liu? No, of course you're not. You know better than to do that. That would make me very unhappy, and you wouldn't do anything to make me unhappy, now would you? So tell me, Mr. Liu. Where exactly is Dr. Rigden and Triplet's brat?"

Liu sighed and slumped to a nearby chair. "If Dr. Rigden is not at Triplet Hall then I'm afraid I don't know where she is, but I will find her."

"Miss Phillips wasn't your only informant in the UK, was she?"

"No, Sir! Of course not."

"Have you found Kevin Wilson and Linda?"

"Ah – no Sir – not since they disappeared from the Centre."

Forrest narrowed his eyes. "You're not being very useful to me these days. If you don't show me some progress, I may have to consider replacing you."

"That is not necessary, Mr. Forrest. I promise you, I will find Dr. Rigden and the Wilsons."

"Good because time is running out for me, and if I go down, you're going down with me. Find out where Rigden is and find out whether or not she has completed her research. Now get out. I have important things to do, and so do you."

"Donna, I need to talk to Dad alone."

"I'll wait for you in the park," Donna responded and stood to leave.

Richard stood and softly kissed her. "I won't be long."

"It's OK," Donna smiled. "Take your time. I like the park. I'll see you later, Sir Richard." Donna left.

"What did you need to talk to me about, Ricky?"

"First thing, did my delivery come?"

"You mean all those boxes from the Centre? Jason and Jaime put them in your bedroom. Didn't you see them?"

"I haven't shown Donna the upper part of our quarters yet."

"Are the boxes for her?"

"Yes. I picked them up while we were in London."

Sir Richard narrowed his eyes. "But she was with Sam then."

Richard grinned. "I took a chance that it wouldn't last."

"I see... have you shown her the entertainment hall?"

"No. The crew is still working on the final touches. It should be ready, by the time we get back from our honeymoon, though. At least, it better be. I want to take Donna to Thirlmere for a week."

"I assume you mean the coach house?"

"Yes."

"That shouldn't be a problem, as long as you take at least two guards with you."

“Dad, did you take security guards on your honeymoon with Mum?”

“No, but we weren’t under as big a threat as you and Donna are. You’re a little more important to society than we were,” he chuckled. “Besides, the coach house has plenty of rooms, and you’ll have plenty of privacy. I know that’s not what you want. You want Donna all to yourself, and I don’t blame you, but it’s too risky. I believe, at least for the moment, we’ve eluded him. He has his people running all over the place, looking for us. I’m a little concerned about what he’s up to, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Something Donna told me. She thinks he’s faking. She doesn’t think Forrest is as near gone as we think he is. I’ve watched the two conflicting videos and it does seem a little odd that he could be wheeled in on a gurney, and the next day, be giving a press conference.”

“Have you had any of our people check to make sure he’s there?”

“One of our agents at the hotel checked his room. He’s there. He has private medical staff looking after him, so I expect he’ll make another one of his surprise appearances.”

“No doubt to bad-mouth us. It’s a good thing you decided not to get the police involved in the Wilsons murders.”

“Yet – Ricky – yet. If I find out for sure who is responsible for that slaughter, you can bet I’ll make them pay. I didn’t like Kevin, but what happened in our guest house goes beyond revenge. So, tell me, how does it feel?”

“How does what feel?”

“To know that you’ll finally get what you want – Donna?”

Richard sighed contentedly and smiled. “I can’t describe the way it feels. It’s like, I’m standing at one side of a row of giant dominoes, and she’s at the other. Everything is falling into place.”

“Ricky, be sure you know what you’re doing here. Donna is a rare black pearl. You’ll have to hang on tight because everybody will want it. She’s like her mother, Son. Marie had

an attraction that seemed to draw men to her. She never paid it any mind – not even with Ken. She only married him because he got her pregnant.”

He studied Sir Richard’s eyes. “You think that’s the only reason Donna is marrying me.”

“No, but we both know why she’s with us. If the obstacles should be removed between her and Jared...” he broke off.

“I know Dad, but I love her, and I’m willing to wait for her to love me.”

“Let me ask you something, and I want you to be completely honest with me. I would never tell Donna, but, other than the obvious, did you have *anything* to do with Donna getting pregnant?”

Chapter 71

Sam stood outside Juanita's quarters for a while, thinking about what she'd said about Donna. "VICi, locate Donna Rigden."

VICi; Donna Rigden is in the park by the waterfall.

"Is she alone?"

VICi; Affirmative.

Sam hurried to the cafeteria. "Rita, two vanilla cappuccinos and two sugar-coated doughnuts - to go, please."

"You're in a bit of a hurry."

"Places to go, people to see. Thanks Rita." Sam grabbed the two bags and dashed to the park, taking the cafeteria entrance.

Donna was sitting on the bench, staring into the waterfall and mindlessly twirling her engagement ring, with her thumb. He slowly approached her. "Is this seat taken?"

She looked up with a start. "Hello, Sam. I didn't know you were there." She slid down.

"If you're trying to see your future - it's with me. I brought a peace offering."

Donna frowned. "Peace offering?"

Sam held up the bags. "Two vanilla cappuccinos and two sugar-coated doughnuts."

Donna's mouth spread in a slow smile, but then it quickly faded. She swallowed hard. "Thanks, but I've already had breakfast, at the - before we left."

Sam flashed his sexy grin. "There's always room for sugar-coated doughnuts and coffee," he persisted. Donna shook her head. "Oh come on, sweetheart. You've never been able to resist these."

Donna sighed. "Did you get napkins?"

"Why? You don't want me to kiss the sugar off your mouth anymore?" Donna's eyes glossed, and she looked as if she would cry, but the tears didn't come. She swallowed hard,

again. “Relax. I brought napkins. I was just teasing. Come on... I know they’re your favourite.”

Donna sighed again and held out her hand. “Richard is talking to his father about where he’s going to take me on our honeymoon,” she offered.

“Charming...” Sam groaned. “That’s one way to spoil the moment,” he muttered.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. So, how are you doing, now that... *he’s* gone?”

“You mean Jared? I’m fine.” Donna looked toward the entrance of the park and leaned closer. “You said something before that I wanted to ask you about.”

“What’s that sweetheart?”

“Sam... does Richard really know why Jared left me the way he did?”

“Of course he knows.”

“Do you? Please... be honest with me,” she said, gazing into his eyes. “I won’t tell Richard, you told me.”

“Forrest, Donna,” Sam softly replied. “Jared left because Forrest was threatening you and his daughter. He gave Jared a choice, leave, or he would go after you.”

Angry tears filled Donna’s eyes. “Forrest was threatening to kill Beth if Jared didn’t leave me? Why?”

“That... I don’t know, and that’s the truth. I’m not lying to you.”

“So, it had nothing to do with...?”

Sam shook his head. “No.”

Donna furrowed her brow and wiped her eyes. “But, why would Forrest...” she broke off. Her eyes widened. Her heart started pounding. A lump of fear rose in her throat, threatening to choke her. *Oh no!* She slowly put the half-eaten doughnut back in the bag and handed Sam the coffee. “I have to go. Please, stop trying to change my mind, by telling me things you know I want to hear. I have to do this!”

“Damn!” Sam groaned. “Maybe I shouldn’t have told her.” He repeated her last few words. “I *have* to do this...?” He

frowned and stared toward the front entrance of the park. “First Forrest threatens Jared’s daughter. Then Donna gets shot in the cemetery. Donna is with me. She said she didn’t want Richard. Juanita said that Donna always thinks about others first and that she didn’t want to see Donna lose someone else, she *loved*. Now... Donna is marrying Richard. Juanita also said Donna was marrying him because of the baby and other reasons. What other reasons?” Sam’s eyes widened. “*He’s* threatening her! He’s found out she’s pregnant, and he’s threatening her. Typical Triplet move.” Sam unlocked his cell phone. “That has to be it! Yeah, Gary, it’s me. Meet me in my quarters. I have to talk to you about Donna. It’s important!”

Donna looked up and instantly felt sick. She swallowed the bile at the back of her throat as she approached him. “We’re all set. There’s just one snag in our honeymoon.” He smiled and brushed the sugar from her mouth. “Having a snack?”

“What? Oh – yes,” she smiled and swallowed hard. “Doughnut and coffee, but I don’t think it agreed with me,” she said, covering her mouth with her hand.

Richard glanced above her head and caught Sam, sitting on the bench with his back to them. He was talking on his cell phone and putting something in the rubbish bin, by the bench. Richard looked back into Donna’s eyes. “Let’s go sit by the waterfall, for a while.”

“No, I’ll be fine. It’s just morning sickness. I should have known better than to have coffee. What’s the snag?” she asked, quickly changing the subject as she gently urged him to the front entrance.

Richard sighed and put his arm around her waist. “We have to take someone with us for protection.”

Donna smiled wryly. “I think we’re a little beyond worrying about protection, aren’t we?”

“Bodyguards, silly.”

Donna jumped at the opportunity. “Why don’t we ask John and Missy? I was thinking about asking her to be my maid of honour. I’d rather have Juanita, but she can’t be here.”

“Did she say why they left so suddenly?”

Donna said the first thing that came to her mind. “Because of Aunt Clara.”

“Her mother?”

“Yes, and Jared had to get back to his daughter. Now, getting back to our honeymoon. Why don’t we ask Missy and John to come along? They’ve just got back together, and it would be like a second honeymoon for them.”

Richard frowned as they stepped through the entrance. “I figured you would be upset that we wouldn’t be totally alone.”

“I am...” she answered quickly, faking a smile, “... but I’m sure wherever you’ve chosen will give us plenty of opportunities to be alone.”

Richard grinned. “We’ll have our own suite, and yes, there will be lots of time for us to be alone.”

Donna reflected his grin. “Where are we going?”

“Oh no – I told you it’s a surprise. You’ll just have to be patient and wait.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “I hate waiting!”

“I know...” Richard softly kissed her. “Right now, we have to go back to our quarters. There’s something I want to show you,” he said as he led her back down the corridor.

“And what would that be?”

“Our bedroom...”

Donna’s eyes widened. “Ok...”

Sam already had two mugs of coffee and a plate of his homemade granola bars – the ones Gary liked - sitting on the coffee table. He paced the floor as he waited. Gary pushed the door panel. The doors slid open. “Sam this had better not be another tactic to pump me for information about Donna! I was right in the middle of something.”

Sam led Gary into the lounge. “Sit down. Have a granola bar. I’ve made us some coffee.”

Gary sighed and sat on the sofa next to Sam. “Thanks, Sam,” he said and started nibbling on one of the granola bars. Sam picked up one. “So what is this about, Sam? I left Wein in the middle of an experiment. Knowing him, he’ll probably blow up the lab.”

“What are you doing?”

“Testing new forms of power sources for our nanobugs. I’m trying to figure out a way of making them smaller, but still have the same capabilities. I wish we could figure out a way of making them invisible. That way we wouldn’t have to worry about their size. Especially, under the circumstances, I think they would be extremely useful.”

“What are you trying to do?”

“Figure out how to use lasers to beam power to the bugs and bounce the signal off VICi’s satellite, so the bugs work in the same way as our cell phones do.”

“Right...” Sam chuckled. “OK – anyway. Before you get upset, I *did* ask you here to talk about Donna.”

“I knew there was a catch,” Gary groaned.

“Did she tell you she was marrying Richard? What am I saying? Of course, she told you. She tells you everything.”

Gary arched an eyebrow. “Well, at least I don’t have to answer *that* question. You already did. She told me about it last night.”

“Did she say why?”

“Sam, Donna tells me things because she knows I’ll keep her confidence.”

“OK, fine. I’ll tell you what I believe is happening. I’ve got to do some checking before I can prove anything, but I think Richard is blackmailing Donna. I think he may be behind this entire thing.”

“And just how do you figure that? Richard hired somebody to shoot at him so he could blackmail Donna into marrying

him. She's marrying him because of the baby, Sam. Isn't that obvious."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, and I know that Donna *has* feelings for Richard, too, but, answer me this. Jared left because Forrest was threatening his daughter."

Gary frowned. "How do you know that?"

Sam waved it off. "Never mind. Gary, what if Richard was responsible for getting Donna pregnant in the first place?"

"Well, he was," Gary chuckled.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. What if he fixed things?"

"Such as...?"

"I don't know – switched her oral contraceptives – did something to her Depro shot. I don't know. With Richard's resources, he could have done anything. I talked to Donna about this. She spent all that time with Jared, and she gets pregnant with Richard after one night? Even though she was still on the oral contraceptives before she took her Depro shot? Richard wanted Donna in the UK. The very day she goes to Hornbeck to collect her things, she gets shot. Not a fatal shot – mind you – but a warning shot. Something to make sure she leaves America with Richard. What if the shooting and the car chase was just another way of creating sympathy for him? I screwed up that night – I admit it, but it wasn't my fault! I screwed up last night, but that wasn't my fault either!"

Gary's mouth gaped. "What are you talking about?"

"It's that damn perfume, Gary. The shit fucks with your hormones. I took a blood sample after I got back last night, and my oxytocin level was three times higher than it should have been, and I had enough testosterone in my bloodstream for five men. I ran another sample a while ago, and it's back to normal. Richard is responsible for that, as well. He gave Ruth, and Joyce the stuff and now he's given some to Jasmine. I love Donna, Gary. You have to help me. I'm being railroaded, and I've got the test results to prove it!"

Gary sighed. "Does D know about these test results?"

“Yes, I showed them to her.”

“And she didn’t say anything?”

“No, I’m telling you, Richard is blackmailing her. He’s probably threatened her or threatened her with the baby or something.”

Gary narrowed his eyes. “Sam, if he wanted to break you and Donna up – which I’ve no doubt he does - Richard wouldn’t threaten D or the baby. He would threaten you.” He paused. “Which is exactly why Jared left Donna. If Forrest had threatened him, Jared wouldn’t have cared.”

“I know! Is it starting to make sense yet?”

Gary pushed further back against the sofa. “Unfortunately – yes.”

Chapter 72

Richard scooped Donna up into his arms and carried her up the stairs to their bedroom. He set her on the floor. Donna's eyes widened. "What are all these boxes for?"

"They're yours," Richard smiled. "I picked them up while I was in London."

Donna frowned. "Why are you giving it to me now? My birthday isn't until December."

"Oh, I've got other plans for your birthday. These are just to let you know how much I love you, Donna. Besides, I wouldn't get too excited. I'm not that good at shopping. You may not like any of them. Why don't you open them up and see? While they ah – while they still fit you – that is."

"Thanks for reminding me that, in a few months, I'll look like a beached whale," she groaned and sat on the side of the bed.

Richard chuckled and sat beside her. He brushed some loose hairs from her forehead and smiled. "When you need new clothes, we'll buy them. Like I told you, I can give you anything your heart desires."

Donna softly smiled and sighed. "Thank you, but all I want... is your love and understanding." She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. Taking advantage of the situation, Richard deepened the kiss and eased her back on the bed. Donna tried to push the thought aside that Richard was lying to her. *But, I haven't come right out and asked Richard if he knew why Jared left. Would he lie to me if I asked him?*

"I'll admit the evidence points to Richard," Gary said. "But, we need proof before I'll even consider going to Donna with this."

Sam unlocked his cell phone. "What's the name of the clinic where Juanita works, and what's Jared's partner's name?"

“His name is Terry Downing, and he co-owns Fairfield Clinic, but you can’t call now. They won’t be open. What are you going to say to him, anyway? If we’re wrong and Donna gets wind of this she’ll have our balls in a vise.”

Sam grinned. “Then I’ll just ask general questions, and lie, and be discreet.”

Gary arched an eyebrow. “You mean you’ll do what you do best.”

Sam frowned. “Hey, I have my talents.”

“Yeah, and if you don’t handle this right, your talents are going to land both of us in the Donna Rigden jailhouse! And, trust me that’s worse than being in Strangeways Prison.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up. “She’s not that bad – is she?”

“Oh yeah – piss her off and find out. She can be a little wildcat! I, for one, don’t want to be on the receiving end.”

“Are you having a meal with her and Richard tonight?”

“No, I hadn’t planned on it. Why?” Gary asked with caution.

“I might need your help to get around a few... obstacles.”

Gary frowned. “That much I had expected. I want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do, Sam, but I won’t go against Donna’s wishes, no matter what! Understood?”

Sam grinned. “Yes.”

Richard landed the chopper at Langston Castle and helped Donna out. Vera let them in. “Where’s Grandma? We have something to tell her.”

“I’m sorry, Master Richard. Your grandmother had to go out.”

Richard looked at Donna and frowned. “For how long? She never leaves the castle!”

“I’m not sure, but she took a small case with her, so I don’t expect her back until tomorrow. Jack took her to the airport, not long after you left, this morning.”

“She didn’t say anything about where she was going or why?”

Vera softly chuckled. “I’m just the maid, Master Richard. Your grandmother doesn’t confide in me, or Jack.”

“I’m sorry, pet. I guess the news will have to wait until tomorrow.”

“In that case, why don’t we go on up to our apartment, take a shower and change. There’s something I’d like to talk to you about.”

“Sure. Vera, could you give us a shout when tea is ready?”

“Of course, Master Richard. Will Sir Richard and Dr. Browne be dining with you, as well?”

“Dad will, but Dr. Browne won’t. We’ll be upstairs.” Vera nodded and left. “Lift or stairs?”

“Lift, I think,” Donna responded.

“Are you sure. It’s an open cage lift.”

“You mean like the one on the movie Titanic?”

Richard chuckled. “Yeah, something like that.”

“In that case, let’s take the stairs.”

Richard took her hand and started leading her up the first flight of stairs. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“About our research project and the HIC. Can you get me as clear of an image of the HIV1 virus as you did our son?”

“Pet, you would be amazed at what VICi can do with it. She can enlarge the nucleus of any cell down to the base pair level. Why?”

“Can the image be manipulated in the same way?”

“You could play with it like a bunch of Lego bricks. What are you smiling about?”

“One more question and I’ll tell you why. Does VICi have the HIV1 genome in her database? It has to be of a live virus – not a dead one.”

“Of course. VICi has every known genome in her database, and we have teams all over the World, collecting more.”

Richard opened the door. “In that case, we may not have to wait for a live sample of the virus.”

“What – you think we can genetically engineer an HIV1 vector?”

Donna shrugged. “Why not? It’s worth a try. We can certainly run the simulation. That is if Gary can feed my calibration program into VICi. We could use the HIC like a 3D electron microscope.”

Richard snaked his arms around her waist and pulled her next to him. “You’re just a little genius, aren’t you? If we could do this, it would make our job a lot easier.”

Richard showered first. While he was waiting for Donna to shower, he decided to call Sir Richard and see if he knew anything about Lady Triplet going on a trip. Sir Richard didn’t know anything and was just as surprised as Richard that she suddenly left the castle. He was even more surprised to find out that Jack had taken her to the airport. When Sir Richard checked with the control tower at Newcastle Airport to see if Lady Triplet had logged a flight plan, he was told she had gone to Amsterdam.

While Sir Richard, John, Richard, and Donna sat down to an early evening meal, ten minutes before Mildred was due to go home, at the Centre, a strange man used Tina Phillips security key to get in the building. He went to the public toilet there, picked the lock to the utility closet and hid inside. He stayed there while the office staff left and security made their rounds.

Quietly, he eased the door open and glanced up and down the corridor. There was no one in sight. Further down the corridor near the entrance, the security guard had just settled at his desk. He didn’t hear the intruder creep up behind him. The cosh, which crushed the back of his skull left little sign of injury, and the guard collapsed without making a sound. The intruder disabled some of the security cameras, and then let in the rest of his team.

Using a security ID, they rode the lift to the top floor, and then made their way along the corridor to Sir Richard’s office.

With her back to the door, Mildred was sitting in her chair, gathering her things to go home. She didn’t notice the three

ninjas until she turned. Discreetly, she pressed the silent alarm under the edge of her desk. “Who the devil are you?”

One of the ninjas stepped forward. “You’re wasting your time. If you want to remain useful, tell me where Dr. Rigden is.”

“Go to hell!” Mildred enunciated.

“Hold her,” the ninja said in Mandarin. He produced a small, wickedly sharp knife. “There is no one coming. The guard will not hear the alarm. Now tell me where I may find Dr. Rigden?”

“She is under Sir Richard’s protection, and you will be dead when he finds out about this,” Mildred snapped back as she struggled to free herself.

“No, Mrs. Hayes. That’s not good enough. I want to know exactly where she is. Now, for the last time tell me. Where is she?”

Mildred said nothing. She cried out as the man calmly proceeded to cut off the tip of her right little finger at the first joint. While the others put Mildred through agony, one of the ninjas proceeded to tear the office apart, looking for clues.

Despite the pain, no matter what they did to her, Mildred held her tongue.

After a while, a man approached. Mildred narrowed her eyes. “I might have known you would be behind this – you sick bastard!” she snapped.

“It’s unbecoming for a lady, such as yourself to use such vulgar language, Mildred.” He looked down at her finger. “You fucking idiots! What have you done? Give her something for the pain!” he ordered.

One of the ninjas produced a tourniquet and a hypodermic syringe filled with a clear liquid and injected it into the vein on top of Mildred’s hand.

“Now find something and clean her up. Mildred, where do you keep your first-aid kit.”

“Bottom drawer of the filing cabinet,” she motioned with her head. The ninja proceeded to gently dress her wound.

Forrest sighed and lifted Mildred's chin, so their eyes met. "Mildred, they weren't supposed to hurt you. Especially not cut off your finger. They should have known, for someone who has worked for Sir Richard as many years as you have that pain would be an ineffective way to extract information from you. Besides," he smiled, "...there are much more pleasant ways, of getting the job done. I am so, *so* sorry. Is the medication helping?"

Mildred softly smiled and nodded.

Forrest continued talking to her while he waited for the drugs to take effect. "You're not going to tell me what I want to know, are you Mildred?"

Mildred grinned slightly and shook her head.

Forrest sighed and crouched in front of her. "Mildred, I *really* need to find Donna. For one thing, I don't want to die, and Donna has something I need. You don't want to see me die, do you Mildred?"

The drugs were starting to take effect. "No... Mr. Forrest."

"Please, Mildred, call me GW. You have such pretty eyes. Has anyone told you that, lately?"

Mildred shook her head. "No..."

"All Donna has to do is give me some of her bone marrow, and then I can live. You want to see me live, don't you Mildred?"

"Of course Mr. – I mean – GW."

Forrest patted her knee. "Good," he said and patted her knee again. "Good. Now... the other reason I need to find Donna is so I can try and talk some sense into her. Donna and your genetics team are working on a drug that will mean chaos to the world. It's going to cause a huge increase in the world's population, and our food supply just can't cope. There will be wars and people will starve. *Billions* of people will start fighting for control of it. You don't want that do you Mildred? Innocent people fighting and killing each other over something like a tiny drug. You don't want that do you?"

Mildred smiled and shook her head, her voice groggy. “No... GW.” Forrest’s kind and considerate tongue bemused her drug addled brain. She didn’t see the monster in front of her that the World saw. The men in the black suits were the ones who had hurt her. Forrest had made them give her something for the pain and bandage her finger. It wasn’t his fault. All he wanted to do was talk to Donna and stop a world disaster. “I... don’t know... exactly where she is,” she found herself saying.

Forrest clenched his teeth and reassured her. “That’s OK Mildred, but I have to find her. The fate of millions depends on it. Please, tell me anything you know that might help me find her. You see, Sir Richard has been lying to everyone. He’s going to kill Donna just as soon as she’s perfected the drug. I don’t want that to happen. Not just because I need her to live, but because I don’t want to see her die.”

“She is... in a safe place... underground. You’re lying... Sir Richard wouldn’t hurt Donna... she’s his... goddaughter. He won’t let you hurt her.”

“I don’t want to hurt her. I just need to talk to her,” Forrest persisted. “Where underground is Donna, Mildred?”

“In the hills... deep down... underground.”

Forrest was beginning to get aggravated. He fought to control his temper. “*Where* underground?” he said through slightly clenched teeth.

“In a mine... she might be... in the mine.”

“Which mine is she in Mildred?”

“It’s up high... away from everything... and everyone.”

“Do you know what’s close to it? What does Sir Richard call it?”

“Nothing... nothing is... close to it,” she replied. “I don’t know... what it’s called. Sir Richard just... calls it... the mine.”

“What kind of mine is it?”

“An old lead mine. Then... British Steel had it.”

“*What* does Sir Richard *call* it?”

Mildred frowned and looked as if she might cry. “Don’t shout... I’m... trying to help.”

“I’m sorry, Mildred. I didn’t mean to shout.”

“That’s OK... I forgive you... GW. Sir Richard just... calls it, the mine,” she said and softly chuckled.

Forrest rolled his eyes and sat in a chair across from her. Mildred was getting too relaxed, and she still hadn’t told him anything he could use. She dozed off; Forrest patted her cheek. Mildred opened her eyes and smiled. Forrest mirrored her smile. “Maybe you can tell me how you contact the mine?”

“I can call Sir Richard for you,” she volunteered, now eager to help. “He’s there too – they all are.”

“Is there a land line to the mine?”

“No... Sir Richard... didn’t want one. Cell phones... won’t work. No towers. Uses a satellite.” She slowly reeled off a twelve digit number.

“Write that down!”

Skilfully Forrest continued to question Mildred, drawing out information until he was certain she knew no more. “Thank you, Mildred. You’ve been very helpful.” He stood. “I’m going to let you sleep now,” he said kissing her forehead. “Have a nice long nap,” he added and walked toward the door. Turning, he blithely said to one of his men, in Mandarin, “Secure her and finish her.”

Chapter 73

Against his better judgement, Gary agreed to have a meal with Sam while they waited to call Jared's clinic in the States. The closer to time to call, the more apprehensive Gary became. For one thing, he didn't want Donna to find out what they were doing behind her back, and another, he knew by talking to Terry Downing, Jared's partner, eventually, Jared would find out. If there was one person Gary hated pissing off more than Donna, it was Jared. He'd seen first-hand what Jared's anger could do.

Sam collected their empty dishes and put them in the dishwasher. Gary moved into the lounge. Sam brought two cups of steaming liquid into the lounge. "Coffee for you. Herbal tea for me." Sam glanced at his watch. "Jared's clinic should be open, by now."

Gary checked the time on his cell phone and sighed. "I was afraid you were going to say that. Sam, I'm going to need a few seconds to upload 'Acid Rain' to their computer system. I'll let you know when I have it, so keep them talking until then. Are you sure you can do this without making Terry suspicious?"

"Trust me," Sam grinned, unlocked his cell phone and put it on speaker.

Gary held up his hand. "Just wait a second. VICi, link database to Sam Kaliea's cell phone and my laptop. Once communication is open, upload 'Acid Rain'. Silent notification only, to my laptop. OK, Sam – go." Sam pressed the number to the clinic and waited.

"Fairfield Clinic, this is Billie. How may I help you?"

"Hi Billie, this is Dr. Sam Kaliea from Newcastle Stem Cell Research Centre in the UK." Sam kept an eye on Gary while he talked. Gary watched the network link, waiting for the red bar to flash. "I've acquired one of Dr. Downing's patients," Sam

continued, "...and I was wondering if you might send me a copy of their medical record. The patient has an unusual problem, and I'd like to check their previous treatment before I go any further."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Kaliea, but you'd need to discuss that with Dr. Downing or Dr. Thundercloud. Other than the patient, they're the only people authorised to release patient records."

"Would either one of them be available?"

"Dr. Downing is with a patient and Dr. Thundercloud is not in the clinic today. Would you like to leave a message?"

Gary gave Sam the thumbs up.

"No, that's OK Billie. I'll call back." Sam ended the call. "That was fast."

"VICi, follow communication link and download Fairfield Clinic's database using Dr. Juanita Walton's logon information. Put downloaded file in a separate folder, label and store in secured area of database. Once download has completed, put 'Acid Rain' in sleep mode." Gary waited.

Sam's eyebrows shot up. "Man, you know the techno jargon. How do you remember all those commands?"

"Takes years of practice, Sam and lots of patience. VICi can do just about anything if you give her the correct commands in the right order."

"Could she fly an airplane?"

"Probably," Gary responded. "It might take some tweaking, but I believe it could be done."

"How would it work?"

"Well, if the aircraft has auto-pilot, which most these days do, I would logon to their on-board computer, much in the same way as I..."

VICi; Logon successful. Database downloaded. 'Acid Rain' now in sleep mode.

"Good, now we can find out whether or not my hunch is right," Sam commented.

"VICi," Gary said. "Access downloaded file. Scan for Dr. Donna Marie Rigden's patient records. Send a list of

medications given to Dr. Rigden since she became Dr. Juanita Walton's patient. Filter out anything before the fourth month of the current year. Display information to wallscreen. Focus, Sam Kaliea."

Sam focused on the wall he normally used for his wallscreen displays. A list of conditions, diagnosis and medications given appeared on the wallscreen. Sam scanned through the information. Aiming a laser pointer at the screen, he started explaining. "Well, on this date it shows where Juanita started Donna on oral contraceptives, but Juanita didn't examine her until a week *after* Donna started taking them, which is a little odd, but, never mind. She shows Donna responded well, so Juanita gave her a repeat prescription for three months, which is standard...."

Gary held up a hand. "Sam, could you just get on with it. I don't feel comfortable going through Donna's private documents like this!"

"Right – sorry – I thought you wanted to know."

"Well – I don't. Just find what we're after."

"There – that one," Sam said. "That's where she was given the Depro shot."

Gary slid to the edge of his seat. "VICi, down three lines. Select barcode. Scan through all patient records of downloaded file for the same barcode. Filter out individual identification elements. Scan for any reference to abnormalities and unplanned pregnancies."

VICi; Six matches found.

"VICi, display matches and dates the injections were given."

"There!" Sam growled, pointing to the dates. "Is that proof enough for you? Every single injection was given on the same day and ordered by the same person."

"Juanita," Gary sighed.

"Richard would have known that Donna would go to Juanita to get her injections. One, maybe two slip-ups I could understand, but not six!"

“Yes, Richard would have known that Donna would go to Juanita, but so would Forrest. This still doesn’t prove Richard was responsible, Sam. For whatever sick reasons, Forrest could have set this up himself.”

“But why, Gary? Why would Forrest care whether or not Donna got pregnant? Richard, on the other hand, would have. Richard would have known if Donna got pregnant with his baby, she would stay with him, because – as she’s doing – Donna would do what’s best for the baby. It wouldn’t have made any difference if she were with me, or Jared, or somebody else. Donna would take the best option for the baby, and in her eyes that’s what Richard can give her.”

Gary scratched the back of his neck and furrowed his brow. “I don’t like the way this is going. Look, Sam. I’ve known Richard for years. I’ve seen him do some pretty conniving things, but Richard loves Donna. He would do almost anything to be with her....”

“...That’s what I’m trying to....”

“...But,” Gary interrupted and paused. “Richard would know if he did something like this, and Donna found out that would be the end of their relationship and quite possibly their friendship, too. I don’t believe Richard would be prepared to take that risk.” *At least for his sake, I hope he didn’t take it!*

“What about what he did with that fucking Euphoria? Huh? Was that right?”

“Well, no,” Gary chuckled. “But, can you honestly tell me if you were in his position that you wouldn’t have done the same? You *and* Richard came very close to cooking your goose with Donna in the first place for that same reason – chest beating – fighting over her. Donna cares for both of you – I don’t know why – but she does. At first, she seemed to care for you more, but you’re right. Donna is going to do whatever she feels is best for her baby. She will not compromise on that issue.”

“Well, no. Neither would I, but marrying Richard just to give the baby the Triplet name may not be the best option. Donna doesn’t love Richard, Gary. She’s told me that.”

“She’s told me that too, but if it doesn’t work out, Richard promised to give her a divorce.”

“I’m telling you if Donna marries Richard, he will not give her a divorce. What he will do is use the baby to keep her with him and Donna will end up miserable. That... cannot be what’s best for the baby, but Donna will not see it that way.”

Gary sighed again. “Probably not....”

“Then we go to Donna?”

“No! At least I’m not. You can, but if you do, you risk losing any chance you might have had with her. Are *you* willing to take that risk?”

“No!” Sam forced through his teeth.

“Then calm down. Get us a scotch and let’s do some more digging.”

Sam poured two tumblers, handed Gary one and sat next to him on the sofa. “Cheers,” Gary said and took a sip.

“What do we do now?”

“Now, we start going through shipping records and see if Fairfield Clinic is the only one that received a delivery of Depro from that barcode batch.”

Amsterdam, Amsterdam Airport Conference Room

The tension in the room was thick with feelings of indecision. The outcome of this meeting was paramount. It was imperative that the speaker remain in control, and he was fast losing the battle. Normally, Sir Richard tried to keep the peace, but then The Order hadn’t extended him an invitation to this meeting. He was the *subject*, of this meeting.

“I do not feel that what you are proposing is entirely necessary. Violence can only lead to more violence!” Amit Chaudhuri, the Indian representative, said with conviction as he rose to his feet and faced the speaker.

Petroff Veloski, the representative of Russia, shot to his feet and leaned forward so that his face was inches from Chaudhuri's. "Sir Richard is standing between us and immortality!" He growled through his clenched teeth. "What better reason can we have?"

The speaker rose to his feet, slamming his gavel hard in an attempt to regain some level of control. "Gentlemen... gentlemen... please!" The room began to quieten. The speaker sat down and spoke in even, calm tones. "Everyone here knows the contribution that the Triplet family has given this organisation, and we're all indebted to them, but of his own free will, Sir Richard has chosen to turn his back on The Order. Now, whether or not we decide to remove him from his position is not a decision any of us want to be faced with. But, gentlemen, we must understand, in a situation like this, personal feelings must be pushed aside."

"I'm afraid I must agree with Chaudhuri. None of us would hesitate to give the order to remove Forrest but, despite all that's happened, Sir Richard has been there when we needed him, and I don't feel that will change. He is protecting these scientists for a reason," Pacon, the Brazilian representative added with consternation.

Wei Chen shouted something in Mandarin.

Bongani, the South African representative, threw his hands in the air. "The entire population is at stake here! We do not have the time to quibble with matters of lesser importance. If you expect that we will be able to come to complete agreement then we might as well adjourn now!"

"I agree!" shouted Bob Howard, the Canadian representative.

The speaker tapped his gavel. "Then I say it's time we take a vote and gentlemen before you make your decision, please remember, it is not the fate of a few friends that lies at stake, it is the fate of the planet. Now, if you would please write your decision on the ballot in front of you and place it in the box as

it is passed to you, we will finish this as soon as possible so that we might take action accordingly.”

The speaker waited until all the representatives had cast their vote. The box was passed to the head of the table. The speaker lifted the lid, and began counting the votes. He carefully placed the yes votes in one pile and the no votes in another. After he had placed the last ballot, it was obvious which pile was taller. He gathered the ballots together, put them back in the box, closed the lid, and slid the box to one side. “Let the minutes show; the decision of The Order, by majority vote is...”

“You dare to call yourself men!” she shouted as she parted the curtain, and stepped in plain view. Her blood was boiling in her veins; she’d been listening. The members looked as if they were staring at a demon. You could have heard a feather drop.

“Is my son to be accused and convicted without a fair trial?” she asked as she approached the table.

Pacon graciously gave up his seat to her and stood to the side in awe. She nodded and sat down; placing her cane beside her chair. “Now,” she said, “Am I to assume, that after all this family has done; all it has lost and all it has been *willing* to give up, that you are removing my son from his position without him even knowing about it?”

The speaker stuttered; he didn’t know what to say. Lady Annabelle had not attended a meeting of The Order since her husband passed away. In fact, she hadn’t even bothered to cast a vote since then. It was believed that she had utterly washed her hands of the organisation. What could have alerted her to this secret meeting?

The speaker found his voice, “Lady Annabelle, you honour us with your presence; I only wish you had informed us of your desire to attend the meeting. We would have arranged transport for you.”

“Oh cobblers do get off your knees, and stop trying to kiss my backside; it’ll earn you no favours from me! I haven’t come all this way to listen to the likes of you grovel at my feet for

crumbs! You should be ashamed of yourself for forcing an old lady like me to stay up past my bedtime to listen to you children quarrelling over table scraps!”

She slowly looked at each member’s face with contempt before continuing. “Which among you dares to make such ridiculous accusations toward my son?”

She waited for a reply that never came. “Am I to assume that none of you have the balls to claim guilt?” She shook her head in disgust. “You’ve sunk further than I had imagined!”

“Lady Annabelle, it was never our intention to...” the speaker finally managed, but she stopped him mid-sentence.

“Not your intention to what? Stab my family in the back the first chance you got? Did you honestly think I would sit by and do nothing?”

“Lady Annabelle, we were under the impression that you no longer wished to participate in our activities.”

She laughed. “Since when has absence and silence removed someone from their position? You!” she pointed to Amit Chaudhuri. “And you!” she pointed to Pacon. “You call yourself my son’s allies – bloody traitors – the pair of you!” She pointed her finger at Petroff Veloski, who had opened his mouth to protest. “Don’t even think about it Petroff. I know you’re in league with Forrest. If you want to remain where you are you’d be wise to keep your mouth shut!”

“I was not suggesting that you *had* lost your position,” the speaker said. “I was merely making an observation based on the circumstances. The last time you appeared you expressed your desire to distance yourself and be left alone.”

“You people really are afraid of a frail old lady,” she laughed. “I suppose my secrets still have some potency. That’s good, at least for you. I would not hesitate to use my secrets against any of you for the sake of my family. What you say or do to me is one thing. What you do to them is another.” She stood.

“Now let me leave this with you because I can’t stay any longer; the stench of decayed disorder is singeing the hairs of my nose and making me nauseous.”

She lowered her voice and narrowed her eyes. “Know this, should *any* of you make an attempt to harm *any* member of my family; whether by blood or marriage or by choice, I will do nothing short of destroy you. For the benefit of those who may not know me, ask those who do if I’m bluffing.”

She stood at the door and turned. “One final warning, the Triplet family has declared war on your lackey Forrest and he will be felled; as well as anyone who interferes.” She slammed the door so hard it rattled the hinges.

The room erupted with activity.

“Who is this person?”

“How dare she come in here and threaten us!”

“How can an old lady make a threat like that and get away with it?”

“Who does she think she is?”

The speaker hushed the room. “That lady is probably the *oldest* member of the original Order and her threats are well founded. Her family has nurtured and financed more operations than any of you could imagine. She guards secrets on each and every member, including myself, that should she so choose to reveal, could shake the very foundation of this organisation. The Order owes the Triplet family. We’ve been under their protection; many times finding safety in their own home. If crossed, she could quite literally obliterate The Order,” he said with the greatest reverence.

“So why not just get rid of her, she’s an old lady for fucks sake!”

“Getting rid of her, as you put it, is *not* an option! Lady Annabelle has recorded history in its truest form that dates back to the Crusades. If she were to release it, it could undermine the entire religious and political foundation of the World. She has connections in every organisation that links

throughout the entire globe; connections that remain covert yet loyal to her *and* her family.”

“Lady Annabelle is the surviving widow of Sir Richard Harold Triplet III; daughter to Sir Albert James Forbes II and a descendent of Richard the Lionheart. She is one of the most feared and protected people on this earth. She walks on Prime Ministers, she turns her nose up at Parliament, and she would eat the likes of any of us for evening tea and still have room for a biscuit. This person is *never* to be touched no matter *what* the circumstance might be. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

“If this person holds the keys to so much destruction, what do you suggest we do about Forrest? He’s going after Sir Richard and his family with a vengeance. He doesn’t give a shit how it might affect The Order or his own company for that fact. He certainly will not be bothered to ace an old wind-bag like her!”

“As I see it if Lady Annabelle has declared war on Forrest then Forrest has found his nemesis. We don’t need to get involved.”

Chapter 74

It had taken several rings before John realised the noise he'd heard was his cell phone. His face paled as his security told him about the mayhem at the Centre. John threw on his clothes and went to Sir Richard's bedroom. Sir Richard switched on the bedside lamp, slipped on his robe and opened the door. "What is it, John?"

John's voice was small. "Sir, there's been an attack at the Centre. Mildred is dead. They found her body tied to her office chair. She'd been tortured. Part of her little finger... had been cut off. Most likely to solicit information from her. It was Forrest, Sir Richard. We got him on camera, this time. I'm on my way to the Centre. I thought perhaps you might like to join me."

Sir Richard paused in thought and played with his chin. His eyes widened. "No, John! That's exactly what he wants. Stay in touch, but let the security at the Centre handle this. It's a typical Forrest move. He's trying to flush us out. Have Mildred taken to the complex. Tell Sam to do a post-mortem on her, ASAP. When we know exactly what happened, we'll notify Mildred's two children. They'll most likely want to arrange funeral services for her. I'll take care of everything that way we can keep this from getting out."

"What about Ricky and Donna?"

"We'll tell them in the morning. Mum should be back by then."

"Did you find out where she went?"

"Amsterdam."

"Amsterdam!" John echoed. "Why would she be going there, at such short notice?"

"It may not be short notice. Mum just may have chosen not to tell anyone. She has an old friend there in a village called Cruquius. She may have decided to pay him a visit."

John arched an eyebrow. "Him?"

Sir Richard chuckled. "One of Mum's *acquaintances*, after my father. Anyway... inform your men to keep this thing about Mildred quiet. Download the information from the security cameras and get Gary on it. I want to know for sure it's who we think it is. There have been some strange things happening with Forrest, since before Donna left Shreveport."

John nodded and left. Sir Richard closed the door. He sat on the side of the bed and shoved his hands through his thinning hair. His eyes glossed. He took a deep breath, and poured a double shot of brandy, from the bottle on his bedside table, Lady Triplet had instructed Jack to put there.

Sir Richard sat, remembering how everyone he'd ever cared for, and loved had been destroyed by this sick individual. He felt old and so very tired. His shoulders had borne a heavy burden. A responsibility he should have walked away from long ago, but people were counting on him. Now he was going to be a grandfather. That thought put a smile on his face, but he wondered how life might have been had he done things differently. Would the outcome have been the same? How would it end? How could he stop Forrest?

The Order had its advantages, but it also had its share of disappointments.

Although, Sam had to stop for Mildred's post-mortem, Gary had continued the search. He'd discovered the drugs had been manufactured and processed by Kings Laboratories, a well-known pharmaceutical company, on the East Coast. They had then been transported by air to Bayou State Distribution, a wholesale drug distributor in Shreveport, where they were loaded onto vans and delivered to the various clinics throughout the state.

On the surface, this seemed legitimate; until Gary discovered that a few years ago Bayou State Distribution had gone public, but had kept their name. The controlling shares of their stocks had been bought out, by none other than Forrest

Enterprises. Forrest had pulled the same stunt with the owner of BSD that he'd pulled with Ken, Donna's father, and the sewage works.

Unfortunately, since Richard happened to be in Shreveport when the shipment arrived made it possible and probable that he could have been involved. However, Gary still wasn't convinced his friend was to blame. It did prove, without a shadow of doubt that Forrest had been involved, but why?

Gary abandoned his search and started working on the security videos from the Centre.

Jack picked Lady Triplet up at the airport in Newcastle. Before Vera had started setting the table for breakfast, Lady Triplet had changed and was sitting in the parlour drinking a cup of tea. Sir Richard tried to sleep but couldn't because of what had happened at the Centre. He showered, dressed and headed downstairs. John came out of his room and went down with him. "Mum when did you get back from Amsterdam?"

Lady Triplet looked up from her tea. "Richard, things are worse than we'd anticipated."

"They certainly are Mum...."

"Last night, I went to a secret meeting of The Order," she sighed. "Well... I guess you could say I 'crashed' a secret meeting of The Order. Some of my sources alerted me, and I decided, under the circumstances that I would see what they were up to. They didn't know I was there until I stepped out in the middle of their vote."

"What? They were casting a vote on something in my absence? What were they voting on?"

"Apparently Forrest has managed to corrupt The Order, or at least he had until last night. I think I've put a stop to their plans, but it won't stop Forrest. He's acting on his own now, and he wants Donna. He's prepared to do whatever it takes. Richard, we can't let that happen! She and Ricky are the future and Donna is carrying Richard's heir. Has he proposed to her yet?"

“I think that’s something you should be asking them. Anyway, I have some....”

“Well, if Ricky hasn’t, he should do so soon,” she interjected. “The baby should be born a Triplet. Ricky needs to understand....”

Richard led Donna into the parlour. “Ricky needs to understand what, Grandma?”

“Welcome back, Lady Triplet,” Donna said and kissed her cheek.

Lady Triplet’s eyes sparkled as she purposely took Donna’s left hand. “I see you’ve already asked her. And she’s accepted?”

“Yes, she has,” Donna smiled and stood next to Richard.

“We’re getting married at St. Nicholas Cathedral in two weeks, Grandma.”

Lady Triplet beamed. “Oh I’m so glad.”

Sir Richard cleared his throat and glanced toward John. “Ricky, Donna, you need to sit down. I’m afraid you can’t get married at the cathedral, and, unfortunately, you can’t go on honeymoon as you’d planned,” he added, turning his attention to Richard.

Richard sat in a chair. Donna sank to his lap; her smile faded. “Why not, Dad?” Richard asked.

“Mildred is dead. There’s been another attack. This time at the Centre. From what John can find out, it appears Forrest himself carried out the attack.”

Donna gasped. “Mildred – your secretary?”

“Yes, petal.”

“How did they get past security this time?” Richard asked.

“They used Tina Phillips ID,” John spoke up. “Since it was Friday and the office was closed, my men didn’t find Mildred, until two this morning.”

Richard’s eyes glossed; he swallowed hard. “So, you got Forrest on camera?”

“That’s how it seems, at the moment,” Sir Richard replied. “It wouldn’t be safe for you to....”

“No, it wouldn’t be safe for them to get married at the cathedral, but it would be a perfect opportunity to flush Forrest out into the open – the sly fox!”

“You’re not using Ricky and Donna as bait!”

Lady Triplet frowned. “No, of course not. In fact, the wedding would still take place, only here, in my chapel. And... you wouldn’t have to wait two weeks. You could be married by – say – Monday or Tuesday.”

“Grandma, I’m not sure I...”

Donna tightened her jaw and clenched her fist. “...I think it’s a good idea!”

Richard frowned and looked at her. “You do?”

“Yes, I do! He tried to poison Missy. He slaughtered Wilson and his wife and done God only knows what with the baby’s body. Now he’s killed Mildred. He’s hurt enough people, Sir Richard. I want to help you bring him down. If it takes my wedding to do it, then so be it! We’ve got the rest of our lives to go on a honeymoon, Richard.” *Besides, I want to get even with that bastard for what he did to me and Jared! The sooner he’s behind bars, the better for everyone. Then, at least I’ll know Jared and Beth are safe.*

Sir Richard softly chuckled, shook his head and glanced at John. “Just like her,” John commented.

Donna frowned. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing is funny. It’s just that I’ve seen that look before.”

“Where?”

“From your mother.”

“If we’re going to do this, the first thing we need to do is go public with their wedding announcement,” John interjected. “Personally, I don’t think we should wait two weeks. It wouldn’t make any difference anyway. Ricky and Donna would already be married, and in a... safe place, by the time this goes down.”

“Then we need to get busy,” Sir Richard said. “I’ll speak to the bishop. He’ll need to be in on this, but we can’t tell him what we’re planning on doing to Forrest.”

“I can’t imagine he’d go along with us shooting someone from the church tower,” John said.

Donna stiffened. “Shooting someone? I thought you were going to....”

Sir Richard held up a hand. “Petal, turning Forrest over to the authorities would be a total waste of time. You wouldn’t have to be involved in that part of the operation.”

Lady Triplet watched Donna. Donna’s eyes had widened to two black marbles, and her face was losing its colour.

“As I see it – two shooters, posed as maintenance men, in the church tower,” John said. “One shot to the head, and another one to the chest. He would go out like a light and wouldn’t know what hit him.”

Bile rose fast to the back of Donna’s throat; she put her hand over her mouth and ran for the downstairs toilet. Richard followed her.

“John you should be ashamed of yourself. Talking about killing someone in front of a pregnant woman. She’ll not be able to keep anything down now, thanks to you and your graphic description!”

“Sorry, Lady Triplet,” John growled. “I’m not *used* to being around pregnant women.”

“Well, keep that part for you and your men. We want to get the story about the wedding in the papers, on TV, every possible form of media. The more exposure the better.”

Richard wet a flannel and wiped Donna’s face and mouth. “Sorry about that, pet,” he said. “John’s not used to talking shop around a delicate flower like you.”

Donna flushed the toilet and sat on the toilet lid, wiping her face with the flannel. “I’m not a delicate flower. I’m a doctor, and I just conspired to kill a man. That’s a little hard to take before breakfast. You three act as if you do this all the time. I’m not a murderer.”

Richard sighed and crouched in front of her. “This is some of those difficult choices Dad was talking about Donna. Dad doesn’t like killing, but trust me, Forrest deserves this.”

“So you’re not opposed to killing?”

“No. Sometimes it’s necessary.”

“And... you would kill to get what you want?”

“No, but I would kill to keep him from killing someone else, and trust me, Forrest is responsible for the death of thousands. Unless he’s stopped, he’ll kill more. He doesn’t care Donna. How many more do you want to see slaughtered like Kevin and Linda Wilson?”

Donna frowned. “I don’t Richard, but that’s what the authorities are for. That’s why we pay our hard earned tax dollars, so we don’t have to make those difficult choices. Murder is wrong, Richard!”

“Do you want me to tell Dad, to forget about the operation?”

“No, but I don’t want to know about it.”

“Fine, as soon as we’re married, we’ll move to our quarters at the complex, and you can carry on doing what you do best.”

“What’s that?”

“Saving lives,” Richard smiled and bent his head to kiss her.

Donna held up a hand, shook her head and reached for the mouthwash. She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Now, you can kiss me.”

Sir Richard’s cell phone rang. “Dad it’s me. I’m ringing, because I know you don’t want Grandma to know about the project. Donna wants to help, so we’re taking one of the choppers and going to the complex.”

“Hang on a second. Excuse me a minute, Mum,” Sir Richard said and stepped out of earshot. “You know she doesn’t have to do that.”

“She knows, but that’s not the only reason. Donna wants to test her idea about using the HIC to build an HIV1 vector.”

“Oh, I see. She’s dedicated, isn’t she?”

Richard smiled. “Yes, she is. Tell Grandma we’ll be back for tea.”

“What about breakfast? The table is already set.”

“We’ll get something at the complex.”

“OK, Ricky, just be careful. John and I will be there after breakfast.”

“See you then,” Richard said and ended the call. He took Donna’s hand and led her to the chopper. As soon as he’d secured her, he got in the other side and went through the pre-flight check. “OK, ready to go?”

Donna swallowed hard and nodded. Richard chuckled. “Still a little nervous about this, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but I’ve learned there are far worst things in this world than flying.”

The chopper slowly rose and levelled off. Richard turned to Donna and smiled. “Here we go. I’m glad we’ve conquered your fear of flying. I love to fly, and I love having you beside me. I wish you would let me teach you.”

Donna glared at him. “Why do I need to learn how to fly? I’ve got you.”

“Because it’s kind of a Triplet tradition, and you never know when it might come in handy.”

Donna swallowed hard. “Are you suggesting Sir Richard can fly?”

“Of course, he can fly. He stopped flying after my mother passed away, but if he needs to he can.”

Donna softly smiled. “I didn’t know,” she sighed. “How long will it take, if I let you teach me? I mean, how long would the lessons last?”

“Well, you’ll need at least 45 hours in the air before you can take your PPL – private pilot’s license test. 25 of those hours need to be with an instructor. I would recommend John, and then you’ve got ten hours of solo time.”

“You couldn’t serve as my instructor?”

“If you want me to, but John has more flight hours than me. So... are you going to let me teach you?”

Donna groaned. “Sure why not. You only live once.”

“When did you want your first lesson?”

“After the baby is born, if we’re done with the project, then you can teach me to fly.” *If we’re still together, by then.*

“I’m going to hold you to that.” Richard hovered over the complex site. “VICi, open hangar door and raise lift.”

Chapter 75

Donna walked into the infirmary and pushed the door panel to Sam's office. She waited. The door slid open. "Can we talk? Gary assured me your office was... safe."

Sam waved her to a chair and sat on the edge of his desk. "Where's your fiancée?"

Donna sighed. "He's going over the security footage with Gary. Where's Joyce?"

"She'll be here on Monday, but the Euphoria won't. I told her if she wanted to keep her job to lose the perfume, or else."

Donna softly smiled. "How can you fire her on the basis of her perfume?"

"As I see it, Euphoria is a controlled substance, and that goes against her contract. Not to mention, it's dangerous. You – ah – you said so yourself."

"I believe it could be, yes. You haven't had any more... episodes with your oxytocin and testosterone levels, have you?"

"Not until you walked through the door."

Donna laughed. "Sorry about that. I'll try to keep my distance."

Sam swallowed hard and jutted his chin. "What did you want to talk about?"

Donna studied his eyes. "Sam, things have not... turned out the way I'd planned. I wanted you to know that I'm not marrying Richard, just because of the baby. I'm doing it to protect the ones I... love."

"Did Gary get a chance to talk to you about what we found out?"

"You mean about the Depro shot? I know about it, Gary told me, that's another reason. If Richard is responsible...."

"Is he threatening you?"

“I don’t know Sam, but I won’t risk you getting hurt. Another reason I came to see you was to ask you to play at my wedding.”

Sam frowned. “You want me to watch you marry Richard? I love you, Donna. Do you realise what you’re asking me?”

“I know it’s asking a lot of you, and if you don’t want to do it, I’ll understand, but I’d like you to... be there. This isn’t forever, Sam. I don’t want... to be with Richard, but right now, I don’t have a choice. And... I have to make it look real, or this whole mess is going to blow up in my face.”

“Just answer one question for me. Do you love me?”

Donna hesitated. “I... care, very deeply for you Sam, but I can’t be with you, any more than Jared could be with me, and I understand why, now. And I do have to think about the baby.”

“So what are you telling me, Donna?”

“I’m asking you to wait until the baby is born, and if you still want me, then we can go from there. Trust me. I’m just as frustrated about this situation as you are. One of the reasons I’m doing this is because of Beth. She’s like a daughter to me. I need to know if you can play your part in this. Because if you can’t, then it ends now. I won’t be the cause of Jared, or Beth, or even you...”

Sam put his finger to her lips. “I took drama lessons, too. I’ll be there, and we’ll get through this... somehow.”

Donna’s eyes glossed. She softly smiled and cleared her throat. “Now that I’ve cleared the air between us, what did you find out about Mildred?”

“Have you seen the footage from the Centre?”

“No, but I know Forrest was responsible, or so it seems.”

“Apart from the fact that her neck was broken, and part of her little finger cut off, Forrest gave her a truth serum cocktail.”

Donna tightened her jaw. “What kind of drugs did he use?”

“Sodium amytal, scopolamine and - are you ready for this, oxytocin.”

“But, no cerbera?”

“Nope. As you know the sodium amyta...”

Donna held up her hand. “I know what they do, Sam. Save your explanations for Sir Richard.”

Sam grinned. “Don’t you mean your future father-in-law?”

Donna sighed. “And, my godfather.”

Sam frowned. “Godfather? Sir Richard is your godfather?”

Donna waved it off. “Another time Sam. Do you have your post-mortem report ready?”

Sam grinned and stood. He took her hand and lifted her to her feet. “VICi, secure office door, no entry mode,” he said and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Before we go into this role-playing thing, do you think I could have one kiss?”

The corners of Donna’s mouth turned up. “Do you still smell like dead fish?”

“No. I assure you after three extremely hot showers, there is no Euphoria anywhere on me.”

“I think I can spare you that much consolation then, but when we get out of here, things have to go my way – understood?”

“Will you stop trying to order me around and kiss me? I know my role. Just remember that’s what it is – a role. If you see me coming onto someone, it doesn’t mean anything.”

“I’ll remember,” she whispered and kissed him.

Sam held her and buried his face in her hair. “I was so afraid I’d lost you.”

Donna grinned. “Not yet, but I have to go, now.”

Gary narrowed his eyes and stared at the wallscreen. “I’ve been over this thing four times now, and something just doesn’t seem right.”

Richard scratched his head. “I have to admit, the part at the end where Forrest speaks Mandarin doesn’t fit.”

“Yeah, I know, but that’s not what’s bothering me. It’s this bit here,” he said aiming a laser pointer at the wallscreen. “You see that filing cabinet beside him?”

“Yes. I’ve propped my elbow on that thing many times.”

“Unless it’s the angle of the camera,” Gary continued. “There’s either something wrong with the height of the filing cabinet, or Forrest’s condition is making him shorter.”

“Making who shorter?” Donna entered the room and walked next to Richard. He smiled and kissed her forehead.

“We were just going through the video from the Centre. CML wouldn’t affect Forrest’s height, would it?”

“No, CML affects the white cells in bone marrow. It does not affect a patient’s height. Why do you ask?”

“Take a look at this picture.” Again, Gary used the laser pointer to indicate a particular part of the image. “Is it just my eyes, or does Forrest seem shorter than he should be?”

Donna sighed. “How tall is that filing cabinet?”

“It’s 132 centimetres,” Richard said.

“That’s what, about four foot four. Forrest is about five foot ten. VICi, what is the height of the man standing next to the filing cabinet?”

VICi; Subject is 1.72 metres.

Donna rolled her eyes and sighed. “VICi, what is that in feet and inches.”

VICi; Five feet eight inches.

“It could just be the difference in his position and the angle of the camera. Why? You don’t think it’s Forrest? It certainly looks like him to me.”

“Another thing that’s bothering us is this last line. Now I want you to listen to this. Forrest speaks in English the entire time, except for this. VICi replay last two minutes of video.”

Donna listened to the playback. “He spoke fluent Mandarin. Why?”

“Does he speak Mandarin, pet?”

Donna shook her head. “I don’t know Richard. If he does, he never did it around me. He travels all over the World, I suppose he could have taken lessons.”

“So... did you and Sam get Mildred’s post-mortem sorted?” Richard asked.

Donna glanced at Gary. “Ah – yeah. The reason Mildred was so eager to help, toward the end, was because she was given a mixture of truth serum drugs. One of them being oxytocin.”

“The love hormone?” Gary asked.

Donna chuckled. “It’s been called that. It’s one of the active chemicals in Euphoria. I might would try some of it myself except I can’t stand the way it smells.”

“Pet, you don’t need Euphoria.”

Donna smiled. “Neither do you, so do me a favour, stop hanging around women who wear it.”

“That won’t be a problem in the complex. I talked to Dad, and he’s outlawed it here.”

“Outlawed? Are you saying your father has separate laws in the complex?”

Richard glanced at Gary. “To a certain extent, he does. I mean, for the most parts, he follows the laws of the land, but there are times, when he bends the rules a bit. It makes sense. See, the biosphere project is supposed to act as its own little world. We’re a community down here, and since Dad is responsible for everyone, he feels he has the right to set certain rules. Much like an employer would expect certain standards.”

Donna arched an eyebrow. “But... he’s willing to kill and doesn’t feel he needs to report murders?”

Richard sighed. “The reason Dad didn’t report the Wilson murders and Mildred’s was because he knew Forrest was involved. And, where Forrest is concerned, standard laws just don’t apply. I know to a law abiding citizen that might be hard to understand.”

Donna grinned. “So... you’re saying you’re *not* a law abiding citizen?”

“What are you on about, D?”

Richard chuckled. “You kind of missed that staff meeting, Gary. She’s concerned that Dad wants to use our wedding to take Forrest out.”

Gary frowned. "Sir Richard is planning on acing Forrest, and he's using you and Donna as bait?"

"Not entirely," Richard groaned. "Here's the situation. Donna and I are getting married at Grandma's castle on Tuesday, but, our wedding announcement and the headlines are going to say something else. See, we're not actually going to be at the cathedral. Dad is just making Forrest think that."

"So, let me guess. Sir Richard is going to have someone in the church tower?"

"Well, actually, John suggested two, but yes," Richard replied. "Donna is..."

"Excuse me," she interjected. "You might be marrying me, but Donna can still speak for herself. I was under the impression that we were going to frame Forrest and have him arrested."

Gary glanced at Richard. "D... even if Sir Richard was lucky enough to get Forrest behind bars, he would never stay there. He has too many connections in high places."

"Well, I'll put it this way. If there's anyone who wants to get even with Forrest it's me, but I still don't agree with the way you're doing it."

Richard brushed the back of his fingers down her cheek and smiled. "Then I would say the safest thing for us to do in this situation is to agree to disagree. Dad is not going to risk an opportunity like this, especially after he murdered Mildred."

"So that's that, then, is it?"

"I'm afraid so, pet."

"No, it isn't." Donna narrowed her eyes and let go of Richard's hand. "I could always call off the wedding."

Richard growled. "Donna, you're not being reasonable."

"Neither are you," she responded curtly and walked out.

Richard turned to Gary. "Would she do that?"

Gary sighed. "Donna doesn't believe in murder, Richard."

"She's got to understand, sometimes to get what you want; you have no choice but to step over the line!" he groaned. "I'll go talk to her."

Gary rested a hand on Richard's shoulder. "No! You carry on. I'll handle this one," he sighed and left. "VICi; locate Donna Rigden."

VICi; Donna Rigden is in the cafeteria

Chapter 76

“Hi, Rita. Could I have a strawberry and banana salad, with natural yoghurt, and a glass of orange juice, please?”

Sam slipped in behind her. “Make that two, Rita,” he said. “...And add a small bowl of dry granola. I like a little crunch to mine. Oh, and put them on the same tray.”

“What are you doing here? Have you already forgotten what we talked about in your office?”

“No... and I haven’t forgotten the kiss, either. Don’t get your knickers in a twist. I’m not following you. I simply came in here to have my breakfast. I’ve been in the morgue since three this morning. I had just sat down to enter my report into VICI’s database, when the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen knocked on my door.”

“Keep your voice down, Sam. The infirmary is secure. The cafeteria isn’t.”

Rita sat the tray on the counter. “Here you go, Sam, Donna, enjoy.”

“Thanks, Love,” Sam said and carried their tray to a table. Donna sat across from Sam. “So, did you check in with the old ball and chain?”

“Yes,” Donna groaned. “I went to see what Gary and Richard were up to. I told you. I do not want...” she lowered her voice. “I do not want Richard to get suspicious. In fact, you should probably sit at another table.”

“Why? I can’t share breakfast with you? All I did was come in here to have my breakfast and help a pregnant lady to her table. We are not doing anything wrong, sweetheart. Do you think I’m going to ravish you on the table in a room full of people?”

Donna arched an eyebrow. “No, I don’t think you will. In fact, I know you won’t! Behave yourself, or *I’m* moving to another table.”

“So... since you’re making the rules and calling the shots, what are we *allowed* to talk about?”

Gary cleared his throat as he approached the table. “Am I interrupting something?” He glanced at Donna.

“No, please, join us,” Donna replied.

“I came to....”

“...Talk me out of cancelling the wedding? I wasn’t going to do that, but it would put a stop to their plans. Unless, he and Sir Richard go behind my back and do it anyway.”

“What are you talking about?” Sam asked. “Do what, behind your back?”

Gary kept his attention focused on Donna. “I assume you’ve ... cleared the air between you?”

“We’ve talked,” Donna responded. “I’m not keeping secrets from Sam.”

Gary sighed. “Hang on, let me do something first. How long have you been in here?” He unlocked his cell phone and pressed a button.

Donna shrugged. “Maybe five minutes.”

“VICi, reverse time by ten minutes and delete footage. Resume time. Temporary visual and vocal filter: Dr. Gary Browne, Dr. Sam Kaliea, and Dr. Donna Rigden, in cafeteria. Voiceprint authorisation, security code GB1A. Confirm commands by direct-link on my cell phone.” Gary waited until the green light flashed. He locked his cell phone and put it back in his pocket. “OK, it’s like this, Sam....” he sighed and started explaining.

“So you see...” Donna said, “...that’s it in a nutshell.”

Sam laid his hand on Donna’s and smiled. “I can understand why you’re upset....”

Donna eased her hand away. “Why do I sense a ‘but’ coming?”

“Gary has filtered us out of VICi’s database.”

“Yes,” Donna admitted, “...but he can’t prevent other people from seeing us, and believe me, Richard has just as

many – if not more – allies as you do. You have your... unique charm, but so does Richard, and he has something you don't – unlimited resources."

Sam grinned. "Sweetheart, I can get any woman I want."

Donna sighed. "Yes, you probably could, but Richard could take her away."

"So I noticed..."

Donna narrowed her eyes. "I wasn't talking about me. I am doing this of my own free will, so cut the chauvinistic crap! It is not... one of your better qualities. Remember, my way, or no way."

"D... you don't trust Richard, do you?"

Donna looked at Sam and then back to Gary. "No, Gary. Not entirely. Richard would have been the one to benefit the most if Jared and I had split up. It's the same thing with Sam. Richard knew if I got pregnant that I would do what I'm doing – marry him for the sake of the baby. So, you see..." she paused. "There's too much evidence against him."

"*Circumstantial* evidence, D."

Donna arched an eyebrow. "I know, but I'm sorry. Until I know for sure, I'm not taking chances. I'm going to the park. I think it would be a better place for Richard to find me than sitting here with Sam." She stood to leave.

Sam held her wrist. "Like I said, sweetheart, we'll get through this."

"I hope so," Donna sighed and walked away.

"She must care more about you than she's letting on."

Sam frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Most people who do what you did wouldn't get a second chance."

"Gary, I'm not responsible for what happened with Joyce, and Ruth, and..."

"Really, Sam?" Gary narrowed his eyes. "You let it happen. You were supposed to go to the complex, yet you asked Ruth to have a meal with you at your apartment. What happened

after that is irrelevant. If you're going to hurt D, leave her alone." Gary stood to leave.

"I'm not going to hurt her, Gary."

Gary sighed and left.

Donna hurried back to the park and sat on the ground next to the waterfall. She stared into the water, wishing she could see her future. Her eyes glossed. Nothing had gone the way it was supposed to. If she hadn't put him off, she would be married to Jared by now, and her music career would have been in full swing. Now she'd lost Jared *and* Sarabeth. She couldn't be with Sam, and now she was marrying someone she didn't love, someone she couldn't even trust. But she didn't fully trust Sam either, did she?

Donna used her index finger to draw imaginary hearts on the surface of the water.

Richard sat beside her. "Donna... did you mean what you said?"

Donna took a deep breath, let it out slowly and turned. "No, Richard. I'm not calling off our wedding. I told you I would follow this through, and I will."

Richard sighed and pulled her into his arms. "Dad, Sam, Gary, and John are waiting for us in the conference room." He stood and lifted her to her feet.

Donna, Richard and Gary sat on one side of the conference table; John and Sam on the other. Sir Richard sat at the head of the table. "OK, who wants to go first?"

Gary cleared his throat. "I guess we can," he said, glancing at Richard. "Sir Richard, I analysed the images from the security camera, and despite his face and voice, I don't think it's Forrest."

Sir Richard frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"Because, for one thing, at least, as far as I know, Forrest doesn't speak Mandarin. And secondly, the man in the images is too short – two inches – to be exact."

“How did you figure that out?”

“By comparing his height to the height of the filing cabinet, behind Mildred’s desk,” Richard added.

“If he isn’t Forrest, then somebody sure went to a lot of trouble to make us think he was,” John said.

“I agree,” Gary said. “What I found unusual about the whole scenario is why would they scramble all the other cameras in the Centre – including the one in the lift – and leave the ones in Mildred’s office on?”

“Easy,” Sir Richard interjected. “Forrest wanted us to know who had killed Mildred. He wanted to gloat.”

“I’m not so sure, about that, Sir Richard,” Gary responded. “It looks more like someone was trying to frame whoever is on camera. I think it’s possible that the person is either a double, or was wearing a latex mask and wig.”

“In that case, they must have used a voice modulator,” John commented. “If that’s what happened, then whoever it was dropped a blob. We know the man is likely to be Chinese.”

“Unless that was just another one of Forrest’s tactics to throw us off and make us think it was somebody else,” Sam spoke up. “By doing that, should we try to press charges against him, he would use that last line to weasel out of it. It would be up to us to prove he was lying, and we all know which way that would go.”

Donna sighed. “Is there no way to bring Forrest to justice?”

“Yes,” John replied. “Put a bullet in his head.”

Donna frowned and slid back in her chair. “I won’t get in the way, but I still think it’s wrong.”

“OK, let’s move on. Sam, what did you find out from Mildred’s post-mortem?”

“Well, the actual cause of death happened when they snapped her neck, but I don’t think she knew anything about it. She certainly wasn’t feeling any pain. Forrest – or whoever he was – gave her one hell of a mixture of psychotropic drugs. Alone, I’m familiar with all three, but I’ve never seen them used together, in this way. The fact that one of the drugs was

oxytocin, which happens to be one of the active chemicals in Euphoria, suggests to me that it was Forrest, or at least someone who worked for him.”

Sir Richard laced his fingers and rested his arms on the table. “Explain....”

“Sodium amytal and scopolamine have been used, with some effect, as truth drugs. I’m not quite sure about the oxytocin, though.”

“I am,” Donna spoke up. “Used in combination, the three become more affective when following intense pain. That’s why they cut off part of her little finger. That’s why Mildred was so cooperative, toward the end of their interrogation. The sodium amytal was used as an effective pain reliever. It’s probable; Mildred didn’t know what she was saying. I would say the oxytocin is what made her giddy. Almost as if she had been intoxicated. Forrest used the same method with the EIA.”

“Snapping her neck was just in case we got to her before she died. Forrest knew Donna might be able to save her,” Sam said.

“I probably could have with the EHG and CTZ5.”

“You didn’t find any cerbera in her system?”

“No, Sir Richard,” Sam responded. “I expected to, but it wasn’t there.”

“Then we have no MO. The person/people who killed Tina are not the same ones who killed the Wilsons and Mildred. We’re dealing with at least two adversaries.”

Donna turned to Sir Richard. “But, you’re still going after Forrest, even though we’re not sure he’s one of the killers?”

Sir Richard tightened his jaw. “Yes, Donna. I am! I do not want that man to get a chance to go after my grandson, or my son, or my daughter-in-law, or anyone else important to me. I’m sorry. I know you don’t agree, but whether you marry Ricky or not, we *are* going after Forrest!”

“In that case, can I be excused? I came to the complex for a reason. I’ve already taken care of part of it, now I’d like to take care of the rest.”

“No, you can go.”

Donna stood. “I’ll be there in a few minutes pet.”

“I don’t need someone to hold my hand Richard. I ran my own department back in the States – or have you forgotten?” Donna left.

Richard waited until she was out of earshot. He turned his attention to Sir Richard. “Don’t you think you were a little harsh on her, Dad?”

“Ricky, as a Triplet, Donna has a hard lesson to learn. It’s best she learns it now, than later. I went through the same thing with her mother. Marie wanted to depend on the justice system to put Forrest away, too. It got her killed. I don’t want to see that happen to Donna. I don’t want you to know the pain I felt when I found out Marie was dead.” He paused. “John, start planning this out. Ricky, if you can convince Donna we need to get a photo of you and her for the engagement announcement.”

Richard sighed. “I’ll do what I can, but she doesn’t want to be part of this. Can I be excused now?”

“Yeah, sure,” Sir Richard suspired. “I think we’ve pretty well covered everything. Sam, I need you to prepare Mildred’s body for transport. I’ll have to talk to her two daughters. I’m not looking forward to this. I have to somehow convince them that we can’t go to the police. Gary, keep me posted on your project.”

The computer broke their silence. VICi; Emergency. Dr. Kaliea and Dr. Rigden to the infirmary.

A cold chill went down Donna’s spine, and she took off in a run. Sam met her in the corridor. “It’s Alan!” she said as they ran for the infirmary. Sir Richard and the others headed in that direction.

Chapter 77

Sam and Donna worked to stabilise Alan, but in the end were forced to put him on the respirator. Due to his age and condition, Sam was prepared to let him go, but Donna wasn't. She and Sam met with Sir Richard in Sam's office to discuss their next move. Sam sat on the edge of his desk; Donna stood beside him. Sam sighed. "We've come to the end of the line, Sir Richard. Alan is no longer responding to our course of treatment. We've put him on life support until we decide whether or not we're going to try the EHG, and the CTZ5."

"Petal, is there any other way?"

Donna sighed and glanced at Sam. "No, Sir Richard. I'm afraid there's not. Alan's only other option is surgery, and we don't think he would survive that. Our treatment worked for Missy, but it might not work for Alan. It's either use the EHG, or we... let him go. Either way, there are no guarantees, but I'm willing to try if you are."

"Alan is not just house staff to me, Donna. He's like family. I don't want to lose him. Give him the EHG."

Donna stood. "Keep a close watch on Alan. Richard, Gary and I will get to work on the stem cell cultures. I do have one concern about this process."

"What's that?"

"Donna – no!" Sam said through his teeth.

Donna glanced at Sam and then to Sir Richard. "Harvesting stem cells from an adult of Alan's age could be difficult. I would have to check, but if my genetic structure is compatible with Alan's, my amniotic fluid would be our best bet because stem cells from a developing embryo are multifunctional."

"No, Donna."

Donna softly smiled. "This is not your decision, Sam. It's mine."

Sir Richard cleared his throat. “Actually, you’re wrong, petal. It’s not just your baby. It’s yours and Ricky’s. I think you should include him in this decision. Would there be any risk to you or the baby?”

“Yes, there is Sir Richard,” Sam interjected. “An amniocentesis is not normally performed on women before their 15th or 20th week of pregnancy. In the case of an emergency, it can be performed during her 11th to 13th week, but even then it’s risky. The risk would be much higher for Donna, who is only in her third week. The baby could be injured by the needle used to draw the amniotic fluid. The other risk is that it could cause Donna to go into premature labour and miscarry. At this stage of development, the baby would not survive.”

“A procedure like this, especially performed at this early stage of my pregnancy would be risky if it were performed by and inexperienced physician. Sam is not inexperienced. With VICi’s guidance, I believe he could do this.”

“Yes, I *could* do it,” Sam admitted. “I know I can control the needle, but I can’t control movement of the amniotic fluid, or the possibility of miscarriage.”

Donna rested her hand on Sam’s. “I know you can do this, Sam. I trust you.”

“Sir Richard, as Donna’s doctor I do *not* recommend this procedure.”

Donna grinned slightly. “Ah – Sam. You’re technically *not* my doctor. Juanita is. I need your help. This is not something I can do on my own. Sir Richard, even with the CTZ5, we may not be able to harvest enough stem cells in time to save Alan. Let me do this. Let me *help* him.”

Sir Richard stood. “I’ll send Ricky in. You two talk, and I’ll abide by whatever you decide. Come on Sam.” The doors slid open. “Ricky, Donna wants to talk to you.”

Richard furrowed his brow. “What about?”

“Risking a miscarriage to save Alan’s life!” Sam groaned.

Richard’s mouth gaped. “What?”

“Just go inside and talk to her,” Sir Richard said. “This is what she wants to do.”

Richard stepped inside; the doors slid shut. “Donna, Sam says you want to risk a miscarriage to save Alan’s life. How?”

Donna explained the procedure and the risks. Richard gave her an incredulous look. “You want to try and telepathically talk to Rich. Ask him to stay out of the way, while Sam stabs at him with a 120cm long needle? His brain is no more than primitive neural pathways at this stage, Donna. How do you even know he’s telepathic? I’m not!”

Donna softly smiled. “I know you’re not, but I am. You’ll have to trust me on that. I know this is going to be OK.”

Richard sighed. His conversation with Daria came back to him.

‘You have no idea what she is, do you?’

‘What do you mean? Of course, I know what she is!’

‘Her gift is genuine, Richard. What she says to you in prophecy is not gobbledygook. If you don’t listen to her counsel, you will regret it. She carries your child.’

‘She what? Donna can’t be pregnant. She’s on contraceptives, has been for months, and even if she hadn’t been, we only had one night together. If Donna is pregnant, the child is Sam’s, not mine.’

‘She is with a rival, but trust me, she carries your son. He is beyond special, Richard. Even now, as he grows in his mother’s womb, the child is aware of everything.’

“Even now, as he grows in his mother’s womb, the child is aware of everything,” Richard mused.

“What did you say?”

“Never mind. Just something Daria said. You really trust Sam to do this?”

“Yes, Richard, I do.”

“Can I be with you while he does the procedure?”

Donna’s eyes glossed. She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Of course, you can. In fact, I’d like it if you held my hand.”

“Then do the test and find out if Alan is a possible match. I’ll get things set up. That way I can begin culturing the stem cells as soon as Sam draws the amniotic fluid.”

“Does this mean you believe I can talk to Rich telepathically?”

“You say you can. Daria said your gift was genuine, and she was right about Rich. That’s good enough for me,” he said and tenderly kissed her.

“Thank you,” Donna smiled and hugged him.

Richard looked at his watch. “Let’s get the test started. Then we’ll grab some lunch, in the cafeteria. By the time we get finished, we should know whether or not you’re a compatible donor match for Alan.”

“I’ve got a better idea. Sam can draw the blood sample. I’ll get it started. You can watch it. I’ll help Sam get things set up for the amniocentesis. I’ll make us something, and then the three of us can have lunch together in our quarters. Unless, of course, you would rather eat Rita’s food, than mine.”

Richard grinned. “I would much rather have your cooking.”

“Good. But, bear in mind, I like eating healthy.”

“What about all those spicy foods like tamales and gumbo? Do you classify them as healthy?”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “Smart Ass! I fudge every now and then. I’ll let you know when lunch is ready.”

“I love you,” Richard said and kissed her.

The corners of Donna’s mouth turned up. “I know....”

Richard stepped into the waiting area. “She wants you to draw a blood sample, and then you’re having lunch with us in our quarters.”

Sam frowned. “So... you let her talk you into doing the amniocentesis?”

Richard studied his eyes. “I trust her judgement.”

“Remember what I said. This could cause her to lose the baby, Richard.”

Richard smiled condescendingly. "She knows what she's doing. See you at lunch, Sam." Richard patted Sam's upper arm and left.

Sam was a bit gruff when he entered his office. He opened the supplies cabinet behind his desk and brought out a vacutube. "I trust one vial will be enough," he said tersely.

Donna nodded. "It should be."

Sam fastened on the tourniquet and swiped her arm with an alcohol wipe. He pulled the needle cap off and looked into her dark eyes. "I hope you know what you're doing, Donna."

"It will be fine, Sam," she smiled. Donna winced when he stuck the needle in her arm.

"Was it your idea for us to have lunch together?"

"Yes, it was. Is that a problem?"

Sam studied her eyes as he waited for the vial to fill. He couldn't stay mad at her. A slow smile spread across his mouth. He shook his head. "No. What are we having?"

"Avocado and mango chicken salad. Do you approve?"

Sam grinned. "Yes, but your fiancée won't."

Donna frowned. "Why is that?"

"Because it's healthy. Why don't I come early and help? It's the least I can do."

"If you promise to behave yourself. I don't know if Richard's quarters are monitored by VICi."

"Easy, sweetheart. I offered to help you do lunch. I didn't offer fringe benefits. If you want those, you'll have to give me a little more advanced notice so I can check my schedule."

Donna rolled her eyes, stood and held out her hand. "Can I have my sample, now, please?"

Sam laid the vial in the palm of her hand and closed her fingers around it. "You can have a kiss, too if you want it. Or, anything else, for that fact."

Donna softly smiled. "I'll just take the sample, for now," she said and turned to leave. "Are you coming with me, or are you going to chicken out? You can clean the mangos and

avocados while I shred the chicken and make the rest of the salad.”

“Lead the way,” he said with a wave and followed her to the genetics lab.

Richard was already preparing culture discs. He looked up and smiled as Donna entered the room. “Get this started...” she said, placing the vial of blood in his hand.

Richard smiled and glanced at Sam. “Something follow you home?”

“Sam is going to help me prepare lunch, that way it will go faster.” She kissed Richard. “There’s no need to wait. As soon as you have this going, come on to lunch. See you in a little while,” she said and kissed him again. Sam tucked his head and lightly cleared his throat.

Donna put some ripe mangos and avocados on the cutting board and handed Sam a sharp paring knife. “I trust you can do this without cutting off your fingers? And I trust you know what this is for.” She set a small bowl of lemon juice on the island.

Sam grinned. “Carry on with your chicken and salad greens. I’ll take care of these beauties...” he said, gently squeezing the mangos. “They kind of remind me of something I had my hands on not so long ago,” he teased.

Donna softly smiled, shook her head and took the salad greens out of the refrigerator. “Just get on with the job and stop molesting our lunch.”

Sam frowned. “Spoil sport.”

Donna laughed and finished making the salad. “Which had you rather have Melba toast, with creamed cottage cheese and chilies, or garlic thins with lemon butter?”

“How about both,” Sam said, sucking the mango juice off his fingers? “I’m done here. I’ll do the bread, you do the toppings.”

Donna gave Sam some slices of wholegrain bread and a couple of small baguettes, from the bread box. Using a serrated

knife, Sam prepared the breads and popped them into the oven. "You're quite useful in the kitchen," she chuckled.

Sam wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed the side of her neck. Donna's eyes widened. "Sam, stop! Richard is coming."

"No, he's not," he said and kissed her again.

Donna pushed him away. "I said stop! Go sit in the lounge. I'll finish this," she said, pushing him out of the kitchen.

With a sigh of resignation, Sam sat down on the sofa and picked up a magazine from the coffee table. He heard the doors to Richard's quarters slide open. "Hello, Sam. Something smells nice. I thought you were helping Donna prepare lunch."

"I did, but she ran me out," he replied, thumbing through the magazine. "Just between you and me, I hope this test fails."

Richard grinned. "It won't. In fact, it hasn't."

Sam laid the magazine down and frowned. "What do you mean?"

"VICi already analysed the sample. She picked up a match in the first scan. As soon as we're done with lunch, you can draw the amniotic fluid, and I'll get the cultures done."

"How can VICi find a match so quickly? The scanning process normally takes at least half an hour."

"Beats me, but she did. Trust me. I didn't believe it either. So I ran the test again, and then used the HIC to align the profile. There's no doubt. Donna was right. This will work. The rest is up to you."

"Yeah, if I can just convince your son to stay out of the way."

"Donna thinks she can take care of that."

Sam looked incredulous. "How?"

Richard grinned. "By talking to him," he replied and went into the kitchen.

"Talking to him! Richard, are you...."

Donna changed into a gown. Sam helped her onto the biobed and positioned her within the scanning outline. “VICi, full body scan. Centre on uterus, enhance and magnify view by one hundred fifty percent. Display on wallscreen and above biobed.”

Donna looked up at Sam and frowned. “I told you I wanted Richard here, for this.”

“I’m going to check the baby’s position first. If it’s in the wrong part of the amniotic sac, I’m not doing this.”

“Sam, don’t start. I know what you’re doing.”

“What I’m doing, Pretty Lady, is looking out for what’s best for my patients. If the baby is positioned too close to the insertion point, I’m not risking it, Donna. You can get pissed at me all you want.”

Sam and Donna watched the overhead wallscreen and waited for the image to appear. Donna forced the air from her lungs and locked her gaze with Sam’s. “That settles that,” Sam said.

“Sam, please, give me a chance to try something.”

“If this is the part where you’re going to talk to the baby and ask him to move, you’re wasting your time, sweetheart.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “Just shut up and let me concentrate.”

“Fine – fine – whatever,” Sam groaned.

Donna closed her eyes and concentrated on the baby. She conjured the image of him in her mind. She saw him as an infant. She imagined holding him in her arms. She began to reach for his thoughts. *Rich, it’s your mom. Do you understand me? Can you hear me? Don’t be afraid. Uncle Sam needs to collect some of the fluid you’re floating in. He’s going to stick a long needle in Mom’s tummy, but he can’t, because you’re too close. I need you to move to one side and be very still. Mom needs this fluid sample so she can save a man’s life.*

Donna didn’t get a mental reply, but she felt something like butterflies in her stomach.

Sam frowned. “What are you doing?”

Her eyes glossed behind her closed lids. “Asking him to move,” she said in a soft voice and swallowed hard. “What is he doing?”

Sam’s mouth gaped. “I don’t know whether what you’re doing is the reason...” he dubiously replied, “...but he’s... moving.”

Donna opened her eyes and smiled. “VICi, notify Richard Triplet.”

“Take a deep breath, sweetheart,” Sam said. Donna squeezed Richard’s hand, clenched her teeth and winced as Sam penetrated her abdominal wall. “OK, let it out slowly. I know it hurts, but try and breathe normally,” Sam added, keeping a close watch on the monitor. “I’m in the amniotic cavity.” He started slowly drawing the fluid.

Chapter 78

As soon as she changed clothes, Donna and Richard took the amniotic sample to the genetics lab. Donna quickly harvested the stem cells and Richard started culturing them. Leaving Gary to finish the job, Richard and Donna rode with John, McGowan and Sir Richard, in the chopper to the Hall, for their engagement photo shoot.

The photographer took some shots of Richard and Donna standing on the portico; some of them sitting on the bench, by the duck pond, and a shot of them in the gazebo, with Sir Richard to be used for the front page announcements. Richard stood, facing Donna with his arms wrapped around her waist. Donna looked up at him with a bright smile on her face; her left hand resting on the side of his upper arm, displaying her diamond solitaire. Sir Richard stood behind them, proudly looking on.

“I want one of these superimposed over the front of St. Nicholas Cathedral,” Sir Richard said to his press agent. “I want the story in the morning edition of every major newspaper in the country, especially the Newcastle Journal and the Evening Chronicle. Make sure it gets on the Financial Times, too, and use the story I gave you. I want the headlines to read exactly as the paper says.”

“I’ll take care of it, Sir Richard, and congratulations. Donna is a really sweet person, and she and Dr. Triplet make a lovely couple.”

Sir Richard smiled. “Yes, they do.”

Donna’s cell phone rang. She glanced at the name and stepped out of earshot. “Sweetheart, it’s me. Gary just finished processing the first batch of stem cells. There’s no rush, but I thought you might like to know.”

Donna sighed. “Prep Alan for surgery. I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes.” She ended the call. “That was Sam. He’s

prepping Alan for surgery. I need to get back. Gary has finished processing the first batch of stem cells.”

Sir Richard looked to McGowan. “You heard the lady. Let’s get loaded up.”

Sam and Donna peeled off their surgical gloves and went to his office. He handed her a cup of coffee. “Things happened pretty fast with Missy. How long do you think it will be, before Alan starts responding?”

“Remember, Missy was young and healthy. Alan isn’t, so it could take a lot longer. Then again, we could start seeing a change later on tonight, or in the morning.”

“How did the photo shoot go?”

Donna frowned. “Perfect,” she groaned. “Sir Richard has *everything* lined up. The announcements go out in the morning. It’ll be on the front page of the Financial Times. I’m *sure* Forrest will see it.”

“The front page? Wow! Sir Richard must be paying them a bomb. This kind of thing usually appears in the editorial section.”

“I don’t care how much Sir Richard is paying to pull strings. None of this was my idea. I wanted an extremely small ceremony with just a few close friends and family. I’m starting to feel like Lady Diana before she married Prince Charles.”

“Sweetheart... you could always call it off.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “No! I can’t, and you know it.” She glanced at her watch. “Shit! I’ve got to go.”

“Why?”

“We promised Lady Triplet – damn,” she winced, “...I wasn’t supposed to say that. I’ve gotta go. Call me if you need me.”

Sam stepped into the waiting area. “How?” he called out. “The last time I tried you weren’t accepting my calls!”

“I changed your setting,” she called back and dashed out the door. Sam smiled, shook his head and went back into the infirmary.

Donna ran for the lift and hurried across the hangar floor. Richard was waiting for her beside the chopper. "What kept you?"

"I'm sorry. I was having coffee with Sam. We started talking about Alan, and I lost track of time." She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him thoroughly. "Forgive me?"

"Pet..." he said, helping her into the chopper. "I'd probably forgive you if you slit my throat." He crawled in the pilot's seat, started the engines and grinned. "Assuming I lived through it."

"You're not going through the pre-flight check?"

"No time. Grandma will be having fits. VICi, open hangar doors and raise lift."

"Where's Sir Richard?"

"He and John left about half an hour ago. Hang on." Donna grabbed the handhold and held her breath. Richard lifted off as soon as they were topside. "Is Alan going to be OK?"

"I hope so. I changed Sam's setting on my cell phone. I told him to call me if something went wrong. When we get to the castle, instead of you waiting for me to take a shower, why don't you use one of the guest rooms? That way it will save time."

Richard glanced at her. "You could always shower *with* me."

Donna softly chuckled. "That would definitely not save time."

Richard grinned. "Probably not."

Richard finished changing first. He knocked on the bathroom door. "Pet, are you going to be long?"

"No, I'm almost finished. Go on down. Tell them I'll be there in a few minutes."

Richard entered the drawing room. "Where are Dad and John?"

“He got a call and had to leave. Vera and Jack are busy, setting the table and preparing to serve.”

“Why? I thought we were all having tea together.”

“Something went wrong at the Centre. Where’s your fiancée?”

“Donna will be down shortly. She’s changing. Did Dad say what was wrong?”

“I don’t know, Ricky. I think it had something to do with Mildred’s children. Your father called them and told them what happened. They were pretty upset.”

“Why? What happened wasn’t Dad’s fault.”

“I know, but you know how it is. So…” she smiled. “Tell me how things are between you and Donna? Are you excited about your wedding? Your father said they were taking pictures for the papers. Is Donna still OK with our plan – I mean – your father’s plan to get rid of Forrest?”

“No, Grandma, she’s not,” Richard sighed. “Donna thinks it’s wrong, and, I guess, from her point of view, killing someone like that would be.”

“Triplets have a certain standard to uphold. She’ll have to learn to adjust, your mother did.”

Donna jumped out of the shower, and quickly got dressed. Grabbing her sandals, she headed downstairs. She stopped beside the doorway and started putting on her shoes. Hearing her name mentioned, she quietly listened to the conversation from the drawing room. From the tone of his voice, she could tell Richard was upset about something.

“Grandma, I do not need your help anymore. Your meddling came close to ruining everything. I told you before I left for the States that I had this under control. Donna is not going to leave me for Sam.”

“Mark my words. If you don’t keep them apart, Sam could still stop this wedding.”

“No, he won’t! Stay out of our affairs. Sam is no longer a threat to our relationship. Leave him alone.”

“I have other plans for him. You take care of Donna. After the wedding, I’ll deal with Sam.”

Donna’s eyes widened. She covered her mouth with her hand and slowly backed away. She hurried partway back up the stairs and sat down. Her heart was pounding. Her head was spinning. “It can’t be true,” she whispered and shoved a hand through her hair. “How could you do this to me, Richard?” She buried her face in her hands and breathed through waves of nausea.

Richard hurried to her side. “Donna! pet, are you OK?”

Donna jumped and looked up. “I’m fine. I was just on my way back upstairs to change. We were in such a hurry, I got dressed so fast I didn’t realise I was putting on my jeans instead of dressing for dinner. I got dizzy, so I sat down for a while. How’s your... grandmother?”

Richard helped her up. “You don’t need to change, pet. Grandma is waiting for us.”

Donna gave Richard a plastic smile. “Wouldn’t want to keep her waiting.”

Lady Triplet smiled as Richard led Donna into the drawing room. “There you are, Dear!” She scrutinised Donna’s clothes. “You’re a little under dressed, aren’t you, Dear?”

Donna pressed her lips into a thin line and tried to look embarrassed. “Sorry, Lady Triplet. I’ll go change.”

Lady Triplet looked annoyed. “Nonsense, Dear. There’s a first time for everything.”

Donna picked and nibbled at her food. She’d lost her appetite. She couldn’t get Lady Triplet and Richard’s conversation off her mind. Halfway through the meal her cell phone rang. Donna’s breath caught. She unlocked it and read the name. Relieved, she sighed and stood. “It’s Sam. Excuse me.”

Lady Triplet arched an eyebrow and looked at Richard. “Do you see what I mean? I thought he couldn’t reach her here.”

Richard narrowed his eyes. “Grandma, she told Sam to call if there was news about Alan. Donna and Sam are friends, so

get used to it. Not everyone lives the miserable life you've lived."

"You are going to lose everything if you don't do what I told you. Put an end to this!"

"I'm warning you. Stay out of this, or I'll marry Donna somewhere else. I mean it, Grandma!"

"Hi Sam. Is something wrong?"

"Yes, it is. You're there, and I'm here, and that's just not right."

"Sam, I unlocked your number so you could call me in case there was an emergency. You weren't supposed to call unless you needed me."

"That's just it. I do need you."

"Sam, I'm hanging up, and don't call again, unless there's a real emergency."

"No, wait! I was teasing. I just took Alan off the respirator."

"You've what? In three hours' time? That's faster than Missy."

"It must be the amniotic stem cells that made the difference. After all, the EHG is part of your gene structure."

"Is he awake yet?"

"No, he hasn't regained consciousness. That will probably happen by morning. This is the fastest recovery yet."

Donna smiled. "I'm glad he's responding, so well."

"You're still coming back to the complex in the morning, aren't you?"

Donna glanced over her shoulder toward the dining room. She swallowed the lump in her throat. "You don't need me there. You can handle it, can't you? I've got a wedding to plan for. You're still playing the piano for me, right?"

Sam frowned. "Yeah, sweetheart. What's wrong? You sound tense."

"No, I'm fine, but I think we need to stop what we're doing."

“Donna, what are you saying?”

“Unless we’re working, I shouldn’t see you anymore.”

“He threatened you again, didn’t he?”

“No, Sam. Richard is not threatening me.”

“That’s not what you said today, in the cafeteria.”

“Well, I was wrong! We talked, and I’ve changed my mind, so stop... bothering me. I’m sorry Sam.”

“Donna? Are you there? Hello?” Sam locked his cell phone and put it away. “Dammit Triplet! What are you doing to her?”

McGowan landed Sir Richard’s Cessna at Barksdale Airport, in Shreveport, La. As soon as Jared set foot on the pavement, Sarabeth ran to him and jumped into his arms. Behind her, not too far away were Nadine, Tom, and Myra. They had all come to meet them. Jared hugged Sarabeth and nuzzled her neck. Juanita stepped off the plane. Sarabeth gave her a strange look. “Daddy, she’s not Mommy,” she whispered in his ear. “Where’s Mommy?”

Jared sighed and swallowed the lump in his throat. He set Sarabeth on her feet. “This is Miss Juanita. She’s going to be living at Wisteria Hall, so she doesn’t have to worry about the bad people.” Juanita stood beside Jared. “Juanita, this is Beth, my daughter.”

Juanita smiled and bent down so she could shake Sarabeth’s hand. “Hi Beth.”

“Hi, Miss Juanita. You’re pretty, too. Is Nano your cat?”

“Yes, he is. Have you been playing with him, while I was away?”

Sarabeth giggled and took her hand. “He likes to chase strings.”

Juanita chuckled. “Yes he does. Do you like cats?”

“I do, but Daddy doesn’t, so we don’t have one.”

“No, I didn’t say that. I said cats don’t like Daddy. And before you ask, Miss Juanita knows why.”

Juanita glanced at Jared and smiled. “I guess Nano will just have to get used to your daddy.”

“Mom. Dad. Myra. This is Dr. Juanita Walton.”

“Yes, Donna’s best friend. Nice to meet you Juanita,”
Nadine said, extending her hand.

“Pleased to meet you Juanita. You can call me Tom.”

“I’m Myra. Nice to meet you Juanita.”

Nadine hugged Jared. “Welcome home, Son. I’m so sorry things turned out this way. Remember what I said.”

“I didn’t want to leave her,” Jared choked. “It’s so hard to leave her Mother. How many more times will I have to do it? I feel like I’m being punished.”

Nadine looked up into her son’s dark eyes. “You are not being punished, and neither is Donna. You have both made choices. The threads of time are tangled. You must be patient. All will work out in the end.”

“Excuse me a second,” Jared said and stepped out of earshot. “Sir Richard it’s Jared. We’re here.”

“Good, Jared. I trust you had a pleasant flight?”

“Yes, Sir, we did. Is everything OK, over there?”

“Yes, Son. When did you want to go after the diary?”

“My family is here. Can we wait a few days? After having to leave Donna behind, I’d like to spend some quality time with my daughter.”

“Of course, Jared. I hope to meet them someday. Let me know when you’re ready.”

“Right.” Jared sighed and ended the call.

Chapter 79

Donna whirled and crashed straight into Richard's arms. Her breath caught. She swallowed the lump of fear in her throat and faked a smile. "You just about scared the shit out of me."

Richard frowned. "You're a little jumpy lately. What did Sam want?"

"To tell me that he'd taken Alan off the respirator."

"Already? That's brilliant, pet! Congratulations. Dad will be pleased."

Donna wrapped her arms around Richard's neck and looked up at him. "It has to have been the amniotic stem cells that made the difference. I'm not the one who needs congratulating. Our son hasn't even been born, and already he's saved his first life."

"Do you want to go back to the complex?"

"Ah – no. Sam doesn't need me now. I'd rather be here with you. He can handle things, and Joyce will be there on Monday. Besides, we're getting married on Tuesday. I think we should be... concentrating more on each other. Don't you? In fact, I could think of a lot of more... *pleasant* things we could be doing," she whispered against his lips and kissed him. "Why don't you say goodnight for us and meet me upstairs?"

"What about tea? You've hardly eaten anything."

"I'm not that hungry... at least not for food," she said, giving him a sultry smile. "Besides, I can always make us a snack later... if we get hungry. Surely, your grandmother will understand." She kissed him again. "*Don't* keep me waiting." She smiled and went up the stairs.

Richard went back into the dining room. "We're going to bed, Grandma."

Lady Triplet frowned and looked at her watch. "At a quarter past eight!"

Richard grinned. "I didn't say we were going to sleep." He kissed her cheek. "I told you I had things under control. Goodnight, Grandma. If we're not down for breakfast – trust me – don't disturb us."

Lady Triplet narrowed her eyes. "Something is up with that girl."

"That was not an easy task," Sir Richard commented as he crawled in the co-pilot's seat. John pulled up the collective control stick, and the chopper lifted off the Centre roof. Pushing on the right pedal, he turned the craft, pushed forward on the cyclic control stick, and they headed back to Langston Castle.

"Did they agree to let you handle things?"

"Yes, John. The record will show that Mildred died of natural causes. Like us, her daughters understand, trying to prosecute Forrest would be useless. I did promise them, I would make him pay."

John grinned. "I'm going to enjoy that part. I've been waiting a long time to take that bastard out. I just wish I could torture him some, for the way he tortured Missy. That man has a lot to answer for."

Sir Richard looked down at the night lights of Newcastle. "It's amazing how the darkness hides the madness. Up here, the city is actually quite beautiful. Who would guess there's a monster lurking in the shadows?"

John sighed. "He won't be out there much longer, Sir. His days are numbered. You can bet the story you're putting in the papers will bring him out into the open. He'll never be able to resist a headline like that."

Sir Richard grinned. "I'm counting on that John. You know, Jared is a good man, and I like him, but for my grandson's sake, I hope Ricky and Donna can make this marriage work."

"He's your son, Sir. Would you expect any less of him? He is handling this responsibly."

Sir Richard softly chuckled. "Maybe he's going to grow up after all." His cell phone rang. He glanced at John. "It's Sam. Hello Sam."

"Sir Richard, I thought you might like to know, I've taken Alan off life support. He's breathing on his own. He's still unconscious, but he's making a remarkable recovery."

"That's wonderful news, Sam. I'll tell Donna what you..."

"I've already told Donna."

"Then she's on her way to the complex?"

"No, Sir. She said for me to handle it."

Sir Richard frowned. "Donna didn't want to be there?"

"She's acting strange, Sir Richard."

"In what way?"

"You would need to talk to her about that. It's just, when she and Richard were at the complex, she seemed fine. Then I called to let her know about Alan, and she didn't seem to care. I don't know, but I'm concerned that Donna is rushing into this marriage with Richard and I'm not sure it's what she wants."

"Sam, that's her choice to make. I know you have feelings for Donna, but if Donna chooses Ricky, then that's something you'll have to get used to. Listen, I've spoken to Mildred's daughters, and they've agreed. I need Mildred's death certificate to state that she died of natural causes."

"Natural causes? Sir Richard, a broken neck is not a natural cause."

"I know that Sam, but that's what it needs to say." Sir Richard ended the call. "John, when Ricky and Donna visited with you and Missy, you said they were as chummy as they were in the States. Did it seem like Donna was acting?"

"No, Sir Richard. She seemed perfectly happy to be with Ricky, and there was no doubt how he felt about her. Why do you ask?"

"I don't think Sam is ready to let her go."

"I would say from the way she was acting around Ricky, Sam doesn't have a choice."

“That’s what I’m afraid of. I think Sam actually believes he loves Donna.”

Jack let Sir Richard and John in. “Where’s Mum?”

“I believe she’s in her room, Sir Richard.”

“What about Ricky and Donna?”

Jack grinned slightly. “I believe they are in their apartment, Sir. They – ah – they retired quite early. Master Richard said if they weren’t down for breakfast, they were not to be disturbed.”

Sir Richard softly smiled. “I see....”

“Would you and Mr. Sherriff like me to prepare you a sandwich or a snack? Perhaps you’d like a cup of tea?”

“No thank you, Jack. We ate at the Centre.”

“If you don’t need me then, I think as soon as we’ve cleared up, Vera and I will retire for the night.”

“That’s fine, Jack.”

“I think I’ll talk to Missy for a while, get a shower and go to bed myself.”

“OK, John. I’ll see you in the morning. We’re going to get this thing sorted, so you won’t have to be away from her. After the wedding, I’m hoping Ricky and Donna will move out to the complex. I know it’s safe here, but I really don’t like living with my Mum again.”

“I’m not particularly fond of being here either, Sir.”

Sir Richard patted John’s shoulder. “Well, goodnight then.”

Sir Richard knocked on Lady Triplet’s bedroom door. “Mum, it’s me. I’d like to come in and talk to you.”

“Of course, Richard. Come in.”

Lady Triplet was sitting up in bed reading. She closed the book and laid it on the bedside table. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

Sir Richard sat on the end of the bed. “Jack said Ricky and Donna were in their apartment. Is everything all right?”

“Yes, Richard. Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Just curious. Do you really think this is what Donna wants?”

“Of course it’s what she wants. Donna is a responsible person. She wants what’s best for the baby and she knows Ricky can give her that. What woman wouldn’t want to be in her shoes?”

“Don’t sell Donna short, Mum. I think Ricky is a very lucky man. I just hope you’re not pushing her at Ricky because of the baby.”

“Richard, I have not coerced either of them in any way. Ricky is in love with Donna. I can see it every time he looks at her.”

“Yes, but is Donna in love with him?”

“She may not be in love with him, but that will change. Ricky is every bit as charming as you were. He can make anyone love him. Ricky and Donna know what they are doing. Now, let me ask you something. Do you have everything lined out for Tuesday?”

“Yes, Mum. A crew will be coming over first thing Monday to start preparations for the wedding. Everything is arranged.”

“And that other little task?”

“Forrest will see the wedding announcement in his Newcastle Journal, first thing in the morning. I’ve arranged for it to be put on the front page.”

Lady Triplet grinned sadistically. “Excellent. Everything is coming together.”

Sir Richard narrowed his eyes. “A final word of warning Mum. If I find out you are pressuring Ricky and Donna in the same way as you pressured me and Martha, I will never forgive you. If Ricky and Donna want to get married, then that’s fine, but do not try and blackmail Ricky the way you did me.”

“Richard, if I hadn’t blackmailed you, Ricky and Donna wouldn’t be together now. You know I was right to interfere.”

“So you say, Mum.” Sir Richard stood.

Lady Triplet frowned. “Do you regret having your son?”

“No. I don’t regret having my son, but I do regret all the other children I would have had, with Marie.” He left.

Forrest lay staring at the ceiling. He couldn’t sleep. In light of the new development, two of his main allies had tucked tail and run. Now, it looked as if more would follow suit. Even King had pulled out. The idea that The Order would blackball him instead of Sir Richard infuriated him. That wasn’t supposed to happen. Share prices should be rising, and yet, Forrest Enterprises was nearing a record low. Something had to be done fast to turn this around, but what? His hotel phone rang. Forrest sat up on the side of the bed, switched on the bedside lamp and picked up the receiver. *“Your services are no longer necessary.”*

“What do you mean? We had a deal. I delivered. Now it’s your turn.”

“You didn’t do anything, so, therefore, the deal is off.”

“You got what you wanted!”

“You risked her life. That was not part of our agreement. She was not to be harmed in any way. She could have died. We made a business deal, and as I see it, you delivered damaged goods. So, therefore, I do not feel obligated to pay.”

“In that case, it’s my right to collect those damaged goods and cut my losses. Do you want to renegotiate, or do I start making plans.”

“Make all the plans you want. You won’t stop me. It’s already too late. Check your morning paper. I think you’ll find it to be quite entertaining. By the way, the number I gave you no longer works, so don’t bother using it, again.”

“I never should have trusted you Triplet!”

“You’re right. You shouldn’t have. This line of communication is now closed.” The line went dead.

“Don’t you fucking hang up on me!” Forrest pressed the button for the operator. “You stupid....”

“...Switchboard.”

“This is GW Forrest. You just put a call through to my room. I need you to call that number back.”

“One moment, please. I’m sorry, Mr. Forrest, but that number is unobtainable. Would you like me to try another number?”

“No!” Forrest growled and slammed the phone down.

Richard held Donna’s naked body close as she lay on top of him; her skin was as smooth and soft as satin. He closed his eyes, remembering how it felt to make love to her again. She’d been every bit as passionate as he had as their bodies came together. In fact, it had been Donna who seduced him. Richard had been prepared to wait, as long as it took for her to come to him. Now, she was here in his arms. In a few months, she would bear their child. Richard was happy. This was how it was meant to be; lovers clinging together amongst the damp and tangled sheets, cloaked under the cape of darkness.

Richard could easily have made love to her again. He groaned as he brushed against her. A slight shift was all it would take. He caressed the back of her hair. “Pet,” he whispered. “Are you awake?” He waited.

Donna lay still, listening to his increasing heart rate and quickening breath. He wanted her again. He was already in position. Donna tried to rekindle the spark. Richard’s hard body throbbed against hers, pressing against her moistness, begging entry. Donna wanted to scream. She didn’t feel the fire, or the need. She squirmed and rolled off him. Resting her head on his shoulder; she stilled again and pretended to sleep.

Chapter 80

Liu had spent most of last night, trying to break the encryption code on his copy of Donna's hard disc. Morning was fast approaching, and all he had accomplished was to find out how many digits there were in the decryption code.

Probably the most frustrating part for Liu was when he plugged in a USB key that was supposed to contain the missing code. To his surprise his media player popped up and *'John Denver's Grandma's Feather Bed'* grated at his ears. He detested country music in any form. Swearing in Mandarin, he yanked the drive out and tossed it in the bin. His last hope at an easy find had just run out.

Liu was not looking forward to telling Forrest that, even using a virtual private network connection to D'Netics' mainframe computer, and working at top speed, it would still take him at least four-hundred hours, just to get past the first level of the encryption code. He reached for his cup of tea. Finding it empty, Liu decided to try and get some rest. He set the alarm on his cell phone, took off his clothes and crawled between the sheets. "Maybe something will come to me in my sleep," he mused.

Liu's alarm clock went off. He groaned, rolled out of bed and headed for the shower. Quickly dressing, he rang room service and ordered breakfast. He laid his newspaper on the table beside his breakfast tray and tucked into his muesli pancakes with fresh fruit. He sipped his cup of green tea as he read the bold headlines on his copy of the Newcastle Journal: 'Triplet International Heir to Wed Childhood sweetheart.'

Sir Richard and the couple were standing on the steps of St. Nicholas Cathedral in Newcastle. The short article stated that once the ceremony was complete, the happy couple would be spending their honeymoon in an undisclosed location. When

asked how he felt about this union, Sir Richard said, "I couldn't be happier. Richard and Donna were made for each other." Sir Richard also announced his plans of early retirement and stated he would spend his twilight years playing with his grandchildren and enjoying life.

When asked who would replace him as chairman of the board at Triplet International, he stated that he hoped to be passing the torch to his son and sole heir; although, he said, "Young Richard was not too keen on the idea. Perhaps he will change his mind after his honeymoon."

Liu folded the paper in half and read over the article again, this time concentrating on the finer details. "What are you up to Triplet?" He tossed the paper on the bed and sat at his laptop, kneading his brow. He was developing a migraine. He taxed his brain as he finished his tea. Once Forrest read this article, he would make plans to go after Donna. "Another useless death. I have to find a better way."

He called up a bird's-eye view of St Nicholas Cathedral and started studying the layout of the buildings, and the surrounding streets.

Forrest stormed into the room in a rage. He'd seen the story on the TV in his room. "The fucking bastard wants grandkids! "Over my dead body!"

Liu held up a hand. "Wait, Sir! This could be an opportunity to get rid of Triplet! Have a look at this." He pointed to the screen. "There's a building, directly across from the cathedral. I can have one of my marksmen on the roof. He takes a shot, runs to the back of the building and rappels down this wall. There's an alley there. He could use that to make his escape – gone before Triplet even realised he'd been shot."

Forrest glared at Liu. "Aren't you a clever boy? You fucking idiot! I don't want to kill him. I want to destroy him! You don't shoot Triplet. You shoot his son! No heir, no grandkids, no bloodline!"

"What about Dr. Rigden?"

Forrest scratched his chin. "I've changed my mind about the little bitch!"

"She hasn't completed her research. How can you get the cure if she's dead? I thought you at least wanted her alive!"

"Yeah, well, this just got personal. The deal is off. I want her taken out first, then Richard. You can do whatever you want to with Triplet!" Forrest walked away.

Richard woke to an empty bed. Donna came out of the bathroom, fully dressed and ready for the day. "Get up and get dressed!" she ordered.

"It's Sunday, pet! Come back to bed with me?"

"No I won't," she said, tossing him his robe. "Hurry or we'll miss breakfast."

Richard frowned in confusion, as he slipped on his robe. "I thought we were spending the weekend in our apartment."

"There's too much to do, Richard. We need to plan for the wedding. After breakfast, I want to go to the complex. I need to get my kitchen organised. I want to work with VICi and the HIC and see if my idea is going to work, plus, I want to check on Alan. He should be awake by now. Get in there and get dressed. I'll wait for you downstairs."

Richard scratched the back of his neck and stared at the closed door. He padded across the floor to the toilet. "Did I miss something?"

Stepping into the lift, Donna let out a long sigh of relief. The idea that Richard was behind her losing Jared and Beth made her stomach lurch. The thought of facing Richard's grandmother made her nausea worse. "Stay in control of your emotions, Donna. If they sense your fear, they will eat you alive. I can do this. I know I can do this!"

As she approached the drawing room, she could hear muffled conversation. Taking a deep breath, she put on her best poker face and entered the room with a smile. "Good morning,

Dad. Lady Triplet. John.” She gave Sir Richard and Lady Triplet a kiss on the cheek.

Sir Richard smiled. “Dad?”

“I figured since you were going to be my father-in-law, I might as well get used to it.”

“In that case, you can call me Grandma,” Lady Triplet offered.

Donna’s smile faded. “I only had one grandmother, and I lost her. I’m sorry, Lady Triplet. It just wouldn’t feel right.”

Lady Triplet’s eyes widened. “That’s quite all right, Dear. Like all things, I’m sure that will change. Where’s Ricky?”

I’m sure it won’t! Donna arched an eyebrow and sat next to Sir Richard on the sofa. “He’s getting dressed. I beat him up.”

John glanced at Sir Richard and grinned. “I didn’t realise you and Ricky were into the kinky stuff.”

Donna frowned. “We’re not!” Her face showed some colour. She glared at John. “You’re so funny, John. I meant I got out of bed before him.”

John and Sir Richard laughed. “He knows that, petal. He’s just getting at you.”

“Have a look at the headlines,” Lady Triplet smiled, passing Donna her newspaper. “What do you think?”

Donna swallowed the lump in her throat. “It looks like enticing bait. I’m sure Forrest is already plotting my demise.”

Lady Triplet grinned slightly. “Trust me – he will not succeed.”

Donna ignored Lady Triplet’s comment. She sat, quietly listening to their conversation while she waited for Richard.

Richard entered the room. “Morning, everyone. Sorry I kept you waiting, but I found getting out of bed this morning to be incredibly... difficult.” He grinned at Donna.

One corner of John’s mouth turned up. “I can’t imagine why.”

With the use of her cane and easy chair, Lady Triplet rose to her feet. She softly cleared her throat and glared at John.

“Shall we have our breakfast now, before John gives us a graphic elaboration on *that* comment?”

Sam turned the corner as Richard and Donna were entering the infirmary. The corners of his mouth turned up. Despite what she’d said last night, Donna was back, but so was Richard. He went into his office and slung his stethoscope around his neck.

Donna sat on the side of Alan’s bed. “Good morning, Alan. Sam called last night and said you were doing better.” She motioned to the empty breakfast tray. “I’m glad to see you’re getting your appetite back.”

“Oh aye, Miss Donna. Miss Rita’s cooking is almost as nice as Miss Alice’s.”

“Do you mind if I listen to your chest?”

“Of course not, Miss Donna.”

“Just lie back and relax,” Donna smiled as she put her earpieces in place. “Now take a deep breath for me.” She paused. “Now let it out slowly.”

Sam entered the room. “Why wasn’t I invited to the party?”

Richard sighed. “Good morning, Sam.”

“Richard,” Sam responded impassively. “You wouldn’t be trying to step on my toes, now, would you Pretty Lady?”

The sound of Sam’s voice warmed her. Donna pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. “Hello, Sam,” she responded without turning. “It sounds good, Alan. I think you’re going to be just fine.”

“Good. Does this mean I can get back to work?”

“As far as I’m concerned, you could, but Sam is your doctor.”

“There’s no reason for you to go back to the Hall, Alan,” Richard volunteered. “Dad is staying at the castle. He and Alice will be here on Tuesday, after the wedding.”

Alan furrowed his brow. “Wedding, Master Richard?”

Sam groaned. “You mean no one told you the glorious news?”

“Donna and I are getting married,” Richard responded. “Alice is helping with the plans.”

“Then you have to take me back, so I can help. I’m going bonkers in this bed.”

Donna laughed. “Sam, I don’t see any reason for him to stay.”

“Nor do I. And... just for the record, he’s been driving me bonkers, as well. I would like nothing better than to get him out of my hair.”

Richard chuckled. “In that case, we’ll take you back to the castle with us.”

Alan smiled. “Thank you, Master Richard.”

Donna stood. “Well, now that I know you’re going to be OK,” she said, patting his hand. “I can get on with my work.”

“Thank you for saving my life, Miss Donna. I thought I was a goner.”

Donna smiled. “Not while I’m around, Alan. Sam, I need to speak with you in your office. Richard do me a favour. Go get Gary out of bed and tell him I want to work today.”

“Are you sure? It’s Sunday, pet. No one normally works on Sunday.”

Donna arched an eyebrow. “I do. If you don’t want to work, that’s fine. You can go back to the castle, and Gary and I will work.”

Richard held up his hands. “OK, I’ll go wake up Gary.” Richard left.

“Will you excuse us, Alan,” Donna said. She took Sam’s hand and led him to his office. “Do what you did before. Use VICi to seal the door. Can she notify us if Richard comes back to the infirmary?”

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

“Please, Sam. Just tell me. I don’t want Richard to overhear us.”

“VICi, secure office door, no entry mode. Track Richard Triplet. Notify me on my cell phone if he approaches the infirmary doors. Confirm.”

VICi; Command confirmed. Now tracking. Richard Triplet is in Gary Browne's quarters.

"What's going on, Donna?"

Donna locked her gaze with Sam's. Her eyes glossed. "Hold me - please. I need to feel your arms around me."

Sam slowly pulled her into his arms. "Sweetheart, you're trembling."

"I'm sorry for the phone call," she choked.

Sam grinned. "I didn't believe you anyway. What is Richard doing to you?"

"I don't know. Look. I don't have much time. Please, just listen to me. More and more, I'm starting to believe we were right about Richard, but I don't think he's working alone."

"So, he *is* working with Forrest?"

"No, at least I don't think he is. I overheard a conversation between him and his...."

Sam's cell phone buzzed. Donna jumped out of his arms and to the chair. Sam hurried behind his desk and sat down. His door panel chirped. Donna held up her hand. "Don't unlock it yet. Let me get into the bathroom first."

Sam took a deep breath. "VICi, unlock door."

Richard stuck his head in. "Where's Donna?"

"In the loo."

Richard glanced at Donna's purse, hanging on the chair. "When she gets out. Tell her Gary and I will be in the genetics lab."

Sam nodded. Richard left. "OK, you can come out, now. He's gone."

Donna hurried out of the toilet and grabbed her purse. "I've got to go."

Sam held her wrist. "Wait. Finish what you were saying before he interrupted us."

"I can't Sam. I can't risk him getting suspicious. I'll text you later. Thanks."

"For what?"

"For not taking me seriously."

“I love you. Even if you won’t say it, I know you love me, too.” Sam kissed her.

“You may be right.” Donna softly smiled and left.

Chapter 81

Donna entered the genetics lab rubbing her palms together. “OK people. I’m here. Let’s get hopping.”

Gary glared at her. “I’ve got a good mind to put you over my knee for making me work on a Sunday!”

Donna sneered at him. “Would you like a little cheese to go with your wine? Richard, I need a clear genome of the HIV1 virus. Gary, I need it linked with my calibration program so I can see what it does over the next fifty years.”

Gary’s eyebrows shot up. He glanced at Richard. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear she’s trying to take my job.”

Donna grinned. “If I wanted your job, dear cousin, I could already have it, ‘cause your boss is going to be my father-in-law. So... you’d better watch your stuff.”

“Is it just me, or did she wake up in a good mood today? What did you do to her last night?”

Richard glanced at Donna out of the corner of his eye. “I’ll never tell.”

Gary rolled his eyes. “VICi, link and control Donna Rigden’s laptop. Copy contents to main database and merge with HIC. Confirm.”

VICi; Content of Donna Rigden’s laptop has been copied and merged with main database. Awaiting voiceprint and code authorisation.

“What does that mean?” Donna asked.

“It means everything on your laptop has been copied to the complex mainframe. You can now use anything on your laptop through VICi. Instead of using your keyboard, simply tell VICi what to do. She recognises that this is a private link, so you have to tell her where and how you want the information stored. She will then associate your voice to store information in a particular folder on your area of the mainframe.”

VICi; Awaiting authorisation. Please provide voiceprint and code for Donna Marie Rigden.

Donna cleared her throat. "VICi, this is Donna Marie Rigden. Voiceprint confirm, authorisation code DMRB1B. Make new folder and label it DLPT. Allow general access. Confirm. Did I do that right?"

"You're getting there," Gary smirked.

They waited. Nothing appeared to be happening.

VICi; Contents from Donna Rigden's laptop stored in folder DLPT. General access allowed. Voiceprint and code authorisation accepted and confirmed.

Donna frowned. "Why didn't she respond instantly like she did with you, and can't she execute the commands without me repeating them? That gets bothersome, not to mention it takes up time."

"Sure. VICi, amend main command structure. Donna Rigden, single word confirmation. Voiceprint and code authorisation Gary Browne GB1A, confirm."

VICi; Command structure amended and confirmed.

"It takes some getting used to, but knowing you, you'll soon catch on," Richard commented and took her hand. "Before you start with the HIV1, let me show you how it's done. Do you remember how I initialised the HIC before, when I showed you our son?"

"I think so...."

"Then you do the honours. Tell VICi to load the human genome, and focus on homo sapiens section."

"VICi, initialise holographic imaging chamber. Load human genome. Focus on homo sapiens section. Concentrate on single cell nucleus. Notify me when the chamber is ready."

VICi; Confirmed.

Donna smiled. "That's much better."

VICi; Program loaded. Chamber initialised.

"VICi, open chamber door," Donna ordered without prompting.

“After you, pet.” Richard indicated a red mark on the floor surrounding the display chamber. “Now, when you’re in here, make sure you stand outside the safety circle. That’s as close as you can get.”

“Why? Would the light from the chamber blind you?”

“It would, yes, but as a safety precaution, VICi will not display the 3D image if you’re standing inside the safety circle. If you stand there too long, she would prompt you to move back, or ask you if you wanted to end the program.”

The display cylinder pixelated and started to form a double-helix model.

“Let’s say we wanted to locate and mark all mutation abnormalities. VICi, scan genome for abnormal mutations over the last 10,000 years and highlight mutations in red.”

Specific parts of the model started flashing red, like a light on a smart phone.

“Rest your hands on mine, like we did before.”

Donna placed the palms of her hands over the tops of Richard’s. He started animating their hands and fingers; twisting, turning, zooming in and out until one of the red areas was in focus. “VICi, lock and set to controlled magnification. Display base pairs to wallscreen. Focus Donna Rigden.”

Donna’s eyes lit. She had dreamed of being able to do this, but never expected to in her lifetime. Now here it was right in front of her. Holographic technology interfaced with a voice activated computer. “This is so awesome! Can I zoom in more?”

“I’ve put VICi on controlled magnification. Just press your thumb and index finger together, like this, centre over the image and spread your fingers. It works the same as a smartphone screen. The more times you do this, the more detailed the image.”

The wallscreen in front of them started displaying base pairs. The base pairs containing the mutated anomalies blinked red again. “This is so cool!”

Richard wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed the side of her neck. “No, here’s the cool part. VICi, split display, right focus mutations. Now slowly turn around and keep your eyes focused on the wallscreen.”

As Donna moved, the position of the readout on the wallscreen moved with her, even when she looked at the ceiling. It did not move, when Richard did.

“Can I still use the keyboard on my laptop to work?”

“It’s not necessary. VICi has copied everything from your laptop, including the program structure. But, if you wanted to – let’s say – enter information in a private file, you would simply link your laptop with VICi, and then tell her to use keyboard input. Are you impressed?”

“Impressed doesn’t even touch it. OK, I’ve got the hang of it, now.”

“One more thing, before I turn you loose. VICi records vocal macros. If you wanted to repeat the same commands, all you have to do is tell VICi to repeat previous commands, using current image.”

Donna nodded. “VICi, load HIV1 genome and repeat previous commands using current image.”

The model in the display chamber changed, and so did the wallscreen readout. “This is so much fun!”

Richard grinned. “Hmm, I’m not sure this was a good idea.”

“Why?”

“I’m never going to get you out of here.”

“Might not,” she chuckled. “How many times can the wallscreen display be split?”

“As many times as there is room on the wallscreen. VICi can split it up to a single pixel screen, but unless you remember where everything is, it gets complicated to keep up. We usually don’t split it any more than there is room.”

“And, we’re moving into your – our quarters, after the wedding?”

“We could move in now, but I think Grandma might strip a gear if we decided to get married in the chapel here, instead of hers.”

Donna sighed. “Wouldn’t want to upset, dear old Grandma, now would we?” she mumbled.

Richard furrowed his brow. “Pardon?”

“Nothing. I was talking to myself. VICi, display onscreen help tips.”

Richard stepped back and motioned to a small sofa, against the back wall of the chamber. “I’ll just be back there, reading if you need any help.”

Donna nodded and kept feeding VICi commands. Richard took out his cell phone and started reading. *If I keep her occupied with this, maybe she won’t concentrate so much, about her music.*

Three hours later, Richard’s stomach rumbled, and Donna was still busy working. He looked at his watch. “OK. That’s it. Time to stop. I’m starving.”

“I’ve almost got this, Richard. Why don’t you go get us some lunch? By the time you get back, I should be finished.”

Richard stood. “Sure, OK. What did you want?”

“Does Rita know how to make any of Sam’s recipes?”

Richard tightened his jaw and sighed. “I don’t know. What did you want? I’ll ask her.”

“Lemony crab salad with baby greens.”

Richard lifted her chin and kissed her. “I’ll see what I can do for you. VICi, pause program and open chamber door. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He stepped out of the chamber. “VICi, close chamber door and resume program.”

Gary looked up. “What’s up?”

“I’m hungry. Donna wants to keep working. She says she’s almost finished.”

Gary grinned. “I know. I’ve been monitoring her progress on the wallscreen out here. She’s isolating caspases in a cancer cell and comparing them to those in the HIV1... and she’s right. She’s almost finished.”

“How does she work so fast?”

“Donna reads and manipulates DNA sequences, much in the same way as a mathematician does calculus. She has an uncanny act for figuring out what base pairs do, and how they’re likely to react under certain conditions. That’s why she wanted her calibration program integrated with VICi, so she can track how her genetically altered HIV1 will be affected by evolution.”

“OK, well, keep an eye on her. She hasn’t eaten or drank anything, since breakfast. I’m going for lunch. Are you going to stop, or do you want me to pick you up something, as well?”

“I’ll have whatever you and Donna are having.”

Richard sighed. “I’m having whatever is on offer. Donna wants something Sam makes.”

Gary frowned. “In that case, I’ll have what you’re having.”

Richard laughed and left. Knowing the chances that Rita would know how to prepare Donna’s request were slim; Richard went straight to the source. “Sam!” he called out. “Where are you?”

“Stop shouting. I have patients in here!”

Richard followed him back to his office. Sam started washing his hands. “What did you want, but make it quick. I was on my way to lunch.”

“That’s why I’m here. I need your help. Donna wants something called lemony crab salad with baby greens, and she says it’s one of your recipes. Would you make her some?”

One corner of Sam’s mouth turned up. “Sure. Shall I make enough for you and Gary, as well?”

“No!” Richard responded quickly. “Gary and I are having whatever Rita has prepared. I’m on my way to the cafeteria. Just make enough for Donna. I’ll pick it up when I get back.”

“Is she eating in the genetics lab?”

“Yeah. How long will it take to make the salad?”

“Not long, after I’ve thawed the crab meat. Being down here, unfortunately, I don’t have a live source, so it won’t taste the same.”

“I’ll owe you, Mate,” Richard said and ran on down the corridor to the front entrance of the park. “Besides...” he mused, “...if it comes from you, I doubt Donna would care how it tasted.” He hurried across the park.

Chapter 82

Sam entered the genetics lab carrying a covered food tray. “Where’s Donna?”

Gary pointed toward the back. “In the HIC. You might as well leave the food on her desk. She’ll get it when she comes out.”

Sam frowned. “No, she’s going to eat it now while it’s fresh. VICi, activate chamber intercom. sweetheart, your lunch is here. Pause what you’re doing and come eat.”

Gary grinned and shook his head. “She’s not going to....”

“Good, I’m starving,” Donna commented as she entered the room.

Gary’s mouth gaped. “How did you...?”

“I guess I just have the touch,” Sam grinned and led her to her desk. “Do you mind if I eat with you?”

Donna softly smiled. “No, but Richard will be back with his and Gary’s lunch any minute, so behave yourself. Gary, why don’t you come eat. I’ll share some of my salad with you. There’s enough here for two people.”

Gary swallowed hard and gave her a plastic smile. “No, thanks, D, but I’ll pull up a chair and visit while I finish my coffee.”

Donna took a bite of her salad, closed her eyes and savoured the flavours. “This hits the spot.”

“Not as fresh, I’m afraid,” Sam commented. “I had to use frozen crab meat.”

“It doesn’t matter. It tastes delicious. Thanks for making it. Did Richard ask you to?”

“He – ah – he knocked on my door in desperation. When he said it was for you, I didn’t hesitate. Where is he, by the way? He should have been back, by now.”

Gary groaned. “Knowing Richard, he got side tracked. When he does that, he loses all track of time.”

Donna chuckled. "Like I said, I'll share my salad with you."

Gary looked at her plate and cleared his throat. "Like I said... I'll wait."

"Can Richard override VICi's commands?"

"To a certain extent, yes. Why?"

"Can he monitor our conversations? I know VICi can track someone, and from what you showed us in the cafeteria, I know she can also mask us out of her security footage."

"Yes...."

"Can VICi – I mean – would Richard...?"

"...Spy on us now?" Gary finished her question. "Yes, if he had a reason."

"Is there a way to prevent him from doing that?"

"VICi, temporary visual and vocal filter: Dr. Gary Browne, Dr. Sam Kaliea, and Dr. Donna Rigden, in genetics lab. Voiceprint authorisation, security code GB1A. Confirm commands by direct-link on my cell phone." Gary laid his cell phone on the desk and waited until the green light flashed. "VICi, track Richard Triplet. Notify me when he enters adjacent corridor or exits front entrance to the park. Confirm." Again Gary waited for the flashing green light. "OK, talk, but remember, I can't keep doing this."

"I need to know if I can send Sam a secure text message from the castle. I don't want Richard to be able to intercept it."

"He can't. He would either have to overhear your conversation, or read your text. Why all the suspicion? What has Richard done to break your trust in him?"

"What do you know about Richard's Grandmother? What kind of person is she?"

"Personally, I've not had a lot of dealings with her, but John doesn't speak too highly of her. Why do you ask?"

"I think she and Richard have been working together, and if that's the case, both of them are conspiring with Forrest."

Gary frowned. "Why, D? Sir Richard and Forrest are corporate rivals. I don't believe Richard would go that far. I

mean, he has a close relationship with his grandmother, but I don't think he would do anything to go against his father."

"Yesterday, I overheard a conversation between Richard and Lady Triplet. He was telling her that he didn't need her help anymore. He said her meddling had come close to ruining everything, and he told her he had everything under control before he came to Shreveport. He said I was not going to leave him for Sam." Donna paused and swallowed hard. "Then I heard Lady Triplet... threaten Sam."

"Threaten me?"

Gary's eyes widened. He held up a hand, forestalling Sam. "In what way, D?"

"She warned Richard if he didn't keep me and Sam apart, Sam could still stop the wedding. Richard said Sam was no longer a threat to our relationship, and for her to leave him alone. Lady Triplet told Richard to take care of me. She said after the wedding she would deal with Sam."

Gary glanced at Sam and then directed his attention back to Donna. "Can he? Can Sam stop the wedding?"

Donna's eyes glossed. She swallowed hard and slowly shook her head. "No..." she whispered.

Gary studied Sam's eyes. "But, I sense you would very much like... her to call it off. Wouldn't you, Sam?"

Sam rested his hand on Donna's. "Yes, Gary. I would. I would be willing to walk away, take her back to Australia, start my own practice, and help Mum make wine, for the rest of our lives."

Donna shook her head. "I can't Sam. Richard wouldn't let me."

"She's right, Sam. There's nowhere on this earth that you could go that Richard couldn't find you. Your safest option is to stick with D's plan. If Richard wants something bad enough, he won't stop until he gets it. If his hand were forced, he might try to take the baby away, or use it to keep Donna. We're best friends, but Richard has a dark side."

Sam saw a flash of red out of the corner of his eye. “Speak of the devil.”

“VICi, where is Richard Triplet?”

VICi; Richard Triplet has just entered the adjacent corridor.

“Is there anything else you wanted to ask - off the record? Talk fast!”

“What about my Depro shot? Have you found out anything, about it?”

“Yes, but I’ll text you, or Sam will. We’re going back on normal mode, so watch yourself. I’ll... help as much as I can, D.”

Donna smiled and nodded. “Thank you, Gary.”

Gary grinned. “What are big brothers for? VICi, stop previous commands.”

Sam smiled, gave Donna’s hand a reassuring squeeze and carried on with his lunch. Richard entered the genetics lab, carrying two trays of food. “When you weren’t at your quarters, I figured I would find you in here,” Richard said to Sam. “Grab this, Gary, before I drop it.”

“It’s about time you got here. Sam’s salad was starting to look good.”

“Sorry, I got distracted by Frank, in the cafeteria. You might need to zap that.”

“Well, as you can see, your lovely fiancée is almost finished with her lunch.”

Richard arched an eyebrow. “Yes, and I can also see that you invited yourself to have lunch, with my lovely fiancée.”

“He didn’t invite himself,” Gary spoke up. “I invited him. Since he’s part of our genetics team, again, I figured he was allowed to hang out with the rest of us geeks.”

“When did that happen?” Richard cut his eyes on Donna. “Was this your idea?”

“As a matter of fact, putting Sam back on our project was my idea. It was my fault that he was taken off, in the first place. He didn’t deserve to be treated that way. He’s become a valuable member of the team, and I was wrong to act so

childish. I think he deserves another chance. Besides, we're getting married in two days, so you shouldn't be jealous of Sam. After all, he no longer poses a threat to our relationship. If you have a problem with that...?"

Richard shrugged and shook his head. "No... it's... fine. You can have anyone you like on the team, and I'm not jealous of Sam." He held out his hand to Sam. "Welcome back, Sam."

Sam glanced at Donna out of the corner of his eye and cautiously shook Richard's hand. "Thanks – I think..."

As soon as Richard was out of earshot, Donna and Sam converged on Gary. "What are you doing?" Sam asked.

"I was wondering the same thing, myself," Donna added.

Gary grinned. "Removing a major obstacle."

Keeping an eye on Richard; Donna leaned close to Gary's ear. "You've just fixed it so Sam and I will practically spend every day together. How can you see that as removing a major obstacle? It's going to create major fireworks."

"Shh. Have a little patience. I'll text you tonight and explain."

Donna narrowed her eyes. "You'd better!" she hissed. "Thanks for the salad, Sam," she smiled.

"Anything for you, Pretty Lady."

Richard stood beside Donna. "Pet, your desk is too small. Why don't we all go to the park, so we can enjoy our lunch?"

Donna stood. "You three can go if you want to. I'm finished with my lunch, and I want to finish what I was doing. See you later, Sam. VICi, open chamber door."

"I'm done, too." Sam cleared his throat and stood. "I need to get back to the infirmary. Once the rest of my medical team gets here tomorrow, I can... help out in here if you need me to."

Gary studied his eyes. "Oh, I'm sure we'll need you. See you tomorrow, Sam."

"Thanks, Sam, for making Donna's lunch," Richard said.

"If she requires my culinary skills again, just let me know." He patted Richard's shoulder and left.

Gary waited until he and Richard were alone. "OK, Richard, I happen to know that you don't like Sam. Why are you being nice to him?"

"He and Donna are friends, and he's playing at my wedding. I just thought, for Donna's sake, I would try and cut him some slack."

"So, you're not jealous of him anymore?"

"Not after last night," Richard grinned. "Gary, you know Donna and the baby are better off with me. I love her, more than I've ever loved anyone, and I'll give her everything she needs."

"What if Donna decides you're not what she wants after the baby is born? Are you going to step aside and let her go?"

Richard looked hurt. "If you have to ask me that, then you don't know me at all, Gary. I would do anything for her. Give her anything she asked for that was within my power to give."

Gary glanced at the wallscreen and grinned from ear to ear. "She's done it!"

Richard frowned. "What?"

"D!" Gary placed his hands on Richard's shoulders and slowly turned him. "She's done it! She's figured out how to make the HIV1 work with the EHG. Now, all she needs is the live HIV1, and we can get some serious work done."

Richard stood outside the chamber door, waiting for Donna. She stepped out and jumped into his arms, laughing as he swung her around. "You two must have been watching out here."

"Yes, we were. Congratulations, D."

"Dad is going to be thrilled."

"Don't congratulate me yet. I still have to make it work with the real thing, and then it has to be tested. We're a long way from success."

"Yes, but we're closer than we were." Richard kissed her. "I think we should wrap things up, grab Alan and go home and celebrate."

“I have a better idea,” Donna said. “Why don’t you take Alan to the castle and bring your dad back? I’ll fix dinner, and we can all tell him together. Since your grandmother doesn’t know about the complex, we wouldn’t be able to talk openly. Here, we would be.”

“She has a point, Richard,” Gary agreed.

“I think we should call Dad first and warn him. Heaven knows what Grandma might have planned. We should try to get in at least one rehearsal, before Tuesday.”

“You’re right. We should. So, why not let’s plan on doing it tomorrow night. You know, of course, that would mean Sam would have to be there.”

“Unless you want someone else to play the piano for us, yes, he would.”

“And you’re OK with that?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? You know, I don’t like how all of a sudden everyone seems to think I’ve got it in for Sam. I’ll admit, I don’t particularly like him, but then I’ve got a good reason to feel that way. Donna, I’m not going to dictate who you’re friends with, besides, with Juanita back in the States, Sam is your doctor. And, although I don’t trust him that much as a person, I do trust him as a doctor. So, please, stop worrying about how Sam and I will get along. We’ve been under each other’s noses for a number of years now, and we still haven’t killed each other. You almost act as if you think I’m going to do something to him. Only one thing could make me do that. Go make our meal. I’ll take Alan to the castle and bring Dad back – one way or the other.” Richard kissed Donna again and left.

Donna waited a few more minutes, before approaching Gary. “OK. He’s gone. Tell me why you think keeping me and Sam together is a solution.”

Gary grinned. “Because, if you and Sam are together all the time, Richard can’t accuse you of anything. Although, it hasn’t appeared as though this is the case, in this genetics lab, I am the boss. Unless Sir Richard overrides me, Richard will do

what I tell him to – after a fashion. You obviously want to be around Sam, and this way you can be. Baby, I'm sorry, but until the baby is born, this is the only way you and Sam can be together without risking the possibility of something happening to him. I know you don't love Richard. You put up a good front, but not from me. I also know that you don't love Sam – not really. But, again, until we get rid of Forrest, I can't see any chance for you and Jared. The only other solution is to....”

“No!” Donna forced through her teeth. “That is not an option. Unless some unforeseen event prevents it, I am going to have this baby. And I am going to give him the best life possible. If it means losing Sam and Jared, then that's what will happen. I grew up without parents. I do not want my son to do the same. If I see there is no other way, I will forget Sam in the same way as I have Jared.”

“But... baby, you haven't forgotten Jared.”

“No, I haven't, and I probably never will, but I have found a way to live without him.”

“You mean Sam.”

“Yes, and if I have to, I will do the same with Sam. Richard is not a monster. I just have to find a way to trust him. I don't think I could ever learn to trust his grandmother, though. There is just something about her that makes my skin crawl.”

Chapter 83

Forrest sat at a table in his hotel suite. Laid out in front of him was a copy of three major newspapers; two from Newcastle, and one from London, all bearing the same front page headlines. The photographs had been taken in different locations, but all included the tattletale shot. Richard, Donna, and Sir Richard standing on the steps of what was clearly Saint Nicholas Cathedral. Why would Sir Richard risk his only son, and his most gifted genetic scientist?

Forrest tipped the last of his scotch in his mouth and sat back in his chair, sighing deeply. “Something is not right. This is not how he operates.”

Liu turned. “In what way?”

“Think about it. Sir Richard’s secretary is killed one day. The very next day, Sir Richard announces his son’s upcoming wedding, and his plans to retire, all without showing an ounce of grief for his fallen employee. He doesn’t even call the police, much less get them involved.”

“Probably because he knows you were responsible and calling the police would be a waste of time.”

“There is that, but why put the two most important people in his life, on display like sitting ducks. Forrest Enterprises is not Sir Richard’s only enemy. He has many. Has he gone senile?”

“The answer is simple. He’s calling your bluff. You tried to use Mildred to flush him out. Now, he’s using Donna to flush you out. The only difference is Donna is much more valuable than his secretary. He knows you’ll take this opportunity. In fact, I’d say he’s counting on it.”

“Then we wouldn’t want to disappoint him. Would we?”

Ten minutes after Gary and Donna arrived, Richard’s door panel chirped. Gary and Donna were in the kitchen, working on the

meal. Donna had enlisted Gary's help. "VICi, unlock door panel," Donna said.

Sam stepped into the foyer. "Hello? Anyone home?"

Donna smiled and walked to the doorway. "We're in the kitchen."

Sam gave her the once over as he slowly bridged the gap between them. "I don't know what's on the menu, but I certainly approve of the appetiser."

Donna stepped into Sam's personal space and turned her face up. She rose on her tiptoes and kissed him. Sam cleared his throat, stepped back and held up a hand. "Sweetheart, what are you doing? This is Richard's quarters. He's probably got more cameras in here than anywhere in the entire complex."

"Nope, at least not yet. Gary checked."

Sam grinned. "In that case, I think I can do better than that..."

The corners of Gary's mouth turned up. "Ahem!"

Sam chuckled. "Sorry, Gary. I couldn't resist."

"Yeah – well – you'd better learn how. If Richard gets the least bit suspicious, he'll start monitoring his quarters and everywhere else in the complex."

"He's right, Sam. I shouldn't have done that. So, what have you got behind your back?"

Sam held out a bottle. "This is a Triplet get together. That always means Champagne. You're pregnant, so I brought something you could drink."

Donna took the bottle and studied his eyes. "Thank you."

Sam rolled his sleeves up and helped Gary and Donna finish preparing the meal. The table was set when Richard and Sir Richard entered the lounge. Donna went to meet them. Richard pulled her close and kissed her. "Miss me?"

Donna grinned. "Yes, I did." She hugged Sir Richard. "I hope you're hungry, Dad."

"Actually, petal, I'm starving."

“I hope you like it. Gary and Sam helped. I need to make a shopping list. I had to improvise on some of the ingredients I normally would have used.”

“What are we having?” Richard asked.

“Grilled chicken with cherries, shallots and arugula. Grilled chicken stuffed with basil and tomatoes. Green beans with mushrooms and toasted almonds. Mashed potatoes with cream cheese and chives. For dessert, brownie ice-cream sandwiches with sour cherry sauce. Sam brought a non-alcoholic Champagne.”

“That was awfully generous of him,” Richard said. “I think I prefer the real stuff if you don’t mind.”

“He didn’t bring it for us, Ricky. It’s so Donna can join in the celebration.”

“Then, I guess I owe you again,” Richard responded, turning his attention to Sam.

Sam arched an eyebrow. “Yes, you do.” He opened the bottle of Champagne he’d brought while Richard opened the regular bottle and filled their glasses. Sam covered his. “I’ll have the non-alcoholic, with Donna.”

“OK, now that everyone has their glasses filled. Dad... Donna has something to tell you.”

Donna smiled. “Dad... I’m ready to start working on my HIV1 vector. I could really use that live sample, now.”

Sir Richard’s mouth gaped, and his eyes twinkled. “You’ve figured out how to make it work?”

Donna nodded. “Yes, Dad. I have. I ran three separate simulations. They all worked. Now, all I’ve got to do is do that with the live sample, so the sooner you can get it for me, the sooner we can complete our research.”

“What are you using to culture the stem cells?”

Donna looked at Richard and then Gary. “The same thing I used to treat Alan - amniotic stem cells.”

“You’re not going to risk collecting more amniotic stem cells!” Sam spoke up.

Donna turned. “No, Sam. I don’t need to. There was enough left over from Alan’s treatment. All Richard has to do is culture more. Dad... how soon can you get me the live sample?”

Sir Richard grinned. “Well, I wasn’t going to say anything until after your wedding, but, I guess I can tell you now. I spoke to a couple friends in high places and pulled some strings. Your HIV1 will be delivered to the complex tomorrow.”

“Great! That means we can start the first phase of tests on Wednesday.”

Richard frowned. “No honeymoon?”

“Richard, we’ve already discussed this. I want this virus thing out of the way. Then I can concentrate on nothing but you and our son.”

Richard smiled. “I can live with that.”

Sir Richard held up his glass. “So, here’s to my future daughter-in-law who is about to re-write history and prove once and for all that immortality is possible.”

“To Donna,” Sam said.

Donna sipped her Champagne. The taste brought back some pleasant and painful memories for her. She swallowed hard and pushed her pain aside, putting on her best painted smile. Her cheeks showed some colour. “OK, enough. I will not take all the credit for this.”

“Well, you should,” Richard said. “You were the only one working on it, today. I sat on the settee in the HIC.”

“And I watched on the wallscreen, outside,” Gary added.

“You can’t blame me,” Sam chuckled. “I wasn’t in the lab until lunch.”

“None of us lifted a finger to help, D. It’s all down to you.”

Donna sighed. “You’d all better be ready to help me on Wednesday.”

After dessert, Gary, Sir Richard, and Richard sat in the lounge and talked while Sam volunteered to help Donna clear the table.

Donna put away the leftovers. Sam loaded the dishwasher. “You know, I’m starting to get jealous.”

“Of what?”

“You...”

“Sam, I told you it would be...”

Sam pressed a finger to her lips, stealing a quick kiss while he kept an eye on the kitchen door. “Not about you and Richard. I’m jealous because you’re making the few recipes I have in my book look small. I think I need to amend it.”

Donna softly chuckled. “Use some of mine, if you want. I don’t mind.”

“Are you and Richard going back to the castle, tonight?”

“Not if I had my way.”

“If I had my way, you would be moving in with me in my quarters, which just happens to be fashioned after my penthouse apartment.”

Donna’s eyes widened. “Really?”

Sam nodded. “Yes, really.”

“What about your grand piano?”

“I’ve already got a space cleaned for it – another one of those Monday deliveries.” Donna frowned. Sam studied her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Richard knows how much music means to me. I was just wondering why he hadn’t suggested one for our quarters.”

“He probably would if you asked him.”

Donna softly smiled. “That’s OK. It would probably remind me of how much I’ve lost. You’ll play for me, sometimes, won’t you?”

“Anytime you want me to.”

Donna’s eyes glossed. “I’m going to miss that, and I’m going to miss not seeing you all the time.”

“Well, it was your idea for me to move out of your bedroom.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “That’s not fair, Sam. You know why. If you were trying to spoil my evening, you did a good job of it. Do you think any of this is easy for me? Do you think

I enjoy it? Richard kissing me, touching me, making love to me, and all the time pretending that it's what I want?"

Sam silenced her with a tender kiss. "No, sweetheart. I know it's not, and you don't have to do this. I meant what I said. Say the word, and I'll take you back to Australia."

Donna's bottom lip quivered. She inhaled and let it out slowly. She stepped back. "I can't Sam. I'm sorry, but I can't." She grabbed a dish cloth and started wiping off the table. "You'd better go in the lounge, with the rest of the men before Richard gets suspicious. I was going to have a cup of tea. Do you want one?"

"Regular or herbal?"

"Herbal, of course. Richard and his dad are the tea drinkers. What do you want? I've got blueberry, raspberry, mint and peach."

"What are you having?"

"Peach, I think."

"Peach is fine."

"I'll bring it to you."

Sam brushed the back of his fingers down her cheek. "I wish you were mine."

"I am..."

He kissed her forehead. "That's not what I meant."

Donna softly smiled. "I know..."

Donna entered the lounge, handed Sam his tea, and then sat beside Richard on the sofa. They talked for a while about the project and the wedding. Sir Richard glanced at his watch. "Petal, I would like to thank you for a delicious meal and a lovely evening. I'm a lot more optimistic about the HIV1 vector idea, now, than I was before. I hate to spoil things, but we need to get back to the castle. Mum has a tenancy to think the worst."

"Richard, before we go..." Donna spoke up, "...could I speak to you in the kitchen?"

"Can you wait a few minutes, Dad?"

Sir Richard stood. "Sure, Ricky. While you and Donna are talking, I'll drop by Missy and John's and let him know we're ready to leave." Sir Richard kissed Donna's cheek. "Thanks again, petal. Goodnight Sam. Gary."

"Gary. Sam, would you excuse us for a second?"

"Actually," Gary responded standing. "I should probably go, as well. I'd like to do some reading." He glanced toward Sam.

"Yeah, me too. It's back to the grinding stone, tomorrow. Joyce will probably want to change everything, in the infirmary. I'm not going to let her."

"Don't forget about tomorrow night," Donna said. "Dinner and rehearsal, at the castle. Gary, you and Sam could ride together."

"Won't be necessary," Richard said. "They can ride with us in the chopper. Actually, why don't you two hang around, for a few more minutes? I need to talk to you."

Sam glanced at Gary and then at Donna. Her eyes almost begged him to stay. He nodded. "Yeah, sure. I wouldn't mind another cup of your peach tea."

Donna smiled and took Richard's hand. "I'll bring it out for you. Gary?"

"Yeah, sure."

Donna led Richard into the kitchen and closed the door. Richard backed her against the counter. "What did you want to talk to me about?" he asked, gazing into her eyes.

"Let's stay here. I'm not comfortable, at the castle. There's a... presence there and it makes me... nervous."

Richard chuckled. "A presence – you mean like a spirit?"

"Yeah – you might say that."

Richard brushed some loose hairs, behind her ears and leaned his face close to hers. "From the look on your face, I'll assume that's not good."

Donna swallowed hard. "No, it's not."

"And you think it's... evil?"

“I don’t know if you would call it evil, but it certainly doesn’t like me. Sometimes, the negativity is so strong it sends chills down my spine. In fact, if we hadn’t already committed to having the wedding ceremony in your grandmother’s chapel, I would prefer to have it somewhere else.”

Richard brushed the side of his nose against hers; breathing in her scent. “There’s nothing that says we have to have the wedding... in Grandma’s chapel. We could always have it here, in the complex chapel.”

“No. We’ve already promised her. It’s only for a couple more days. As long as we don’t have to stay there, I can handle it.”

“You’re sure?”

Donna loosely circled her arms around his neck and looked up at him. She knew he was going to kiss her, so she took control and kissed him first. “Thank you,” she whispered and kissed him again. “I’d better make Gary and Sam’s tea.”

“I’ll go tell Dad we’re staying at the complex. Then, I’ll drive over to the castle and get us some clothes.”

“Richard, I have an entire wardrobe, upstairs.”

“Yeah, I know, but I don’t. Besides, you’ll probably want your guitar and keyboard. I plan to solve that problem, soon.”

Donna grinned. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see. We’ll fly back, in the morning and pick up the rest of our things. That way, it will give me a chance to talk to Grandma.”

“You’re sure you don’t mind?”

Richard smiled, framed her face with his hands and tenderly kissed her. “To be honest, I don’t particularly like it there myself. Stay and visit with Gary and Sam. I won’t be gone long,” he said and turned to leave.

“Richard...”

Richard stopped and turned, waiting.

“Be careful.”

Richard walked back and tenderly kissed her again. “I will be. I love you.”

Donna sighed. "I love you, too."

Richard smiled and went into the lounge. "Donna is making your tea. I'll be back shortly," he said and headed for the door.

"What's going on?" Gary asked.

"Donna doesn't want to stay at Grandma's. We're moving into our quarters, tonight. She says there's a presence in the castle that makes her nervous. Stay with her, at least until I get back."

"Sure," Gary responded. Sam nodded.

Jack let Sir Richard and John in the castle and led them into the drawing room. Lady Triplet was drinking a cup of tea. She greeted them and glanced expectantly toward the door. "Where are Ricky and Donna?"

"Donna is at the complex. I'm going to take a shower and go to bed. I think John is, as well."

Lady Triplet frowned. "What's going on?"

"Ricky will explain when he gets here. Goodnight, Mum," Sir Richard said and walked away.

Chapter 84

In Garrigill, at the George and Dragon Inn, about twenty miles south of Langston Castle, a group of young intoxicated teenagers crammed into a late model sports car and headed down the country lane, toward Alston. The couple in the back started kissing and fondling each other. The girl in the front passenger seat lit up a joint, took a drag and passed it to the driver. "Are you crazy! Where did you get that?"

"From my cousin," she giggled and offered it to him again. "Go on, take a puff."

"Are you kidding? That shit fries your brain. I don't do drugs. What if we get stopped? I shouldn't even be driving, much less smoking grass! Besides," he motioned with his head, "... them two in the back are making me horny."

"Awe, poor baby," she simpered and stroked his penis, through his jeans. "I'll take care of that."

"Come on, now! Cut it out! I need to concentrate on driving."

"Bring the party back here with us, Stacey."

Stacey glanced over her shoulder. "You look like you've already got more than you can handle."

"Hell no," he laughed. "I can handle both of you at the same time. Crawl on back here and join the ride."

Stacey started unbuckling her seat belt. "What are you doing?" the driver growled.

"I came to get high and get laid. So far, all I've got is sauced and let down." She crawled between the seats.

"Bitch!" he spat and swerved back on the road.

Richard parked in front of Langston Castle. "Evening, Master Richard. Shall I make you a cup of tea?"

"No thank you, Jack. Is Grandma up?"

"Yes, Sir. I believe she's in the drawing room."

Jack announced Richard and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Evening Grandma.”

“Good evening, Ricky,” she spoke cordially. “Where’s Donna?”

“She’s... not coming, and I’m not staying.”

Lady Triplet frowned. “What do you mean she’s not coming, and you’re not staying? Has something happened between you?”

“Don’t panic. It’s not what you think. We’re still together, but we’ve decided to live somewhere else.”

“Why on earth would you want to do something like that? You’ve got a beautiful apartment upstairs. No one bothers you. You have servants, and it’s safe here for you and Donna. Not to mention it would be a wonderful place for your children to grow up, and when I’m gone this will all be yours. What more could you ask for? Whose idea was this – Donna’s?”

Richard grinned. “As a matter of fact it was Grandma. She doesn’t feel comfortable here. She says there’s a presence that makes her nervous.”

“A presence - as in a ghost? Oh, come on Ricky! There’s no such thing as ghosts – you know that! She’s just being difficult, like her mother was. Marie thought she was psychic, too – more like psychotic.”

“I’m not going to argue with you about this. Donna is going to be my wife, and this is what she wants. If that upsets you, I’m sorry. If you want to disinherit me – that’s fine too. The castle is too cold for my liking anyway.”

“Well, where is it?”

Richard grinned. “It’s a short distance from here, further out, into the country.”

“How safe is it? What about the Centre? If it’s further out, won’t it take longer to get to work?”

Richard chuckled. “Getting back and forth to work won’t be a problem.”

Using her cane, Lady Triplet pushed to her feet. “I suppose Donna has decided not to get married in my chapel, as well!” she snapped.

Richard groaned. “No, Grandma, but if she knew your true colours, she probably would.”

“What do you mean my true colours?”

“You’re two-faced, Grandma. You’re all peaches and cream to her face, and then talk about her behind her back. She’s never seen you – angry – like you are now.”

Lady Triplet softly smiled. “I’m not... angry Ricky. I’m just... frustrated. I know how much you want this marriage between you and Donna to work. I’m not sure Donna wants it as much as you do. Answer a question for me. This new place, where you’ve chosen to live, is it anywhere near your doctor?”

Richard forced the air from his lungs and pressed his lips together. “He’s not... far away.”

“Just as I suspected. Don’t do this, Ricky. Donna is attracted to him. From what I understand, most women are. He’s a smooth talker. If you continue to let them see each other, you’ll regret it. Someone else will raise your son – mark my words!”

“OK, Grandma – that’s it! One more word against Donna and you’ve seen the last of me.” Richard headed for the lift.

Lady Triplet followed him and grabbed his arm. Richard looked down at his arm and back into Lady Triplet’s eyes. “Ricky, you have to listen to me. I’ve been around longer than you have. I’ve seen relationships come, and I’ve seen them go. Sam will mean trouble if you don’t put a stop to this preposterous friendship.”

Richard tightened his jaw. “Grandma, I know Donna is attracted to Sam. I know she doesn’t love me like I love her, but if you’ll stay out of this, I know I can make this work. If I start telling Donna who she can and can’t be friends with, she will resent me, and as soon as the baby is born, she will want me to give her a divorce.”

“And you would?”

“Yes! If I knew I couldn’t make her happy, I would. Now let go of my arm. I don’t want her worrying and wondering why I’m not back. I appreciate your concern, but I don’t need your help. I can run my own life.”

Lady Triplet slowly released him; Richard stepped into the lift. “Remember what I said!” she called out.

Richard looked down. “Remember what I said!” he called back. He unlocked his cell phone. “Dad, it’s me. Are you still up?”

“Just got out of the shower, Ricky. What did you need?”

“I need to borrow the chopper. I want to move all of mine and Donna’s stuff over to the complex.”

“Now? Tonight? I thought you were only coming to pick up clothes and a couple of Donna’s things.”

“Yeah, well, I’d planned to, but I thought I would surprise Donna and move it all tonight. That way, she wouldn’t have to come back, but for the rehearsal and wedding. I don’t want to make her uncomfortable.”

“OK. That’s not a problem. Just as long as it’s here in the morning. I still have to pick up a few things at the Hall, tomorrow. Was there anything else you needed from there?”

“No. Oh – wait. I want to move a couple of the horses. I spoke to Natress, and he said he would keep them at the farm for me.”

“Let me guess, you want the white Appaloosas, and the chestnut stallion, right?”

Richard grinned as he unlocked the apartment. “Yeah. I’m driving back in my car. I’m going to let John fly the chopper, help him unload it and then he can fly back tonight. That won’t be a problem, will it?”

“Course not. I told you to use the choppers whenever you needed to. In fact, why don’t you just keep the one you’ve been using? That way you won’t have to look for John or Frank when you want to use it. Think of it as an early wedding present for you and Donna.”

“Thanks, Dad, for everything.”

“Listen, is it still foggy?”

“A little, up on the fells. That’s why it took me a little longer to get here.”

“Look, just be careful going back. Use your fog lights and take it slow. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I will. Goodnight Dad.” Richard pressed another button. “Jeff, it’s Richard. Did you get that little project taken care of, for me?”

“Which one, the card or the locket?”

“Both, actually.”

“Yes, I did Richard. Did you want to get it tonight, or wait until morning?”

“I’ll pick it up in about half an hour. I’d like to give it to her tonight.”

“Sure thing, Mate.”

Richard ended the call. There was a knock on the apartment door. “Ricky it’s John.”

Richard opened the door. “Your Dad said you wanted to load some things on the chopper.” John’s eyes widened as he stepped into the lounge. “All these boxes?”

Richard nodded. John forced the air from his lungs. “OK... let’s get this done.”

Lady Triplet winced and rubbed her chest as she cautiously made her way back to her easy chair. She put a small white pill under her tongue and breathed through the pain. This attack was stronger and was lasting longer than before. She was just about to call for help when it started easing off. She wiped the cold sweat from her mouth and brow and put her handkerchief back in her pocket. As soon as she could, she made her way to the lift and went to bed.

As soon as Richard and John had loaded all the boxes onto the helicopter, John prepared to lift off. Richard got in his car, started his engine and popped his cell phone in the car cradle. Due to the misting rain, his wipers came on automatically. He

turned on his headlights, put some music on and turned the car around. Speeding out of the drive, he turned right onto the A686 and headed south, back toward Allendale.

About fifty yards from the sawmill turnoff, a deer crossed the road.

Coming from the opposite direction, traveling at a high speed was the car with the pumped-up and oversexed teenagers. The driver swerved into the other lane.

Richard took the bend, too fast and had to make a split-second decision.

“Oh fuck!” the driver of the other car swore.

Confused, blinded by the glare of their headlights, the deer stood there.

Richard yanked hard to the left and managed to miss the car, but his left wheel went too far over the edge of the verge.

The other car skidded sideways and steered onto the other verge.

The right front of Richard’s car glanced off a small tree. Upon impact, the driver’s airbag popped out. Richard slammed on his brakes, but the car was already sliding down the bank. His head hit the driver’s window. His vision blurred, and he let go of the steering wheel.

The other driver grabbed for his cell phone and jumped out of the car. The man in the back stepped out, zipped his jeans and staggered to the other side of the road. “Get back in the fucking car!” he yelled to Stacey and the women, who had crawled out behind him.

“Watch for a car,” the driver said to the other man. “I’ll go down there and see if they’re alive.”

Gary, Sam, and Donna were sitting at the dining table in hers and Richard’s quarters, playing a game of Monopoly. Gary took his turn and landed on Park Place. Without checking the board, Donna reached for the dice and took her turn. Owning that entire side of the board, up to now, Donna had been quick to ask for her rent. She slowly reached for her playing piece; the iron.

Picking it up, she paused, staring at her hands as if she didn't know what to do with it.

Gary frowned. "D... are you OK?"

"No," she whispered.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"I don't know Sam, but something doesn't feel right."

"With you?"

"No... not me, but something is wrong. I think it's...."

The door panel chirped; Donna's eyes turned to two black marbles. She swallowed the lump in her throat. "VICi, who is at the door?" she asked with a shaky voice.

VICi; John Sherriff.

Donna swallowed the bile at the back of her throat, fighting the nausea in her roiling stomach. Her heart started pounding. Adrenaline rushed through her veins. Slowly, she rose to her feet and headed for the lounge; Gary and Sam followed. "VICi, unlock door panel," she said as she propped her back against the sofa and waited.

The doors slid open. Standing on the other side was John; both hands full. He stepped inside the apartment; the door slid shut. "Ricky decided to move your stuff, tonight."

Donna reached for her guitar and keyboard. Sam stepped forward. "I'll take those. Where do you want them, sweetheart?"

She pointed. "Over there. Next to the wall, in the corner."

"The boxes are on the chopper," John said to Sam and Gary. "I could use your help."

Sam glanced at Gary and nodded. "Yeah, sure."

Donna caught Gary's arm. "Wait!" she snapped. "John, where's Richard?"

"He's coming in his car." John checked his watch. "He should be here in about twenty minutes, but knowing Ricky, he'll be here in fifteen."

Gary and Sam followed John to the door. "I'll go make some coffee and put the game away," Donna mumbled and ambled back into the kitchen.

By the time Donna had cleared the game away and put the dishes in the dishwasher, the men had arrived with some of the boxes. “Where do you want these, D?” Gary called out.

“It doesn’t matter. Just leave me a path!” Donna answered back from the kitchen. She finished wiping off the table and counters, put the crisps and dips away and pressed the button on the kettle. She then sat in the lounge, on the sofa and reached for her Kindle.

The men had brought two more loads of boxes and gone back for the rest.

Checking her watch, Donna noted fifteen minutes had passed. Unless her instincts were wrong, Richard would be there any minute. Donna tried concentrating on her book, but she couldn’t shake her dark foreboding feeling. She glanced at her cell phone, lying on the coffee table and thought about calling him. “No,” she shook her head with a sigh. “John said it was foggy. It might distract him. Richard, please be safe.”

Bonnet first, at a forty-five degree angle, Richard’s car came to rest, in the bed of the stream, at the bottom of the ravine. Steam boiled from the exhaust pipe. A partial beam could be seen from the other headlight, buried in the mud.

Using the flashlight application on his cell phone, the other driver slipped and skidded down to Richard’s car. Peering through the tinted glass, he could see Richard sluggishly moving around. He’d been left dazed and dangling by his lap belt. The driver banged on the window a couple of times. Richard glanced at him out of the corner of his eye and nodded back off.

The driver crawled and clawed his way back up the bank. “Are they alive?” his friend asked.

“Yeah! Let’s get out of here before he calls somebody.”

Another ten minutes passed. Donna's uneasiness was getting worse. The door panel chirped, causing her to toss her Kindle in the air. She grabbed it before it hit the top of the coffee table. "VICi, unlock door panel!" she snapped and grabbed her cell phone as she rose to her feet.

John entered the lounge and set his box on top of another one. Gary and Sam followed suit. "Any news from Ricky?" John asked.

Donna's eyes glossed. She slowly shook her head. "No. I've been tempted to call, but I was afraid it would distract him."

John checked his watch. "VICi, locate Richard Triplet. Is he in his car?"

VICi; Richard Triplet is in his car. His location is latitude fifty-four degrees, fifty-seven minutes, three point five one seconds, North. Longitude is two degrees, fifteen minutes, fifty-six point two nine seconds West.

Gary jerked his head toward John. "He's off the road in the stream!"

"VICi, connect to Richard Triplet's cell phone. Sam grab a medkit and gurney and meet me at the chopper. Gary, go with him." Donna headed for the door. Sam grabbed her arm. "Stay here."

"Fuck off, Sam!" Donna snapped. "Get your hand off me! I'm going!"

"Let her come!" John ordered.

Donna and John got to the hangar first. Donna strapped in the co-pilot seat. John glanced at her and smiled. Warming the engine, he quickly went through the checklist. "VICi, open hangar doors."

"Where are they?" Donna growled.

Sam and Gary wheeled the gurney toward the chopper and jumped in.

Donna glared at Sam. "What did you do? Get lost!" She popped her Bluetooth ear bud in and tapped it. "Richard Triplet," she said and waited. She blinked to clear her vision. "Come on Richard! Please - pick up!"

As soon as the chopper cleared the hangar doors, John pushed forward on the stick. He looked at Donna; she shook her head. "Nothing," she choked.

"Call Sir Richard," John said.

Donna tapped her ear bud, again and waited. Several rings later, Sir Richard picked up. "Dad, it's Donna. We're on our way! Richard has had an accident. Gary said he's not far from the sawmill, in the ravine. I've tried reaching him on his cell phone, but all I get is voicemail. John says we'll be there in about three or four minutes."

"Hurry! I'll wait for you in the Escalade," Sir Richard said and ended the call. He jumped in his clothes and ran to the lift. He hurried to Jack and Vera's room and started knocking on the door.

Jack slipped on his robe and opened the door. "Sir?"

"I have to go out. Ricky's been in a car accident, near the sawmill. Tell Mum I'll let her know something, later!"

"Yes, Sir Richard," Jack mumbled and closed the door.

"What is it?" Vera asked.

"Master Richard has been in a car accident. Sir Richard said he would let us know something later."

Chapter 85

John skid the Escalade to a stop and jumped out. Sir Richard got out and walked to the back of the car. Gary and Sam took out the gurney. Donna followed them to the edge of the verge. “Sir Richard, you stay here with Donna,” Sam said. “We’ll get him out.”

Sir Richard pulled Donna into his arms and held her. She looked up at him and rested her head against his shoulder.

John opened the door and pushed it back until it snapped in place. “Richard! It’s Sam! Can you hear me? Come on Mate, say something. Come on Richard, answer me. You’ve got a very concerned fiancée waiting on the verge!”

“Sam...?” Richard groaned and slightly turned his head. “Where’s Donna?”

“She’s up on the verge with your dad.”

“Tell her not to try and come down here.”

“I won’t let her. Where are you hurt?”

“My head and my right shoulder.”

“Does it hurt when you move your neck?”

“A little. It feels stiff.”

“You said your shoulder hurts. Can you move that arm?”

“Not without considerable pain,” Richard groaned.

Sam opened the back door and took the passenger headrest off. Carefully, he crawled over the front seat. “I need to check your shoulder. I’ll be as gentle as possible, but it still might be a little painful. Just try and relax.” Sam examined Richard’s shoulder and head. “You’re going to have a headache from that. Gary grab me a sling kit. I want to brace his arm before we try to move him.”

Gary hurried up the bank. “He’s talking to us, D,” he smiled. “He bumped his head on the side window, and his shoulder is hurt, but he’s OK.”

Donna wiped her eyes on the back of her hand and let out a long sigh of relief. “Can I...”

“...No! Richard knows you’re here, but he said *not* to let you come down that bank. He’s afraid you’ll slip and hurt yourself. Just stay here with Sir Richard. We’ll have him out, as soon as Sam puts the sling on him.”

Sam put the sling on Richard’s arm and fastened it and the pillow around his torso. “John, I’m going to push him up, you and Gary ease him out. Be careful and try not to move his shoulder any more than necessary. Ready?”

“We’re ready,” John said.

“OK, Mate. It’s time to get you out. Just relax and let us do the work.”

Richard softly chuckled. “You’ll get no arguments out of me.”

Once Richard was out of the car, Gary and John helped him up the bank. Donna’s eyes filled with tears as she touched his face. “I was so worried about you.”

“I’m OK, pet.”

“Richard, sit on the tailgate, so I can reduce your shoulder. Sam, give him an injection for the pain.”

One corner of Sam’s mouth turned up. “That’s what I was about to do, Miss Smarty Pants. Are you sure you know how to do this?”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “Sam, unlike you, I may not have my own practice, but I went through medical school and two years of residency. I have performed closed reductions and re-set bones. Are you suggesting I don’t know how to do this?”

“I might ask you the same thing.”

“There’s an easy way to solve this problem,” John chuckled. “Why don’t you just ask the patient who he’d prefer?”

Richard gave Sam a wincing grin. “Do I even have to *answer* that question?”

“Besides,” Sir Richard interjected. “If he chose you Sam, Ricky would never hear the end of it.”

Richard groaned. Donna sighed in exasperation. “Sam, please, he’s in pain. Give him the injection!”

Sam injected lidocaine into the shoulder joint, and they chatted while they waited for the medication to numb the affected area.

“Ricky, what happened?”

“Honestly, Dad, it happened so fast, I’m not sure. I came around the bend. I was blinded by a set of headlights. I didn’t have time to think. It was either hit the other guy head on or....”

Sir Richard tightened his jaw. “...Another car ran you off the road?”

“Yeah, basically. It was either the verge or a head on collision. I didn’t count on my wheel slipping. The anchors had no effect. The right front of the car glanced off a small tree, the airbag popped out, and I hit my head on the window. That was it. The next thing I knew, there was a bright light shining in my eyes, and I guess I blacked out again.”

“That would explain the other skid marks and tyre tracks,” John said. “The light you saw was probably the other driver checking to see that you were still alive.”

Donna frowned. “So he ran you off the road, and then just drove off, without even calling anybody? It’s against the law in the States to drive away from the scene of an accident. Isn’t it the same here?”

“Yes, petal. It is, but that doesn’t mean everyone abides by the law.”

“The bastard! What if he’d been bleeding, or dying?”

“Let’s put it this way...” Sir Richard said, “...if I ever find out who it was, they’ll get theirs.”

“How does your shoulder feel? Is it getting numb?”

“Yes, but it still aches.”

“Then, let’s get this done, so I can get you home,” Donna said. “Sam, I need you to get behind him and support his body.”

Sam crawled over the seat, knelt and propped his front against Richard's back. "Ready when you are, sweetheart."

"OK. Richard, I need you to relax as much as possible and try not to move. The lidocaine should help with the pain, but it will still be uncomfortable. I'm going to use what we call the Kocher method. I want you to straighten your shoulders."

"How's that?"

"Yes, like that. OK, deep breath and we'll begin."

Within a couple of minutes, Richard's shoulder was back in place. She kissed him. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

"No, and the best part was the treat for being good," he said and kissed her again.

Sam sighed. "Could you move to the side a little, so I don't have to crawl back over the seat?"

Richard slid to the side. Sam sat down on the tailgate, next to him.

"OK, let's get his car out," Sir Richard said. "John, hook the winch to the tow bar. Sam, you, or Gary steer it out."

Sam stood. "I'll get it."

Lady Triplet woke with a terrible chest pain. She reached for her nitroglycerine pills, concealed in her bedside table and put one under her tongue. Replacing the lid, she put the little brown bottle back in the bedside table and closed the drawer. The pain got worse. Clutching her chest, she groaned and sat on the side of the bed, waiting. Each second that passed seemed as though it was an eternity. The pain wasn't letting up. She gasped for each breath and grabbed for the phone. "*Vera – get Richard - help me. I can't... breathe....*"

Vera heard a loud thud, and then nothing. "Oh God! Jack. I think she's fallen. Hurry to the lift. I'll ring Sir Richard!" Vera searched through an address book for Sir Richard's cell phone number.

Richard got into the passenger seat of his car. Donna got behind the wheel. She adjusted the seat, side and rear view mirrors so she could see. “Donna, are you sure you can...”

Donna tightened her jaw. “...Sam, I’ll have you know I’ve been driving a car since I was fifteen years old!” she growled. “I was driving before I left the States. I haven’t forgotten how.”

Sam grinned and looked across at Richard. “Are you sure you trust her driving?”

Richard studied her eyes and smiled. “More than I trust yours.”

Sir Richard leaned down. “Be careful, petal. You’ve only got one set of headlights, so take your time.”

Richard gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll be fine, Dad.”

“Ready?”

Richard nodded. “See you when we get there.”

Donna eased on the gas and drove off.

Sir Richard’s cell phone rang. He ignored it, watching Donna’s tail lights until they were out of sight. He unlocked it and glanced at the name. “Hello Vera. Have you told Mum about Ricky’s accident?”

“Sir Richard, get here quick. It’s your Mum. She’s passed out and fallen.”

“Sam, get in the car! John turn us around and get back to the castle. Something is wrong with Mum. That was Vera.”

Sam checked Lady Triplet’s pulse and then listened to her heart. He looked up at Sir Richard. “Gary, get the gurney. We need to get her to the complex, Sir Richard. She’s in arrest.”

“I’ll go warm up the chopper!” John said.

Sam gave Lady Triplet an emergency injection to regulate her heart rate until they could get her to the complex. Gary and Sam jumped in the chopper with Lady Triplet. Sir Richard jumped in the co-pilot’s seat, and they lifted off. Sir Richard turned. “What’s wrong with her Sam?”

“Her heart is beating too slowly, Sir Richard. Has she been diagnosed with an irregular heart rate?”

“Not that I’m aware of. As far as I know, she’s as strong as an ox, but, until here lately, my Mum and I haven’t seen a lot of each other. What could have caused this?”

“Sir Richard, your Mum is ninety years old. If she hasn’t already been treated for this, there are a number of things that could have brought it on. Donna and I will check her out.”

“That reminds me. I’d better let Ricky know something.” He unlocked his cell phone.

“Press that middle button on the right hand part of the steering wheel. Hello Dad.”

“Ricky, if I’m on speaker, take me off.”

“Pull onto the verge a second.”

Donna slowed and pulled over. Richard put his Bluetooth ear bud in. “Press that button again. Dad are you there?”

“Yes, Ricky, I’m here.”

“Hang on a second. OK, pet, you can pull back onto the road. What’s up, Dad?”

“Son, I know you can’t drive, and I didn’t want to scare Donna, but we’re almost back to the complex with Grandma.”

“Right...”

“Not long after you and Donna left, Vera called me. Grandma collapsed. Sam said her heart was beating too slowly. He gave her an injection. I thought you might want to know.”

Richard’s eyes widened. He swallowed hard and softly cleared his throat. “OK, Dad. We’ll be there in about ten minutes.” Richard ended the call. “Pet... don’t panic. Something has happened to Grandma. They’re on their way back to the complex.”

Donna put her foot down and the car started accelerating. She kept her eyes forward, concentrating on the road. “What did Sam say was wrong with her?”

“He said her heart was beating too slowly.”

“Sam isn’t your grandmother’s doctor?”

“Are you kidding? Until lately, her and Dad hadn’t spoken for years.”

“They seemed to be getting along well enough when we watched Mama’s video.”

Richard chuckled. “They tolerate each other, Donna, but they’re a long way from close. I’m closer to Grandma than Dad is.”

Donna arched an eyebrow. “I see. So you... don’t do everything your grandmother tells you to?”

“Hell no!” Richard scoffed. “I try to appease her. I may tell her I’m going to do something, but I don’t always do it. It depends on what she asks me. Why?”

“Oh – no reason. I was just curious. I guess we’ll have to postpone the wedding.”

“Why?”

“Your shoulder. Richard, you’ll be out of commission for at least two weeks – possibly four – depending on how many ligaments you’ve torn.”

“I thought you wanted to get married as soon as possible.”

“I do, but I couldn’t ask you to do that. How is your shoulder, by the way?”

“Sam’s injection is making it bearable. We can still get married, Donna. You may have to help me a little with your ring, but I don’t want to postpone it. I’ll get you or Sam to give me some pain medication, and I’ll be fine.”

Donna softly smiled and snorted. “You know, you’re almost as stubborn as me.”

“Start slowing down. We’re getting ready to turn down the road to the farm. Just take your time. I’ll guide you through it.”

Sam and Gary put Lady Triplet on a biobed. “VICi, full body scan. Focus on cardiovascular system. Enlarge sinus node. Monitor vitals and display to wallscreen.” Sam drew some blood. Sir Richard and John stood out of the way, watching. “Gary, can you do a blood gas?”

“No, but I can,” Donna said as she and Richard entered the room.

“I’ll get VICi to scan your shoulder in a bit, Richard,” Sam said.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. Take care of Grandma, first.”

Sam handed Donna the vial of blood. She turned to Richard and kissed him. “You stay here and behave yourself.”

Richard grinned. “Yes Ma’am!”

Donna rolled her eyes. “Sweetheart,” Sam interjected. “I need that as soon as possible.”

“OK,” she said and left.

“While we’re waiting on that, let’s get you on another biobed and find out how much damage you’ve done to your shoulder,” Sam said. “How does it feel? Do you need more pain medication?”

Richard softly chuckled. “I wouldn’t say no, but, I’m OK, for now.”

Sam studied the wallscreen display. “Well, here’s the good news. Although you dislocated your shoulder, you haven’t torn any ligaments. I wouldn’t suggest you using it for at least two weeks, maybe longer. So... are you postponing the big day?”

“You wish. No, I’ll have you give me another injection.”

“What about your grandmother? Surely, you’re going to wait until she’s able to attend?”

Richard frowned. “Why? I’m not marrying my grandmother. The only way I’ll call off this wedding is for Donna to ask me to. If the worse come to the worst, Grandma can watch on the wallscreen.”

Sam arched an eyebrow. “If that’s the case, why bother getting married at the castle? Why not do it here, in the chapel?”

“Again,” Richard responded. “That’s up to Donna. As far as I’m concerned, I just as soon marry her in the cafeteria. I don’t need my grandmother’s chapel or a chapel at all, for that fact. I’m hoping Donna, and I will be together forever. Since this is

her wedding day and we'll only do this once, I want her to be happy."

"Even when you know she doesn't love you?"

"I love her. That's enough for me."

Sam frowned. "Wait until it's time to carry her across the threshold."

Richard smiled condescendingly and crawled off the biobed. "Sam, I have two arms. I'm sure we'll figure it out. Is Grandma going to need a pacemaker?"

"Possibly. I'll know more when I see the results of her blood gases. I'm hoping with proper exercise and diet, we'll be able to regulate her arrhythmia with drugs. Assuming she follows my instructions."

"Oh, believe me..." Sir Richard interjected. "She'll follow your instructions!"

Sam's cell phone rang. "Excuse me a second," he said and went into his office. "What's up sweetheart?"

"Can you come to the lab, for a second? There's something I'd like to discuss with you before I enter the test results into VICi's database."

Sam smiled. "On my way," he responded and ended the call.

"What's up, sweetheart?" Sam asked as he entered the medical lab.

"Are we treating Lady Triplet, now?"

"Unless she wakes up and disagrees, Sir Richard wants us to treat her. Why? What have you found out?"

"What do you know about vepramil?"

"Not a lot. I know it's been used to treat hypertension and migraines, and it's also an unconventional treatment for arthritis. I'm afraid that's about all I know. Why?"

"Take a look at this. VICi, display Lady Annabelle Triplet's blood gases and chromatograph results."

Sam frowned. "Her PCO2 is almost 60mmHg. That would account for her fainting and bradycardia."

“I was hoping we’d be able to avoid a pacemaker, but don’t see how. Lady Triplet is not a compatible match for the EHG. At least not with our current vector. With it being Richard’s grandmother that was one of the first things I checked. Now, look at her chromatograph.”

“No wonder she passed out. She’s lucky to be alive. Another ten minutes and she would have been dead.”

“I know. Has she regained consciousness?”

“She hadn’t when I left.”

“Do you know who her doctor was or what they’d been treating her for?”

“No, sweetheart. I know very little about Lady Triplet.”

Donna frowned and exhaled. “With all the top qualified doctors at the Centre, it just seems strange that Lady Triplet would prefer to be treated by an outsider.”

“Maybe she doesn’t trust her own son.”

“Sir Richard said he and his mother fell out over a personal matter, but he never said what.”

“Triplets are experts at keeping secrets. Sir Richard is not much different from his mother, and Richard falls somewhere in between them.”

“Let’s leave Richard out of this and stick to the subject. As far as Lady Triplet is concerned, as I see it, we have two choices. Either start running tests, or wait until she wakes up. I think the latter would be our safest option. At her age, I don’t want to cause her unnecessary distress.”

Sam stroked her temple with the back of his fingers. “You’re pretty good at this, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“That acting job you did, when we got Richard out of the car would win an Oscar. You seemed genuinely concerned. Even your tears looked natural.”

Donna jerked away and narrowed her eyes. “I was genuinely concerned, and my tears were real, Sam. I told you, I do care for Richard. And, another thing, I don’t think we

should be discussing this in here, nor do I think it's a good idea for you to openly express your affection for me."

Sam grinned. "Sweetheart, the medical lab is my responsibility, too. There are three places where we are basically safe. Here, the infirmary, and my quarters."

"Unless Richard decides otherwise. Anyway, I have some good news."

"You've decided to call off the wedding?"

Donna chuckled and shook her head. "Will you be serious? My HIV1 sample will be here on Monday. I intend to start testing on Wednesday."

Sam whistled. "Wow! Talk about a short honeymoon."

Donna's smile faded. "I may need therapy before this is over."

Sam pulled her into his arms and hugged her. "Just remember... I'm here. If you need someone to keep you sane, I'll gladly volunteer."

"You're sweet."

"That's the first time a woman has ever used that word to describe me – snake, yes – but never sweet."

She rested her head against his shoulder. "Maybe they don't see what I see." She looked up at him. "Are we in agreement about Lady Triplet, then? We consider fitting her with a pacemaker?"

"If we can't get her bradycardia under control, I don't see any other option."

After a few seconds more, Donna sighed and pulled away. "Time to put my Wonder Woman mask on, again."

Chapter 86

When Sam and Donna got back to the infirmary, Lady Triplet was still out. Sam, Donna, Sir Richard and Richard met in Sam's office. "What's the news? What's wrong with Mum?"

"Bottom line, she took an overdose of vepramil," Sam responded. "That slowed her heart rate, and almost bottomed-out her blood pressure. That's probably why she passed out. Another five minutes and your mother would have been gone, Sir Richard."

"Can we use the EHG?"

"No," Donna spoke up. "I've already tested for that possibility. If we gave her the EHG, there's a 95 percent chance it would kill her."

Sir Richard inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. "What can we do?"

"We've got her on IV fluids, and medication to help bring her blood pressure up. That's about all we can do until the vepramil works its way out of her system."

"What exactly is vepramil?"

Sam glanced at Donna. "It's not a drug I would be quick to prescribe, Sir Richard. Without knowing your mother's medical history, I couldn't tell you exactly why her doctor had put her on it. Do you know who her doctor is?"

Sir Richard frowned. "No, Sam. Ricky, do you?"

Richard shook his head. "Sorry. Grandma doesn't talk about her health."

Donna groaned. "Who would know, Sir Richard?"

"Vera or Jack might," Richard responded. "But... on the other hand, if she'd told them not to tell..."

Donna yawned. "I just don't understand why your mother is, so secretive about her medical condition, especially to her family."

"What do you suggest?"

“Donna and I have talked, and we think a pacemaker is her best option,” Sam responded.

“But that didn’t work for Alan.”

“No, but your mother’s condition has been brought on by age. Alan’s heart was weakened as a child,” Donna added.

Sam sighed. “There’s no reason why a pacemaker wouldn’t work for your mother.”

“The only other thing we could do is put her on a different medication and see how she responds. Keep in mind, Lady Triplet is already taking one of the drugs used to treat her condition, and it didn’t agree with her.”

“How long will it be, before you can fit her with a pacemaker?”

“I don’t want to do anything until the vepramil is out of her system.”

“How long will that take?”

“I’ll put her on a slow atropine drip, to counter the vepramil. It should start to wear off anywhere from twelve to sixteen hours, but she still needs to be monitored for the next seventy-two hours. By then, if everything goes well, we should be able to fit her with a pacemaker.”

“So, Mum is going to be bedridden for the next three days?”

“I’m afraid so. Unfortunately, that means she won’t be able to attend Richard and Donna’s wedding – assuming they go ahead with it as planned.” Sam glanced at Donna, when she yawned, again. “I’ll sleep in one of the extra beds and keep an eye on her tonight. Sheila and Joyce can take over tomorrow, when they get here.”

Donna frowned. “Who’s Sheila?”

Richard grinned slightly and cleared his throat. “Dr. Sheila McGowan PhD. She’s a neurologist. She’s – ah – she’s one of my formers, and Timothy McGowan’s little sister.”

Sam chuckled. “A very young and pretty, neurologist, I might add.”

“I don’t remember seeing her at the Centre.”

“That’s because she’s new, petal. At least to Triplet International.”

“Oh – I see,” Donna sighed and stood. “OK. Well – anyway. You’ll let me know if something goes wrong, right?”

Sam smiled. “Of course, sweetheart.”

Richard stood. “See you in the morning, Dad. I assume you’re staying here tonight?”

“Yes. I’ll be in my quarters.”

“Goodnight, Sam,” Richard said and led Donna out into the corridor.

“Call me if there’s any change,” Sir Richard said and left. “Go on to our quarters. There’s something I need to do.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

“No. Go on and get ready for bed. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Don’t hurt your arm,” she warned.

Richard softly chuckled and kissed her forehead. “I won’t.”

“You’d better not. If you do, I’ll spank your handsome ass.” Donna grinned and walked away.

Richard waited until Donna was inside their quarters. He rang Jeff Wein’s door panel. Wein showed up in his robe and slippers. “Had you gone to bed?”

“No, but I was on my way,” Wein responded. “I suppose you want your gifts?”

“Yes. I’d like to give them to her tonight.”

“Come in. I’ll get them for you. I heard about your accident. How bad is your shoulder?”

“It’s not too bad – sore as hell though. According to Sam, I just stretched things. I’ll be fine, in a couple of weeks. You’re coming to the castle tomorrow to set up your equipment – right?”

“Yes. Everything is already charged, packed and ready to go.”

“You’re sure this is going to work?”

Wein grinned. “Why wouldn’t it work?”

Richard chuckled. "It's just that most of your out-of-the-ordinary experiments seem to backfire on you – especially your food projects."

"I make one tiny mistake, and you're never going to let me live it down, are you?"

"Jeff, your first attempt at a chicken nugget was more like unflavoured gum. Your second attempt was like chewing on a rubber."

Wein handed Richard a small box. "Synthesising condensed food is not easy, Richard." He motioned to the box. "Look inside and see if that's what you wanted."

Richard eased his arm out of the sling, took off the lid and smiled. "Just perfect, Jeff. Thanks. We need to leave early tomorrow morning. Donna wants to make sure the chapel is decorated to her specifications."

"What time?"

"Right after breakfast – no later than nine."

"I'll be ready."

"See you then," Richard said and stepped back out into the corridor.

Donna took a quick shower, put on her bed clothes and went back into the bedroom. Richard was sitting on the side of the bed, watching her as she approached him. "Do you want to take a shower or a bath?" she asked as she started removing his sling.

Richard grinned and played with a piece of her hair. "Are you offering to take one with me?"

Donna arched an eyebrow and softly smiled. "No, but I'll help you."

Richard caught her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist. "Under the circumstances, what do you suggest?"

She laid the sling on the foot of the bed. "The bath would be more soothing, but it's really late. I don't mind staying up with you if you want to take one."

"I'll just take a quick shower."

"Do you need me to help?"

Richard smiled. "No, pet. I can manage, but I wouldn't turn you down."

"Then I guess I'll see you in the morning," she said, coming to her feet.

Richard frowned and took her hand. "You're not sleeping with me?"

"I'm afraid I'll hurt your shoulder, Richard."

Richard stood, snaked his free arm around her waist and pulled her close. "My arm and I will be just fine. I'd rather risk a little pain than have you wake up with scary nightmares." He tilted her chin up and kissed her. "I *will* trade sides of the bed with you, though." Richard softly kissed her, again and grabbed his robe. "Promise you'll stay?"

"How could I resist your blue eyes," she said and gingerly kissed his forehead. "How's your head?"

"A little achy."

"Why don't you take one of the pain pills Sam gave you?"

"If it's still hurting when I get out of the shower, I will. The hot water should do it good. I'll see you in a few minutes."

Donna yawned. "I'll try to stay awake."

"Please do. I'll try to hurry," he said and went for his shower.

Sam lay on his back on one of the extra beds, close to Lady Triplet's room. He took out his cell phone and called up an image of Donna sitting on the back of Richard's Appaloosas. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. His phone rang and gave him a start. He read the name, frowned and groaned. "What are you doing up so late?"

"Well, hello to you, too!"

"What do you want, Joyce?"

"I haven't seen you in a couple of days. How are you?"

"I'm fine," he responded tersely. "Have you got everything packed for tomorrow? I have to leave, and I'll need you to keep an eye on a patient while I'm gone."

“Sam, what happened between us? Before Donna came along, we used to actually talk to each other. What went wrong, I thought we were friends?”

Sam tightened his jaw. “Leave Donna out of this!” he snapped.

“How are things between you and Donna?”

“We’re fine, Joyce! Was there a reason you called?”

“Sam, why are you being so antagonistic?”

“Oh – I don’t know. Maybe because you tried to frame me. Who gave you the fucking perfume, Joyce?”

“What – the Euphoria?”

“Don’t play coy, with me Joyce.”

“Richard gave it to me. I already told you that.”

“It’s not the same as the one he bought for Donna. I had it analysed. The perfume you were wearing the other night, when you and Jasmine just happened to drop by, was chemically different from the one on market. Did you three plan that? Was that a way to get back at me because I stopped fucking you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Sam. The perfume I wore was the same one Richard had given me.”

“Don’t fucking lie to me Joyce. The perfume you were wearing was different from Ruth’s, and Jasmine’s. I was able to resist Ruth’s. I knew she was wearing it. That’s why I kept my distance. As long as I did that it was bearable. When you got next to me...” he growled. “Let’s just not go there. Whoever gave you that perfume was trying to entrap me, and it worked. Did they make you take photographs, too?”

“Sam, can we talk about this tomorrow? I don’t want to do it over the phone.”

“Why? So you can lie to me some more? Let me warn you of this, and I’m only going to do it one time. If I even suspect that you brought any of that shit in the complex, you’re gone. No second chances - do you understand me?” Sam ended the call.

Chapter 87

Richard came out of the toilet wearing his white terrycloth bathrobe. Donna was sitting up in bed, reading her Kindle. She looked up. "Has anyone ever told you that you look incredibly sexy with wet hair?"

He grinned. "Do you really want me to answer that?"

Donna smiled. "Probably not."

"I'm glad you're sitting up. I need you to close your eyes and keep them closed until I tell you to open them."

"OK, but I might go to sleep."

"Hold out your hand."

Richard placed the small box in her hand. "OK. You can open your eyes, now."

Donna looked down at the box. She furrowed her brow. "What is this? You keep buying me all these things, and it's nowhere near my birthday."

"Just think of it as making up for all those years we were apart."

Donna lifted the lid off the box. Her mouth gaped. Her eyes glosed. "Oh, Richard! Where did you find this?"

Richard smiled and softly cleared his throat. "The locket I bought at a jewellery shop. The laser etching on the front was done by our electronic specialist, here in the complex. You remember him, Jeff Wein?"

"Yeah, I remember him. This is so beautiful. It looks just like...."

"...Raging Storm's logo?"

"Yes," she choked.

"Open the locket and see what's inside."

Tears filled Donna's eyes. She swallowed hard. "It's Rich, and Beth, but how did you get a picture of her?"

Richard grinned. "There's another compartment, in the back."

Donna looked up at Richard. "Is this what I think it is?"

"It's your microSD card from your old cell phone. I had it checked so you could get the files off it."

Donna frowned. "Oh God, Richard. I don't think I'm ready for that. This will have all my pictures of..."

Richard laid his hand on hers. "I know, pet. Of you and Jared, and his family. You can safely keep them in your locket until you're ready to look at them. I know this is painful for you, but I also know how much they meant to you. I know you loved Jared. I know you still do. All I want is for you to be happy, Donna."

Donna wiped her tears away. "I can't tell you, how much this means to me. Thank you," she said and tenderly kissed him. "Put it on for me, please." She turned, holding her hair out of the way.

"There," he whispered and kissed the side of her neck.

Donna turned. The links in the tiny gold chain sparkled like stars, around her neck. The wolf baying at the moon on the front of the locket glittered with each breath she took. "Just as I suspected. It looks beautiful on you. I had Jeff put a special seal in it, as well. It's waterproof, so you don't have to take it off, when you get in the shower or bath, unless you want to."

"You're so sweet, but you don't have to buy me all these gifts."

He turned the bed covers back. "I get them for you because I love you. Now, into bed, little mother-to-be." Richard crawled in beside her. With caution, Donna rested her head on his shoulder. Richard kissed her forehead. "Goodnight, pet," he said and turned out the bedside lamp.

Everyone in the wedding party had breakfast in the conference hall at the complex. As soon as Sam had confirmation that Joyce, and the rest of his senior medical team were on their way, he, along with the rest of the wedding party boarded a chopper and flew out to the castle to prepare, for the celebration. At least that's what it was to everyone but Gary, Donna, and Sam.

The first thing Sam noticed about Donna was her new necklace. It concerned him that she'd been prompt to return his, but now proudly wore this one. Unless Jared had sent it to her, Richard was the only one who could come up with its customised design. If Jared had sent Donna the necklace, with the 'Baying Wolf' logo on it that meant Donna was lying to him *and* Richard. Sam intended to ask her about it, when they had some time alone. *If...* they got that chance.

After hanging up on her last night, Joyce wasn't surprised to find Sam gone, when she entered the infirmary. The only thing she found was a sheet of instructions and a duty roster, for Dr. Sheila McGowan, McGowan's younger sister. Sam meant to have as little contact with Joyce as was necessary. Through the years, she and Sam had gone through rough spots, but it seemed since he became involved with Donna, Joyce and Sam were at constant odds with each other. Before now, Sam had never stayed cross with Joyce this long. If she didn't tell him something soon, they would be lucky if they remained friends, if anything. But that had been one of the rules of this game; tell no one.

Sam's cold shoulder was pushing Joyce to who she considered to be a safe haven – Ian Allen. But, how much did she know about him? Apart from the fact he was a dirty blonde with crystal blue eyes that could melt a woman's heart with a smile. He'd been part of the senior medical team since he came to the UK; shortly after she and Sam had. There was something oddly familiar about him, but Joyce couldn't figure out what it was.

Ian knew next to nothing about his biological parents; only that they had both been British. How he came to be in Australia was a mystery to him. Ian said he'd tried to find his parents, but without something to go on, he hadn't been successful. Even testing his DNA had drawn a blank. Finally, Ian had given up the search and decided it really didn't matter, now.

The few dates Joyce had with Ian, hadn't been bad, but it seemed as if what he wanted from her was the same thing Sam wanted – nothing. He pleased her in bed, but he constantly pumped her for information – or so it seemed. Like Sam and Richard, Ian had that bad-boy mysterious air about him. At least he was a friend she could talk to and pass the time with. She certainly couldn't do that with Sam, these days.

By the time Sir Richard's chopper landed at Langston Castle, preparations were well underway. Alice and Alan were busy in the kitchen, helping Vera and Jack, and the rest of Lady Triplet's house staff.

After lunch, Gary, Sir Richard, Richard, and John were locked away, in the study. Missy was in one of the bedrooms being fitted for her gown. Donna had taken advantage of everyone's absence to reflect on the current events. She was stood with her back leaned against the doorway to the chapel, watching as the decorators transformed the drab stone room, into a floral paradise.

Tomorrow was her wedding day. She should be happy, but Donna was numb. For her, it seemed as if she was trapped in a proverbial crystal ball while all around her, time was speeding past. She didn't know how to feel. Without looking, Donna sighed deeply and turned to leave.

"Hi, Pretty Lady," Sam smiled.

Donna's breath caught. "Shit Sam! Where did you come from? Did you take lessons from Jared, when he was here? I thought you were upstairs being fitted for your tuxedo."

"Don't insult me." Sam frowned. "The tailor finished with me. I came to see where you were hiding." He brushed the back of his fingers down her cheek.

"Don't do that!" Donna warned and stepped back. "I'm hiding anywhere I can find," she groaned. "If you don't stop taking chances, I'm going to stop even talking to you. Can't you understand?"

“At least, you don’t have to worry about bumping into the dragon lady.”

“Yeah,” Donna scoffed. “That is one thing.”

“Where is the lucky groom?”

“I would imagine off somewhere making sure tomorrow goes to plan.”

“How are you?”

Donna swallowed hard. “How do you think I am, Sam?”

Sam lifted her locket and rubbed his thumb over the wolf engraving. “That would depend on how much this means to you.”

“The locket and what’s inside means a lot, but I want to run! I want to get out of this castle and run as far away and as fast as I can. I don’t want this – you know that – but I don’t have a choice!”

Sam motioned to her locket. “May I?”

Donna nodded and stepped into Sam’s personal space. “It was very thoughtful of Richard to do this.”

Sam glanced into her eyes and then gingerly opened the locket. “Who are the boy and girl?”

“The little boy is my son, Rich. The little girl is my daughter...” she paused, sighed and shook her head. “Well, I think of her as my daughter. That’s Beth, Jared’s daughter. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Sam frowned. “It’s uncanny how much she looks like you and Jared.”

“That’s because, Sara, and I could have passed for twins.”

One of Sam’s eyebrows shot up. “I see. What’s this?” he asked, opening the last compartment of the locket. Something fell out. “Whoops!” He bent down and picked up the tiny chip.

“It *was* the microSD card from my old cell phone, and it *had* all my pictures and MP3s on it.”

“Richard had it cleaned?”

“Yes, but it’s probably broken, now.”

“No, it isn’t. Give me your cell phone.”

“What are you doing?”

“Proving to you that I didn’t break it. See....”

Donna looked at an image of her, Jared and Sarabeth. Pain slammed her so hard she almost lost her breath. Her knees gave way.

“Whoa! Careful.” Sam steadied her and helped her to a chair. She took a couple deep breaths and swallowed the knot in her throat.

Sam took her cell phone, locked it and wrapped his arms around her. “You haven’t even seen a *picture* of Jared since he left you, have you?”

Donna shook her head and buried her face in his neck. “No, Sam,” she choked.

“Come here.” Sam kissed the top of her head. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

From the corner of her eye, Donna caught movement and jerked away from him. She wiped her eyes.

Vera cleared her throat and stepped into view. “Excuse me, Miss Donna,” she said. “Would you and Dr. Kaliea like a cup of tea, and some shortbread biscuits?”

Donna stood. “None for me, Vera. Sam, I’m sorry, but I have to go.” She disappeared.

“Dr. Kaliea would you like a cup of tea and some shortbread biscuits?”

Sam sighed and sat back in the chair. “I’d rather have a whiskey, Vera.”

“Of course, Sir. I’ll bring it to you,” Vera responded and left.

Sam unlocked Donna’s cell phone and scanned through her pictures. “Why in the hell would Richard want to remind Donna of Jared? What’s your game, Triplet?”

Chapter 88

Donna sat on the sofa in hers and Richard's castle apartment. She wasn't prepared for the impact, Jared and Sarabeth's picture would have on her. She thought her emotions were in check, but seeing even a digital image of the ones she loved the most felt as if a knife had been stabbed into her heart and twisted. "How am I ever going to get through this?" she mused.

The phone on the end table rang. Donna stared at it for a couple of seconds, before answering it. "Hello..."

"How long do you think I will allow this?" the robotic voice asked.

Donna tightened her jaw. "Who is this?"

"If you do not stand by the choice you've made - starting with Sam - everyone you love will die. The next time he won't be behind bulletproof glass."

"Why are you doing this? Why can't you just leave me alone? What do you want from me?"

"Stay away from Sam. I have plans for him, and they don't include you."

"Leave Sam alone! Who do you think you are? Sam and I are friends. I work with him. He's a member of my genetics team, and he's playing the piano at my wedding."

"See that it stays that way. If you continue to fraternise with Sam, the little girl dies."

"You fucking leave my daughter out of this, you bastard!" she forced through her teeth. "Sarabeth and Jared have *nothing* to do with this."

"Anyone who comes between you and Richard are involved. Stay away from Sam, Donna!"

"Is this Mr. Forrest?"

"I am his enemy. Forrest is a kitten. He has no power but what I allow him. Call off this wedding for any reason and the ones you love are the ones who will pay."

“I have no intention of calling off this wedding, you son of a bitch! I *will* marry Richard, tomorrow, but you will not dictate what I do when this baby is born!” Donna slammed the phone down. “So help me Richard, if I find out you’re behind this I will never forgive you!”

There was a knock on the door. Donna jerked it open. “What are you doing here?”

Sam’s eyes widened. “I came to return your cell phone,” he said with caution.

Donna was fuming. “Where is Richard?”

“When I left the chapel, he was standing in the parlour, talking on his cell phone, why?”

Donna clenched her teeth. “Get in here!” she snarled and stepped to the side.

Sam cautiously stepped inside. “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

Donna slammed the door. “We need to talk!” she forced through her teeth. “Where is Gary? We need his help. I’m sick of this shit!” Donna unlocked her cell phone. “Gary... it’s me. I don’t care how you do it, but figure out how to get Richard out of our hair for a while.”

“That’s not going to be easy, D. What happened?”

“I don’t want to discuss this over the phone. I know you told me our lines are secure, but I’m not taking chances, especially, now.”

Gary groaned. “I don’t know what I’ll do, but I’ll think of something.”

“Thanks, Gary.”

“Yeah,” Gary scoffed and locked his cell phone. He put his empty coffee cup on the serving trolley. He met Richard at the bottom of the stairs. “Where are you off to?”

“Looking for my fiancée. I tried ringing her, but she’s not answering her cell.”

“She said something about going up to the apartment to take a nap.”

Richard's eyes widened. "Is something wrong? Is she all right?"

"She's fine, Richard. Listen, there's something that I needed to talk to you about – best man stuff. Have you gone over the list of things Donna is supposed to have, before the wedding?"

Richard frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You know the old wives tale. Something old, something new - that thing."

"Oh, I've already taken care of that."

"Are you sure?"

Richard pressed his lips together, concentrating. "Let's see. Her dress and the locket I gave her last night takes care of something new. Her garter takes care of something blue. We could probably find one of Grandma's hair combs for the something old and something borrowed."

"Um, Richard. I don't think D would like that. Don't you have something that belonged to your mother that Donna could borrow?"

Richard smiled. "What about the string of pearls my Mum wore when she married my father?"

Gary heaved and inward sigh of relief. "That would be perfect. I'm sure D would be honoured to wear that. Are they here in the castle?"

"Unfortunately, they're locked in my safe, back in my bedroom, at the complex."

"Well, you'd better go get it now because you may not have time in the morning. You know after tonight, you're not supposed to see Donna, until the wedding."

"Sod that shit! Donna has nightmares if she sleeps alone. I'm not putting her through that for the sake of tradition. I'll get John to fly me back to the complex. If Donna asks where I am, tell her."

"Wait! Be sure you're back for the rehearsal. If you're late, Donna would be really pissed."

Richard grinned. “Don’t worry, I’ll be back. I don’t know why I didn’t think about that before we left the complex.”

“You probably had other things on your mind.”

Richard grinned again. “Yeah – Donna,” he said and went to look for John.

Gary waited until Richard was out of sight and stepped into the lift. He knocked on the apartment door. “OK, you’ve got about half an hour – forty-five minutes, at the most.”

Donna closed the door and followed Gary into the lounge. “What is he doing?”

“He’s getting John to fly him back to the complex, so he can get the string of pearls his mother wore when she married Sir Richard for you to have something old and something borrowed.”

Donna laughed. “So, that’s how you got him out of our hair?”

Gary frowned. “Hey – it worked.”

“You’re certain?” Donna asked.

“Yes. Now tell me what’s going on.”

John waited for Richard, in the chopper. After collecting his mother’s pearls, Richard stopped by the infirmary. Joyce was sitting in a chair, in the corner of the room, reading. Richard softly cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck, as he entered the room. He smiled. “Gripping novel?”

Joyce reflected his smile and sighed. “It helps to pass the time, but I wouldn’t describe it as gripping.”

Richard read the title; he recognised the grey tie on the front cover. He arched an eyebrow and softly chuckled. “Not exactly your style, is it?”

“I got bored,” Joyce softly smiled. “Sam ordered me not to move anything. Apart from babysitting your grandmother, he didn’t exactly leave me a lot to do.”

“Probably because Donna organised his office.” He turned toward the infirmary bed. “How’s Grandma?”

“Her vitals are stable, but she hasn’t fully regain consciousness.”

“Where’s Sheila?”

“You mean Dr. McGowan? In Sam’s office, I think. She and I don’t get along well.”

“She likes things her own way. You’ll get used to her. I’d stay and keep you company, but I’ve got a wedding rehearsal to go to.”

Joyce’s smile faded. “Yeah, I heard. Congratulations.”

“Looks like we both get what we wanted.”

“Not exactly....”

“Give Sam some time. When he realises he’s lost Donna, he’ll come round. He always has. Well, I have to dash. See you after the wedding.”

“You’re not taking Donna on honeymoon?”

“Bit too risky for that right now. We’ll take one later on. She hasn’t fully committed to our relationship, but that will change.”

“Richard, are you sure things are going to work out for you and Donna?”

Richard grinned. “They will, after the wedding,” he said and went to Sam’s office. He pushed the door panel and waited.

Sheila looked up from her work. “VICi, unlock door panel.” Richard stepped inside Sam’s office; the doors slid shut. Sheila studied his eyes. “This isn’t going to get awkward, like it did the last time, is it?”

One side of Richard’s mouth turned up. “I wouldn’t have described our last meeting as... awkward, Sheila.”

Sheila’s cheeks showed some colour. “Ok, Richard. Maybe that was a slight exaggeration. What are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be at your grandmother’s castle, getting ready for your wedding, in the morning?”

Richard sighed. “Oh – you know about that. I guess good news travels fast. I just stopped by to get this,” he said, holding up the black velvet box.

“I wouldn’t exactly call it *good* news, but something like this does travel fast, on the Triplet International grapevine.”

“Rita told you,” he made it a statement.

“Yeah,” Sheila chuckled. “What can I do for you?”

“I just came from Grandma’s room. According to Sam, the vepramil should have worn off, by now. Why hasn’t she come round?”

“Richard, she’s ninety-years-old, and she’s weak. It’s going to take her a while longer to bounce back. She’ll get stronger, once she’s fitted with her pacemaker. So who’s the lucky woman? Anyone I know?”

“Donna Rigden, my childhood sweetheart.”

“You mean the American doctor you pined over?”

Richard grinned. “Yeah, that’s the one.”

“I thought she was engaged to that country music heartthrob, from Raging Storm – Jared Thundercloud.”

“How did you...?”

“The interview she did at HMV in Newcastle. What did you do? Take her away from him?”

“You might say that. He presented me with a few obstacles, but I won in the end.”

“Don’t you always? You’re really going to do this? Tie yourself down to one woman? What about all those things you said about not letting your grandmother run your life?”

“She’s not running my life,” Richard frowned. “I guess I realised, for once, Grandma was right. Donna is the right woman for me.”

“Weren’t you even going to tell me?”

“I didn’t think it made any difference.” Richard looked at his watch. “Does your brother know you’ve accepted Dad’s offer?”

“Not yet, but he’ll figure that out, when we bump in to each other. I thought I would see him in the cafeteria.”

“He’s a little busy with security, when John’s not here. He’s second in command, now.”

“Yeah, I know. He sent me an email. Where’s Mildred? I haven’t seen her round, either.”

Richard swallowed the lump in his throat. “She’s dead, Sheila.”

Sheila’s eyes widened. “When? What happened?”

“A few days ago – heart attack.”

“Oh... I’m so sorry, Richard. She was kind of like an auntie to you, wasn’t she? I’m sorry to hear that. I liked her – unlike your grandmother.”

Richard pressed his lips together. “A lot of my ‘friends’ feel that way about Grandma. Anyway, I’ll see you around, Sheila.”

“Yeah,” she scoffed. “See you round. Can’t wait to meet your bride!” she called out.

“You will!” Richard ran to the lift.

“That took a little longer than I’d expected.” John started warming up the engines. “VICi, open hangar doors and raise lift.”

Richard sat in the co-pilot’s seat and buckled up. “I dropped by the infirmary to check on Grandma.”

The chopper lifted into the air and headed for Langston Castle. “How is she?”

“Sheila said Grandma was stable, but she still hasn’t come round. Don’t say anything, but just between us, I sort of feel responsible for what happened.”

“Why is that?”

“Last night, before I left the castle, Grandma and I sort of got into a heated argument.”

“Good for you,” John softly chuckled and glanced at Richard out of the corner of his eye. “Over what?”

Richard sighed. “Donna.”

Gary blew out a long sigh of exasperation; looking from Sam to Donna. “D, are you *sure* marrying Richard is the right thing to do?”

“As far as the baby is concerned, yes. Considering the threats I’m under, I don’t see that I have a lot of options. I’m not prepared to risk Jared’s daughter, or Sam, but I do want you to find out who’s behind this.”

“I think it’s pretty clear,” Sam spoke up.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. The fact that Richard was using his cell phone, about the same time that Donna got another threatening call, does not mean it was him.”

“Who then?” Sam scoffed.

“He’s right, Gary. It has to be Richard. It’s not his grandmother. She’s in the complex. It could have been Forrest, but the likelihood of Lady Triplet giving him her personal number is unbelievable.”

“No!” Gary agreed. “There’s no way Lady Triplet would give her personal number to anyone she considered an enemy. There’s something else that’s bothering me. What kind of plans would Richard have for Sam?”

“I’d like to know that myself.”

Donna glared at Sam. “Well I wouldn’t.” She paused and held up a hand. “Listen,” she whispered. “That’s the chopper. Richard’s back. Sam you have to go!”

“If Richard is responsible, it wouldn’t be a good idea for him to find you here, Sam.” Gary stood. “I’d better go, too. I told him you were upstairs, taking a nap.”

Donna grabbed his hand. “Please – stay. We’ll tell him you came upstairs to check on me and heard me screaming. I’ll tell him I had a nightmare.” She turned to Sam. “You have to go - now - before he gets out of the chopper. Go to the chapel. Tell Richard you’ve been practicing for the rehearsal.”

“Which is not far away, now,” Gary interjected, checking his watch.

“Don’t remind me!” Donna groaned.

“OK. I’ll see you in a few minutes.” Sam kissed her.

Donna quickly ended the kiss. “Just go Sam!”

“I have a better idea. Why don’t we all go down to the chapel, and work on the rehearsal? While I play the piano, Gary can practice leading you down the aisle.”

“Fine – but please, just go. Take the lift. We’ll follow you down the stairs. Come on.”

“D... are you afraid of Richard?” Gary asked as they hurried down the stairs.

“No! I’m not afraid of him. I just don’t want to be alone with him,” she responded as they ran for the chapel.

“Donna... after tomorrow, you’ll be married to him. How are you going to pull this off?”

Donna sighed deeply. “One curtain call at a time.”

Chapter 89

“John, get the bishop. I’ll get Dad. Donna’s probably already in the chapel, waiting for us. I didn’t realise we’d been gone, so long.”

“Right....”

Piano music could be heard as soon as Jack answered the door.

“Afternoon, Master Richard. I believe Miss Donna, is waiting for you, in the chapel.”

“I was right,” Richard smiled. “Tell her I will be there shortly. Where’s Dad?”

“He’s in the parlour,” Jack responded and disappeared.

Richard stopped in the doorway. In Lady Triplet’s absence, Sir Richard was stretched out on the sofa, napping. Richard smiled. “Come on, Old Man. It’s time to rehearse. Everyone is already in the chapel.”

Sir Richard slowly sat up, jugged his chin and arched an eyebrow. “Old man?” he challenged. “I don’t particularly like that title.”

“Not even considering you’re going to be a grandfather?”

Sir Richard stopped in front of the stairs. A soft smile spread across his mouth. “I like that, but not the old man part. Oh, Pam, from the Centre called. Someone named Daneekah called, trying to reach you. She said it was urgent that she see you. Do you know what this is about?”

“Daneekah?” Richard paused in thought; his eyes widened. “Oh hell! I was supposed to ring her back. Shit! That means I can’t make the rehearsal!”

Sir Richard frowned. “What do you mean? You’re the bloody groom, Ricky!”

“I can’t help it Dad. I have to go to Newcastle.”

“Then you’ll have to get John to take you. Where are you going?”

John and the bishop stepped out of the lift.

“Daneekah is the woman I talked to about making the wedding cake and catering the reception.”

“Why couldn’t you just use one of the shops in Hexham?”

“When you see the cake you’ll understand. Daneekah makes special cakes – if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, I get it now. This must be something special you’re doing for Donna.”

“Yes, it is, and don’t breathe a word of it to her.”

“OK, but be careful and hurry back.”

John and the bishop approached. “Hurry back? Where are you going?”

“You’re taking me to Newcastle, and we have to leave now!”

“Newcastle? What about the rehearsal?”

“I’m sorry, Bishop,” Richard said. “Carry on with the rehearsal.”

“What about reciting your vows, Son?” the Bishop of Newcastle asked.

“Don’t worry. I’ve already rehearsed them a thousand times, in front of the mirror.” He grabbed John’s arm and pulled him toward the door. “We have to hurry, before the shop shuts!”

“John, stay alert. Forrest has probably got people trying to find out where we’re staying!”

“I will Sir,” John responded and followed Richard out the door.

Sir Richard took the bishop’s arm. “I’m sorry, Bishop. Ricky is just trying to make this wedding special for Donna.”

The bishop chuckled. “He’s a lot like you were – isn’t he?”

“Yes, Sir, I suppose he is.”

Sam was sitting at the piano; Donna was standing beside it. They were harmonising to Jason Walker’s song ‘Down’. Sir Richard and the bishop stood and listened for a while. “She has an angelic voice, Richard, but that seems a rather unusual selection, for a wedding.”

Sir Richard chuckled. “That’s not for the wedding. Donna just loves to sing, and so does Sam. Donna used to be part of a country band, back in the States.”

The bishop smiled. “Oh yes! I thought I recognised her voice. She’s the girl everyone is talking about that looked so much like Jared’s late wife.”

Sir Richard looked shocked. “Bishop, you know about Jared Thundercloud and Raging Storm?”

“Oh yes. I love his music. I met him when I went on vacation to see my granddaughter in Arizona, a couple years ago. Jared is a nice lad – very talented musician.”

Liu entered his hotel room with an arm full of papers, a Sellotape dispenser, and several old books he’d checked out from the Newcastle Central Library. No sooner had he started up his laptop, than Forrest came barging in the room. “Where the fuck have you been all day?”

“Looking up the location of old lead mines centred on the area where the counties of Northumberland, Durham and Cumbria meet.”

Forrest’s eyebrows shot up. “All day?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Forrest thumbed through the stack of papers on the bed. “What is all this shit?”

“Copies of old lead mine maps.”

“Every single sheet?”

“No. There’s more than one map there.”

“What are you going to do with them?”

“I’m going to line them up and then tape them together. Then I’m going to use the red marker to circle the location, and then after I’ve done that, I’m going to look them up on Internet using Google Earth.”

Forrest thumbed the pages again and grinned. “This is going to take you all night.”

“Quite possibly.”

“Before you do that, go to the bakery and get me some doughnuts.”

“At this hour? They’ll be shut before I get there.”

“You’d better hurry, then.” Forrest chuckled and went back into his hotel room.

“What does he think I am?” Liu mused and stood to leave.

“His fucking errand boy! I’ll get you some doughnuts alright - laced with cerbera.”

Liu opened the shop door and went inside. He approached the counter, rang the bell and waited. “Good evening. I’d like to buy a dozen sugar-coated doughnuts to go.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m getting ready to close.”

“They’re for my boss, and if I show up without them, he’ll sack me. I’ll pay you fifty-pounds.”

“For fifty-pounds, I’ll give you a free cup of coffee while you wait.”

“Thank you, but if it’s not too much trouble, could you make that tea?”

“Of course. Just have a seat and I’ll bring your tea. The doughnuts will take about twenty-five minutes.”

“That’s fine. I don’t mind waiting.”

“Here’s your tea,” Daneekah said.

“I couldn’t help notice the sign on your window. Why the urgent need for help?”

“I’ve got an important wedding to cater in the morning, and I’m short a driver and a server.”

“That’s not good.”

“No. It’s not. Because this is an important client and I owe him a favour,” Daneekah responded and went to the kitchen.

Liu picked up a newspaper and read while he sipped his tea. There was an article on Forrest Enterprises falling share prices. “If we don’t get rid of this bastard soon, I’ll never pull that company out of the dust bin,” he mused.

A few minutes later the shop door opened. Two men approached the counter. Daneekah came from the back. “If it

were possible, you'd be late for your own funeral, Richard Triplet."

Liu's eyes widened. He swallowed hard and slowly lowered the paper enough so he could see. He narrowed his eyes, eavesdropping on their conversation.

"Don't blame me this time. It wasn't my fault," Richard said, holding up his sling, so she could see it. "I was in a car accident and dislocated my shoulder. John here was doing the driving."

"Oh really. You have an excuse for everything!"

"Yes, he does," John chuckled. "Some of us don't like getting speeding tickets."

"So, have you got it done?"

"All but the decorations for the top layer. I'll do that after you've approved it. Making a double-helix shaped cake wasn't that easy. If I didn't owe you a favour...."

"...You'd do it for me anyway," Richard grinned. "Wouldn't you?"

Daneekah sighed. "Probably. You still haven't told me where I'm delivering this stuff."

Richard took out a scratch pad, jotted down the coordinates and handed it to her. "Just put that in your sat-nav. Remember, the wedding starts at ten. *Don't* be late.

"If I can't get a driver and another server, I may have to set the cake up during the wedding."

"Just so you've got it ready in time for the reception."

"Everything will be ready in time for your wedding, Richard. Now, come through and have a look."

Liu waited until the door closed. An evil grin spread across his mouth. He peeled the 'help wanted' sign off the window and took it back to the table with him.

"So what do you think? Is that what you wanted?" Daneekah asked.

Richard hugged her and kissed her cheek. "Sweetheart that is *exactly* what I wanted. I knew I could count on you."

A timer went off. Daneekah turned to take care of it. Richard motioned to the sizzling doughnuts. "Planning on taking a snack home with you?"

"No. These are for the man waiting out front. He came in a few minutes before you did. Said he'd pay me fifty-pounds if I'd make him a dozen doughnuts."

Richard arched an eyebrow. "Kind of late to be requesting fresh doughnuts, isn't it?"

"I knew I would be waiting on you, so it was no bother. Besides, fifty-pounds is a fair amount for a dozen doughnuts." She dropped some dough in the hot fat.

"Is that all you needed from me? I need to get to the florist before they shut. I have to buy some roses."

"Wooing your bride-to-be?"

"More like an apology. I had to miss our wedding rehearsal to come over here. I figured a couple dozen roses ought to do the job."

"Take her a single long stemmed red rose – more sentimental."

"I was planning on it, but the others are for the bedroom."

"Lucky girl," Daneekah chuckled. "See you tomorrow."

Liu watched from the corner of his eye as Richard and John left.

"Your doughnuts will be ready in about ten minutes. I had to reheat the oil."

"You say you're short a driver and a server, right?"

"Yes. You wouldn't know anyone, would you?"

"As a matter of fact, I would. How would you like someone who can drive and serve?" Liu asked, holding up the sign.

"You? What about your boss?"

"I'm off tomorrow. You seem like a sweet person. You helped me. I'd like to repay the favour."

Chapter 90

The wedding rehearsal would have been over a long ago, but Donna couldn't keep a straight face when it was time to say her vows. "Bishop, I'm sorry," she laughed. "Could we try one more time. I promise this will be the last."

"Oh, come on D," Gary groaned.

"I can't help it, Gary. You're my cousin. It's extremely hard to say those words to you, and stay serious."

Sam stood. "Then do it with me. Gary, you come play the piano. I'll stand in for Richard. If that's OK with you, Donna?"

"Gladly," Gary interjected. "I'll be reciting Richard's vows in my sleep."

Donna swallowed hard. "I think it's the only way I'm ever going to get this right." She looked to Sir Richard. "Dad, do you mind?"

Sir Richard sighed. "No, petal. You're only going to do this once. Come on. I'll lead you down the aisle, *again*. I'm sorry Bishop."

The bishop chuckled. "It's quite all right, Richard. This is actually the most fun I've had all day."

Sam's heart turned over as Sir Richard placed Donna's hand in his and stepped aside. The bishop started going through the vows. Donna kept her eyes locked on Sam's and didn't miss a cue. Gary could tell when Sam repeated Richard's vows that he was serious about every word. Sam would gladly take Richard's place if Donna would let him, and even though he knew she didn't love Sam as much as she had Jared; Donna would rather be marrying Sam, than Richard.

"Then I would say, by the power vested in me, etc. etc. At this point, the groom may kiss his bride."

Oh God, Sam, please don't kiss me.

Sam leaned his face closer. "I wish this were real," he whispered and kissed her cheek.

"Perfect," the bishop said. "Young man, we should have used you instead of Dr. Browne."

Sam looked at Donna and grinned. "Glad I could help, but in the morning, you're on your own."

"Now," the bishop said and clapped his hands together once. "Donna, how about you and Dr. Kaliea entertaining us some more. I was enjoying that, before your godfather, and I came in."

By the time Liu and Daneekah finished talking, Forrest's doughnuts were cold. Daneekah offered to make him some more, but Liu told her to zap them in the microwave. He paid her and left. He knocked on Forrest's hotel room and waited. "Your doughnuts, Mr. Forrest," he said as he entered the room.

"These better not be cold!" Forrest snarled as he jerked the bag from Liu's hand. "Why are you wearing that fucking grin?"

Liu's grin faded. "Blind luck," he responded.

"What do you mean blind luck?"

"I was in the right place, at the right time. You're suspicions about the Triplet wedding were right. It's not taking place in two weeks. It's in the morning at ten. I know where it's taking place, and I've made arrangements to attend."

"How in the hell did you pull that off?"

"The owner of the doughnut shop is catering the wedding as a favour to Richard. He and his bodyguard were standing a few feet away from me at the counter."

"Did they see your face?"

"No. I stayed concealed behind my newspaper until they left."

The corners of Forrest's mouth turned up. "Then this is a perfect opportunity to take her out."

"Yes... it would be. I can spike her drink and no one would know until it was too late, but..." he paused. "This could also

be an opportunity to find out what his secretary was talking about.”

“You mean the mine?”

“I suspect that’s where he’ll be harbouring the cure you need.”

“But what if you’re wrong and his secretary was just spouting a load of bullshit. Triplet is clever. This could also be a set-up and Rigden could slip right through our fingers, again.”

“Which would be more valuable to you? The cure or Donna’s demise? What the doctor did is not going to last forever. You feel fine now, but once the red blood cells are used up; you’ll be back as before. Without that cure, you may not survive until we find another way.”

Forrest frowned. “Then what do you suggest?”

John parked the Escalade in front of the castle. “I’m going to take Donna’s roses upstairs. If she asks where I am, tell her I went to the loo.”

John nodded and went to the chapel. Donna, Gary and Melissa were gathered around, singing while Sam played the piano and sang along. Sir Richard and the bishop were sitting on the front pew, clapping along and enjoying the music.

Melissa looked up, smiled and waved. “Excuse me.”

John pulled her out of sight and pushed her against the wall, kissing her. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too. Where’s Ricky?”

“Upstairs, putting his apology away.”

Melissa frowned. “His apology?”

John grinned. “He bought her two dozen red roses to make up for missing the rehearsal. How did it go?”

“When Sam traded places with Gary, it went fine. Before that, Donna couldn’t keep a straight face. Every time she tried to say her vows, she cracked up and then everyone else did, too.”

John smiled. "You certainly looked as if you were having fun."

"We were. I feel really bad for Donna that she had to leave the band. She and Jared were good together."

"Yes, they were, and not just because of the band. Jared and Donna were good *for* each other."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't repeat this. Donna doesn't really love Ricky. She's marrying him because of the baby and to protect the ones she loves. She won't admit it, but I think she's falling in love with Sam."

"Oh no - John," Melissa gasped. "That explains why she was so serious when he helped her with the vows. Oh poor Donna."

"It's not just poor Donna. Ricky is head over heels in love with Donna, but he knows she doesn't really love him. Ricky loves Donna so much, he's hoping in time she'll learn to love him. Personally, I don't think this is going to work out, but it's not my life. I'm just glad we're back together."

Melissa wrapped her arms around John's neck and kissed him. "Me too." John wrapped an arm around her waist and led her back into the chapel.

Richard entered the chapel with his hand behind his back. "I would love to applaud, but I'm a little short of hands, right now."

"I guess that's it for the night," Sam groaned.

Donna narrowed her eyes. "Behave yourself," she whispered. "You missed all the fun," she said in turning.

"Yeah," Sam scoffed. "If it hadn't been for me standing in for you, we'd probably still be going over the vows."

Richard studied Sam's eyes. "*You* played the part of the groom? Who played the piano?"

"I did," Gary spoke up. "At least for the final rehearsal. Donna was having problems with the love, honour, and obey part."

“She had no trouble saying her vows when I stepped in,” Sam grinned.

“Excuse us a second, Sam,” Richard said and took Donna’s arm, leading her to the side. He presented her with the rose. “I hope this helps to make up for my not being here.”

Donna took the rose, closed her eyes and breathed in its fragrance. Memories of her and Jared standing in her apartment in Shreveport came back to her. She sighed deeply and opened her eyes. “It’s beautiful, Richard. Thank you,” she said and kissed him.

Sir Richard cleared his throat and stood. “Well, I’m going to turn in.”

The bishop stood. “I think I will, as well. Donna, thank you for a most entertaining evening.”

Donna’s cheeks showed some colour. “You’re welcome, Bishop. And, I’m sorry we had to go through it so many times.”

The bishop chuckled. “Oh, don’t apologise. I can truly say this was the most fun I’ve ever had at a wedding rehearsal. Richard, I guess I’ll see you in the morning.” He offered his hand.

Richard used his left hand. “You most certainly will, Bishop. Sorry I wasn’t here.”

“Just be there in the morning. You have a rare young lady, there.”

Richard put his arm around Donna’s waist and pulled her close. “That I do, Bishop. Goodnight. I’m going to be extremely rude now, and steal my fiancée away. You’ve had her all evening, now it’s my turn.”

“Before we go inside, I want you to close your eyes.”

“What are you up to, Richard?”

“Just close your eyes.”

“OK, they’re closed.”

Richard carefully led her to their bedroom. “Now, without opening your eyes, take a deep breath and tell me what you smell.”

Donna softly smiled. “More roses. Can I open my eyes now?”

“Yes, you may,” Richard responded and closed the door.

But for the rose scented candles Richard had lit, the bedroom was dark. Propped against Donna’s pillow was a bouquet of red roses. On the bedside table, chilling in a bucket of ice was what looked to be a bottle of Champagne. Close by were two tall crystal Champagne glasses.

Donna read the label on the side of the bottle. She turned and smiled. “Non-alcoholic.” She slowly walked back to him. “Sometimes, you can be the sweetest person on Earth.” She carefully removed his sling.

Richard gingerly pulled her into his arms. He studied her eyes and softly smiled. “You *are* the sweetest person on Earth,” he whispered and kissed her. “I love you, so much Donna.”

Donna swallowed hard and buried her face in his neck. “I love you, too, Richard,” she sighed. “Thank you for the roses. What I’d really like to know is why it was so urgent that you go to Newcastle tonight.”

Richard handed her a glass of Champagne and grinned. “You’ll just have to wait until after the wedding and find out. A toast – to my future wife and our life together.”

Donna touched her glass to his and sipped her drink. “You know if you stay with me tonight, we’re breaking your grandmother’s rules. After midnight, you’re not supposed to see me until we meet at the altar. It’s tradition, you know.”

Richard took her glass and sat it on the bedside table next to his. He kissed her and started undressing her. “Sod tradition. You’re sleeping in my arms tonight and every other night, from now on.”

Donna did love Richard and she didn’t want to believe he would do anything to harm her, but too much pointed the

blame in his direction. With slight hesitation, Donna locked her eyes on his and started unbuttoning his shirt. Taking a deep breath, she pushed her doubtful feelings aside and did what she knew was expected of her. A task she may be forced to repeat, every night for the rest of her life.

To Donna, the child she carried, the one she left behind, and the man she loved justified her pain. Donna fell asleep in Richard's arms, holding fast to the hope that someday fate would be kind, and all the wrongs would be made right.

Forrest dressed for bed. Seeing that a light was still on in Liu's room, he knocked on the door and went inside. Liu was dressed for bed, sitting at the table taping the pieces of the map together. He glanced up and pulled off another piece of Sellotape. "On your way to bed?"

Forrest motioned to the puzzle in front of Liu. "Why are you doing that? I thought you knew where the wedding was taking place."

"I still need the maps to find the mine. From the description his secretary gave us, and knowing Sir Richard, the mine will likely not be that easy to find. I'm hoping they'll at least mention the name."

"And if they don't?"

"Then I'll have the maps to fall back on."

Forrest leaned down, so his face was in Liu's. "*Don't* fail me! I want the cure. I want Donna dead, and I want to bring Triplet International to its knees – no exceptions!" Forrest left, slamming the door behind him. The draft scattered several pages from Liu's maps onto the floor.

Liu sighed in exasperation. "I'm going to enjoy seeing you get *everything* you deserve," he forced through his teeth.

Chapter 91

The castle was bustling with activity in preparation for the wedding. Everyone seemed to have something to do. The caterers and Richard's unusual wedding cake arrived on time. Vera let them in, and they started setting up, for the reception. The cake was to be wheeled out once all the guests were in the main dining room.

Sir Richard dressed ridiculously early and was wandering around getting in everyone's way. Alice finally told him, since he was giving away the bride; he would have to make the 'father of the bride' speech. Not having thought of this, Sir Richard retired to the attic turret; which happened to be the only quiet place in the castle.

Donna's big day had not started out well. She'd tossed and turned most of the night, and despite being in Richard's arms, she'd had a horrible nightmare. Richard had brought her breakfast in bed, but all it did was make her sick. She hadn't been able to eat anything. He was concerned about her and had tried to comfort her, as best he could, but his constant hovering was making her even more nervous. He wanted to call Sam, but Donna told him she was fine. Donna knew if she saw Sam before the wedding, it would make this harder than it already was. Despite her feelings for Richard, she did not want to spend the rest of her life with him.

There was a knock on their apartment door. "Get the door, Richard," Donna groaned as she sat on the side of their bed.

"Who is it?" Richard called out as he headed for the door.

"It's Missy and Gary," Melissa answered back. Richard opened the door. "I came to help Donna...."

"...And I came to get you out of their hair," Gary added. "Get your things. Vera has arranged for you to get ready in Lady Triplet's room."

“I’ll get ready here, in one of the other bedrooms. Donna isn’t feeling well. I don’t want to leave her.”

Gary’s eyes widened. “What’s wrong? Morning sickness or cold feet?”

“Probably a combination of both,” Melissa sighed.

“Who is it?” Donna called out from the bedroom.

“Missy and Gary, pet! Do you need me?”

“No! You need to go with Gary.”

“She’s right, Richard. I’ll take care of Donna. If she needs you, I’ll let you know.”

“Get your things Richard!” Gary insisted.

Melissa followed Richard to the bedroom. “Pet if you need me, I’ll...”

“Richard – just go!” Donna forced through her teeth. “I don’t feel well, and you hovering over me and asking me how I’m doing every few seconds is driving me crazy. Get out of here or I’ll leave you standing at the altar!”

Richard was taken aback. He cleared his throat. “I’ll – ah – I’ll just get my suit and leave you alone, then.”

“Wait!” Donna sighed in exasperation. “I’m sorry I snapped at you. I’m a nervous wreck. I just want to get this over and done with. OK?”

Richard collected his suit and bent down to kiss her. Donna tucked her chin. Richard kissed her forehead, stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers and turned to leave.

“See you in a little while,” Melissa said.

Donna buried her head in her hands. “God! I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I don’t know if it’s morning sickness or wedding day jitters.”

Melissa glanced over her shoulder to make sure Richard and Gary were gone. She sat on the side of the bed next to Donna. “It’s OK, Donna. John told me. I know.”

Donna studied Melissa’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

Melissa brushed some loose hairs, away from Donna’s forehead. “I know why you’re marrying Richard.”

Donna swallowed the lump in her throat. "Then I hope you haven't come up here to try and talk me out of this."

Melissa's eyes glossed. "No, Sweetie. I'm here to help you get through it. I know how it feels to walk away from someone you love." She paused. "Now... let's see what we can do with your hair."

"The way I feel, I doubt you'll be able to do anything with it. At least my veil will hide my pain."

"Donna, I promise you. When I'm done, you'll look like a queen."

"I feel more like Cinderella before she met her fairy godmother."

"Well, you won't look that way. You have my word on that."

Donna smiled. "Thank you, Missy."

"All part of the maid of honour's job."

Richard got dressed and started pacing the floor. Gary followed him with his eyes a few passes. "If you don't stop that, I'm going to glue your feet to the floor!"

"I can't help it. I'm nervous."

"Why?"

"Donna could still back out. I've waited, so long for this day, I don't know what I'll do if she does."

"What makes you think she's going to back out?"

"The way she reacted to me this morning. She snapped at me several times."

Gary groaned inwardly. *Can't imagine why.* He sighed in exasperation. "D is probably as nervous as you are. Now let's make sure you've got everything you're supposed to have. I've got the rings. The bishop is taking care of the license. The reception is all set up. Do you have your speech?"

"I know what I'm going to say. Do you have yours?"

"Wrote it last night."

"Then I guess that's everything. Would you do me a favour and check on Donna?"

“Richard, she’s fine.”

“Just check on her, please.”

Gary groaned and stood. “All right, but you do not leave this room, understand? You’ve already broken enough traditions.”

Richard nodded. Gary stepped out into the corridor. He met Sam at the top of the stairs as he stepped out of the lift. “Where are you going?” Gary asked.

“To see Donna. Joyce called. Lady Triplet is awake and asking about the wedding. I wanted to check with Donna before I decided what to do about the old bat.”

“I’ll pass the message along and tell you what she said. I could probably guess at her answer, but....”

Sam studied his eyes. “Gary... I *need* to see her, just for a couple of minutes. Please!”

Gary hesitated. “Come with me, but Missy might not let you in. Another thing, don’t you dare tell Richard about this.” Gary wagged his finger in Sam’s face. “I mean it, Sam – not a word!”

Melissa was putting the last of the sweetheart roses and baby’s breath in Donna’s hair. There was a knock on the door. Donna groaned. “I’ll be right back. That will probably be Sir Richard.” Melissa opened the door. “Gary. Sam. I was expecting Sir Richard.” She stood to the side.

“Sam needs to talk to Donna about Lady Triplet,” Gary volunteered. “I’ll wait in the lounge.”

Melissa tapped on the door and stuck her head in. “Donna, you have a visitor.”

“If it’s Richard, tell him to go away! I don’t want to see him.”

Sam stepped into view. “It’s not Richard, sweetheart.”

“I’ll be in the lounge with Gary if you need me,” Melissa said and disappeared.

Sam stepped into the room and closed the door. His heart turned over. “You look like... a dream,” he whispered.

“You don’t look so bad yourself. I’ve never seen you in a tux.”

“I avoid them, when I can. I don’t mind wearing a suit, but I’m not fond of tuxedos.”

“You should. You look... good in one.” Donna’s eyes glossed, and she came to her senses. She swallowed hard and cleared her throat. “What are you doing here?”

“Sheila called. Lady Triplet is demanding to be at the wedding.”

Donna’s smile faded. “What did you tell her?”

“Sir Richard sent John to pick her up.”

Donna sank to the side of the bed. She blew out a sigh of exasperation. “Great,” she groaned. “Could this day get any worse?” Her voice choked.

One side of Sam’s mouth turned up. He sat beside her and laced his fingers with hers. “I’m kidding sweetheart.”

“You’re lying.” Donna narrowed her eyes. “You rat! You did that on purpose!”

Sam chuckled. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t resist. You looked so unhappy when I came in. I thought I would make you smile.”

Donna softly smiled. “You can’t be here, Sam! Richard is already antsy. He can’t find you here. You shouldn’t have come.”

“Gary forbid Richard to leave Lady Triplet’s room. I had to see you, one last time before you give yourself to him.”

“Sam... don’t.”

“I have to, Donna,” he whispered. “I love you, and I know you love me. This is... killing me, sweetheart. I want to be the one standing beside you. I know how you feel. I know you don’t feel the same way I do, but I also know you don’t love Richard - not that way. If you’ve got to learn to love someone, let it be me. I think you’d find the task a lot easier if it were me.”

Donna studied his eyes. “Yes, I would, but it can’t be you. Don’t you understand? One of the reasons I’m doing this is because of you. Be patient Sam, please. I need your support

and your strength. That's what it's going to take to get me through this. To know that you... understand. To know that you'll still be there, when this is over."

Sam blinked to clear his vision. He cradled her face in his hand and leaned closer. He swallowed the lump in his throat. "Then you have my solemn promise," he whispered and kissed her.

Donna softly smiled and wiped his lips with her thumb. "Garnet lipstick does not look good on you." She pulled a tissue from the box on the bedside table. "Here, get rid of that before you go out."

Sam took the tissue and wiped his lips. He took out his cell phone. "Hang on a second. Sheila, it's Sam. I've talked with Donna, and she agrees with us. Lady Triplet stays where she is."

Sheila chuckled. "I had a feeling you would say that, but I had to ask. All right Sam, but I may have to sedate her. She's pretty riled-up."

"I couldn't care less. Tie her in the bloody sheets if you have to!" Sam ended the call and turned back to Donna. "Now here's something that might help you get through today. When you're taking your vows, think back to last night and imagine it's me. I would gladly take Richard's place." He softly kissed her. "Now, I'd better go. I've got about ten minutes. I'll see you at the reception." He stood to leave.

"Sam... is Lady Triplet better?"

"Do you want me to call Sheila back?"

"No!"

Sam grinned. "She's stable and apparently quite upset that we're not letting her come to the wedding."

Donna grinned and blotted her eyes. "What a shame. I'm heartbroken."

Sam chuckled and left. Gary stood as Sam entered the lounge. "Is everything all right?" Melissa asked.

Sam grinned. "No, it's not, but we'll survive. I'll see you all downstairs. Thank you, Gary."

Gary softly smiled and nodded. Sam left. Donna entered the lounge. Gary stood in front of her. Donna's eyes filled with tears. She hugged him. "Thank you. If anyone ever looked out for my best interest, it's you."

Gary swallowed the lump in his throat. "Somebody has to look out for you. You look beautiful, D. Are you OK?"

Donna sighed. "I'm better now. Do you have any idea where Richard's father is?"

"No, I haven't seen him. I better go check on Richard."

"What's wrong with him?" Donna asked.

"He's like a cat on a hot tin roof. He said you snapped at him. He's worried that you're going to back out."

"I'll send him a text," Donna said.

Gary kissed her cheek. "I'd better run. See you at the altar."

Donna sighed. "I'll be the one with the knocking knees."

"Are you nervous?"

"Yes. Nervous that I will chicken out."

Gary smiled and left.

Melissa blotted Donna's eyes and smiled. "I've kept an eye on you ever since I started working at D'Netics. You're not going to chicken out."

"No, I'm not, but I'd like to."

"I know, Sweetie. It will be over soon."

It was now five minutes to ten. Everyone was ready. Richard and Gary stood at the front of the chapel, waiting. Sam had been playing various piano pieces as the chapel filled up with guests. The bishop checked his watch and motioned to Richard. "Are we ready to begin?"

"Um, we're waiting for the maid of honour's signal. Gary..." he said, turning.

"I'll see what's going on." Gary stepped out of earshot and unlocked his cell phone. "Missy, it's Gary. Everyone is here. Richard is about to have a stroke. Sam has played through his entire repertoire of wedding music. What's the hold-up?"

“I was just about to call you. We’re waiting for Sir Richard. Have you seen him?”

“No... I haven’t. Have you tried ringing his cell phone?”

“Yes. It’s been changed over to voicemail.”

“Great! Do you have any idea where he could be?”

“No, Gary, I don’t.”

“OK. Sit tight. Tell Donna not to worry. We’ll find him.”

Gary ended the call and motioned to Richard.

“What is it? What’s wrong? Has she backed out?”

“No, but there is a problem. Sir Richard is missing.”

“Oh that’s just bloody great, Dad!” he pushed through his teeth.

“You stay here and talk to the bishop. I’ll tell John.” Gary motioned to John.

“Is something wrong?”

“Yes. Sir Richard is missing.” John’s eyes widened. He unlocked his cell phone. “It’s no use. He’s switched his phone over to voicemail. I already tried.”

“OK, tell Tim to check this level. I’ll round up the others, and we’ll start checking the other levels. Keep trying his cell phone. He may have gone for a walk.”

Richard approached the bishop. “We need to stall, Sir. We can’t find my Dad.”

The bishop frowned. “Oh dear!”

Chapter 92

You can glare at me all you want to, Lady Triplet, but you're still not going to the wedding," Sheila said. "I've spoken to Dr. Kaliea who has also spoken to Dr. Rigden, and I've read your medical records. I agree with their diagnosis. You need to stay calm."

Lady Triplet cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes. "I don't know you."

Sheila chuckled. "I'm not surprised you don't remember me. It's been at least ten years since Richard and I were together. I'm Tim McGowan's younger sister. Richard and I were in chemistry class at Cambridge."

Lady Triplet sat up in bed and smoothed the sheets. "I don't like McGowan."

Sheila grinned. "That's OK, Lady Triplet. He doesn't speak very highly of you either. Now, are you going to behave yourself, or do I sedate you. One way or the other, I will carry out Dr. Kaliea and Dr. Rigden's orders."

Joyce appeared behind Sheila.

Lady Triplet glowered at Sheila. "Do not kindle my anger. I'm running out of patience, and you're running out of chances! Get my son on the phone!"

Joyce's eyes widened. *Where have I heard that phrase before?* It came back to her. *Oh my God!* She cleared her throat. "Dr. McGowan, if you need me, I'll be in the back."

"Before you go, I'd like you to administer Lady Triplet's medication." Sheila handed Joyce a filled hypodermic syringe.

Joyce held out her hand. "Sure, Dr. McGowan."

Sheila frowned. "Joyce, is something wrong? You're shaking."

Joyce swallowed hard and glanced at Lady Triplet. "No. I'm fine. It's just a little... *cold*... in here."

"Have a nice nap," Sheila said. "I'll check on you later."

Lady Triplet cut her eyes at Sheila and then watched Joyce's shaky hands as she injected the liquid into her IV. Joyce glanced at Lady Triplet from the corner of her eye, but wouldn't look directly at her. She quickly headed for the door. "Joyce..." Lady Triplet called out.

Joyce froze and turned. "Yes, Lady Triplet?"

"Turn out the light on your way out, please?"

Joyce stared at Lady Triplet. "VICi, lights out," she said and left.

Lady Triplet narrowed her eyes. "VICi, lights on." The lights came back on. "VICi, lights out." The lights went off. Lady Triplet sighed and lay back on her pillow. "Curious," she mused. "I'm not at the Centre. Now, I wonder where I could be?" She grinned.

Engrossed in the memorabilia Sir Richard had lost all track of time. He read over his speech to make sure it was perfect. He smiled and glanced at his watch. "Oh shit! I'm going to be late!" Immediately, he unlocked his cell phone and headed for the door. "Missy, it's me. I'm..."

"...Sir Richard! Thank goodness. John has a search party out looking for you."

Sir Richard frowned and grabbed the door handle. "Why didn't he ring my...?" He paused. "Hang on a second, Missy. I'm going to put the phone down so I can use both hands. The door is stuck." He gave the door a couple of strong yanks. "Bloody hell!

"What's going on, Missy?"

"It's Sir Richard."

Donna let out a long sigh of relief. "Where is he?"

"I don't know, but..."

"...I'm in the attic turret. The bloody door won't open. Tell Donna, I'm sorry and let Ricky know. I'll be there just as soon as somebody gets me out."

"Sir, why didn't you answer your cell?"

“I shut the damn thing off, so I wouldn’t be disturbed. I didn’t realise I’d been up here this long. What a good first impression I must be making with my new daughter-in-law.”

Melissa laughed; she couldn’t help herself. “I’ll tell John. See you in a few minutes, but hurry. Ricky is probably sweating bullets, by now.” Melissa pressed John’s speed button. “John, it’s me. Sir Richard just called. He’s – ah – he’s locked himself in the attic turret.”

There was laughter on the other end of the line. “I’m headed that way.”

John slapped on the door. “Hang on, Sir Richard. We’ll have you out of there in a couple of seconds. Tim is knocking the hinge pins out.” After a couple more knocks, with a grunt, McGowan lifted the door out of the way. The look on Sir Richard’s face was priceless. “A little rusty on your jail breaking skills, Sir?”

“We’ll discuss this later. Get downstairs and let the bishop know I’m on my way to get Donna. I’ll signal Ricky when we’re at the top of the stairs. And don’t forget to put Mum’s door back on.”

Sir Richard ran across the roof and down the spiral stairs. He fidgeted while he waited for the lift to stop. Jerking the door open he ran down the corridor, nearly crashing into the door of Richard and Donna’s apartment. He smoothed down his hair, straightened his tie, and knocked. Melissa let him in.

“Where is she?”

“She’s in her bedroom.” Melissa led the way. She tapped on the door and opened it. “He’s here Donna. I’ll wait in the corridor, and give you a moment alone with her.”

“Thanks, Missy,” Sir Richard smiled. “I won’t be long.”

Sir Richard entered and gazed in awe at Donna. Although she wasn’t his daughter, he felt the lump rising in his throat that a father gets when he realises his little girl has grown up. Tears glossed his eyes. “You look... stunning,” he said with a quaver in his voice.

Tears filled Donna's eyes. She placed her hand in the crook of Sir Richard's arm. "Come on Dad, it's time to go."

"I'm so, sorry I'm late. I forgot the attic turret used to be used to detain prisoners. The bloody lock stuck. Tim had to take the door down."

Donna smiled. "It's OK, Dad."

Standing at the bottom of the grand staircase, John signalled with a wave of his hand.

Wein quickly checked his cameras and unlocked his cell phone. "VICi, begin recording."

Slowly, Donna and Sir Richard glided down the stairs with Melissa a few steps behind, carrying Donna's train. Sir Richard signalled Richard who nodded.

Sam began playing the bridal march.

Everyone turned in their seats.

The bride stepped beneath the archway. Sir Richard escorted her to the altar. Melissa followed close behind. Sir Richard placed Donna's hand on Richard's arm. "Where's your sling?" she whispered, leaning close to his ear.

"I'm fine, pet. I'll put it back on after the reception. By the way, you're breath-taking," he whispered and kissed her cheek.

Richard and Donna faced each other and stepped up to the altar. Behind her veil, tears glossed Donna's eyes. This was not the wedding she had dreamed of, but she refused to cry. Richard's eyes glistened. Gary sensed Donna's pain. Tears stung his eyes as his heart ached for his cousin.

The bishop stepped up to the podium, and the ceremony began. Not a sound could be heard as the couple began their wedding vows.

"Richard Harold Triplet V, do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife ...?"

Donna's heart was pounding. She listened to Richard repeat the bishop's words. Then, the important question. Richard answered without hesitation, "I will."

The bishop turned to Donna. “Donna Marie Rigden, do you take this man to be your lawful wedded husband...?”

Richard couldn't take his eyes off his bride as she pledged to love honour and obey him.”

Then it was her turn. Donna reached down deep and grabbed onto every ounce of strength she had left for the breath it took to do what she had to do.

Sam clenched the sides of the piano stool. Everything inside him was screaming ‘No!’

Gary swallowed hard. Stay strong D. It will be over soon.

Richard heard the most important words he would ever hear. “I... will,” Donna said; her voice choked.

“Then, by the power vested in me, I now pronounce you, husband and wife. Richard, you may kiss your bride.”

Richard gazed into Donna's tear-glossed eyes. He smiled as he took her into his arms and kissed her. He ended the kiss, and they turned. The bishop said his final words. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I now present you with, Mr. and Mrs. Richard Harold Triplet V.”

Richard and Donna joined hands and made their exit through showers of red and white rose-petals falling around them, and beneath their feet. Donna breathed a long sigh of relief. After signing the register, Richard led Donna to the main dining room where the reception was being held. Gary's speech was both entertaining and heartfelt as he wished Richard and Donna many happy years together.

The cake was brought out. Donna's mouth gaped. She turned to Richard. “How did you?”

Richard smiled. “It wasn't easy. I had to sweet talk an old friend at the last hour. I was supposed to call her and forgot when I went back to the complex to get Mum's pearls. By the way, they look as beautiful on you as they did on her. She wore them for all of hers and Dad's anniversaries. They're yours now.”

Donna touched her neck. "But they were supposed to be used for something borrowed. That means I have to give them back. I couldn't take your mother's pearls, Richard."

"They were mine. I want you to have them. You did borrow them, and now I'm giving them to you. I think we can get away with it."

Donna smiled. "It's a beautiful wedding present, Richard. Thank you."

Richard picked up the knife and handed it to Donna. "That's not your wedding present. It's back at the complex." He wrapped his hand around hers, and they turned to face the camera. To Donna, the reception seemed to go on forever. She kept sneaking quick glances of Sam out the corner of her eye. He looked positively shattered. Most of the time, when she looked his way he tucked his head.

After their traditional first dance together, Richard danced with Melissa while John danced with Donna, and then Sir Richard danced with Donna. Gary finished his dance with Donna and then Sam approached. He studied Donna's eyes. "May I dance with the bride?"

"I don't see why not," Gary responded. "Just remember, you're being watched," he cautioned.

Sam rested a hand on Donna's back and took her hand in his. "I can't begin to tell you how lovely you look."

Donna sighed. "I can't begin to tell you how much I wish this could be over. The wedding was beautiful, but it's not at all what I'd hoped for."

"...Or me. When we get the chance, we'll do it right."

Donna rested her head on his shoulder. "We'll see..." she sighed. "By then, you'll probably have a woman on each arm, and god knows how many in your bed."

Sam softly chuckled. "Maybe on my arm, but *not* in my bed," he whispered. "That spot is reserved for one person."

After the family photographs were taken, Richard got a call and stepped out of ear shot. Donna wondered over to the serving

table and filled a small plate with hors d'oeuvres. "Would you like a glass of Champagne to go with that?" a server asked.

Donna smiled. "No, thank you, but I'll take a glass of ginger ale, please."

"Would you like that with vodka?"

Donna frowned. "No – just the ginger ale. I'm alcohol intolerant."

He held a flute of sparkling ginger ale. "I don't do well with alcohol myself." He narrowed his eyes. "You look incredibly familiar. Didn't you used to be in a country rock band? Jared Thundercloud and Raging Storm?"

"I was lead female vocalist for a short time, but I left the band when I left the States. How did you know that?"

"You signed autographs at HMV in Newcastle. I saw your video on MTV. It's a shame you left the band. You and Jared were good together."

"Don't remind me," Donna groaned. "Did you have anything to do with the cake?"

"Oh no. I'm just temporary help. One of those you-scratch-my-back favours, if you know what I mean."

Donna softly chuckled. "Yes, I know what you mean."

"So, I guess you'll be off to a big month-long honeymoon after this?"

"Oh no. Too much work to do. That will have to come later."

"Then I guess you'll be whisked off to the Triplet mansion. I envy you. Being a Triplet you have lots of opportunities. The sky is the limit."

"It doesn't feel that way to me," Donna sighed. "Do you think I could have my ginger ale now?"

"Oh! Of course," he said, looking genuinely embarrassed. "I didn't realise. It's just that you have such beautiful dark eyes. They seem to catch every ray of light."

The corners of Donna's mouth turned up. "Thank you. And thank you for the ginger ale."

"My pleasure, Dr. Triplet," he smiled.

Donna sighed and walked away. “Why is his voice so familiar?” she mused. She grabbed Gary’s arm and pulled him out of earshot. “Did you notice anything about that server at the end of the table, next to the window?”

Gary turned. “D, there’s a woman at the end of the table.”

“What?” she turned and frowned. “He must have already left. Never mind. When Richard gets off the phone, tell him I went upstairs.” She walked up to Sir Richard. “Thanks for a lovely wedding, Dad.”

“It was my pleasure petal. When you were growing up, I always hoped I’d be able to walk you down the aisle.”

“I love you, Dad. I’ll see you later.”

“Going to change?”

“Yeah. I need a break. Oh,” she said in turning. “Did Sam tell you about your mother?”

“Yeah. I’m probably going to get it in the neck, when she sees me.”

Donna slightly smiled. “I’m sure she’ll survive. Her life was worth more than having her at my wedding. Let me know when we’re ready to go back to the complex. I think I might take a short nap.” She kissed his cheek and walked away.

Chapter 93

Richard stood by the bed, looking down at Donna. She had changed into her jeans and T-shirt and was curled up on her side, facing the door. He breathed a sigh of contentment and started cautiously taking off his tie. He reached into his jeans pocket and brought out the card of pain pills Sam had given him last night and popped one in his mouth; his shoulder was beginning to ache, from too much movement. He managed to get his tie off and used his left hand to unbutton his shirt. He changed into his jeans and polo shirt and lay on the bed beside Donna, facing her. He softly smiled and stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. Donna murmured and slowly opened her eyes. “Hi Mrs. Triplet. Feeling a little better now?”

Donna sighed, softly smiled and nodded. “More refreshed. I’m sorry, but I’d taken that dress-up thing as long as I could.”

Richard rolled over on his back. “Come lay your head on my shoulder and I’ll nap with you. Dad is taking care of a few tasks here. We’re leaving in a couple of hours.”

“Has anyone checked on your grandmother?”

Richard grinned. “Yes... Sheila gave her a sedative. She was asleep through the entire wedding.”

Donna faked a frown. “You mean she didn’t even watch it on the wallscreen?”

“Nope.”

“Richard, she’s going to be really upset with us.”

“Yeah, but she’ll survive. She can watch Jeff’s video.”

Richard rubbed his cheek against the top of Donna’s head and sighed. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing is wrong. I’m still getting used to the fact that now you’re all mine – signed, sealed and delivered.”

Donna lifted her head and studied his eyes. “Richard... do you *really* love me?”

Richard tilted her chin up, lowered his face and kissed her. “More than life itself, sweetheart,” he whispered

Daneekah and her crew loaded up their equipment. Sir Richard paid her, and she left. Along with Alice and Alan, Lady Triplet’s house staff started putting things back in order. In his mother’s absence, Sir Richard took the opportunity to collect some of his personal things to take back to the complex. Once Lady Triplet had recovered and returned home, Sir Richard didn’t expect to be going back to the castle for a long time. Now that everything was in place, and the death gene project was nearing completion, there was no reason for them to remain above ground.

Sam grabbed a scotch and went back to the chapel to play the piano; one of his ways of dealing with pain. Without thinking, he started playing the song he’d composed for Donna. Like Sam and Donna, Gary was glad the festivities were over. It hadn’t been a particularly pleasant day for him, either. Not only because he knew how badly Donna was hurting, but also because it reminded him of Juanita, and what he’d lost.

Juanita had moved on, and Gary knew the chances of them ever getting back together were slim to none, but it didn’t change the way he felt about her. His attraction to Tina had been mainly physical, and the ache of losing his childhood sweetheart was still there.

Daneekah and her team hurried back to Newcastle for their next appointment; a business meeting at the Marriot Hotel, in Gateshead. Because of the delay with Richard and Donna’s wedding, by the time they’d loaded the vans, Daneekah and her team only had a few minutes to spare.

Once the event was over, Daneekah was so impressed with her new help that she considered offering him a permanent position. After helping her and the crew unload the vans and put everything back in the shop, Liu had declined; as she’d expected him to. Insistently, Daneekah made Liu two dozen sugar-coated doughnuts to appease his boss. Liu thanked her

for the opportunity and walked back to the hotel. He knocked on Forrest's door. "Mr. Forrest, I need to speak with you."

Forrest and Eli shared a wide-eyed look. "Get into the bathroom!"

"I'll be with you shortly!" Forrest called out.

Eli stood, rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Wrong answer - too civil," he whispered.

Liu stood on the other side of the door, confused. "Sir?"

"Don't you have ears? I said I'll fucking be with you in a minute!" He glanced back over his shoulder to make sure Eli was out of sight. Forrest cleared his throat, roughened his voice and contorted his face. "Where in the hell have you been all day?" he growled as he jerked the door open. "Get in here! You were supposed to be back hours ago!"

Liu arched an eyebrow and stepped into the room. Forrest slammed the door behind him. "Where did they have the real wedding?"

"In a castle. A place not too far from a small village called Langley. I'm late because the wedding was delayed for half an hour. Afterwards, I helped Daneekah, the woman who owns the bakery, with the rest of her appointments. I've made a valuable contact, who is also a close contact of Richard Triplet's."

"I'm not interested in all that fucking shit. Did you learn anything useful?"

"Unfortunately, not as much as I'd hoped to. I questioned Dr. Rigden, but I think she'd been briefed. She was very vague with her answers."

"Did you get the location of the mine?"

"No, but I'll figure that out soon."

"Exactly what *did* you find out?" he forced through his teeth.

"That Richard and Donna are not going on honeymoon. Dr. Rigden said there was too much work to do, so I suspect she was referring to her research. She also said they wouldn't be going back to Triplet Hall, so that could only mean that they're

working at the mine. I was unable to reach my other source at the Centre, so I assume she and the senior team have been moved to the other location, which again, *has* to be the mine.”

“That’s it? That’s all you found out?”

“There is one other thing. During the reception, when I spoke to her, the new Mrs. Triplet did not particularly seem happy, about this union. In fact, it seemed more like she’d just come from a funeral, than her wedding. It’s possible that I didn’t give Triplet enough credit. If they suspected something, the entire wedding could have been a set-up. Richard and Donna may not be getting married, at all.”

Forrest laughed. “That would certainly throw a spanner in the wheels of progress. Wouldn’t it?”

Liu furrowed his brow. “Sir...?”

Forrest waved it off. “Never mind. What about Triplet and his mother? Did you see Lady Triplet?”

“No, Sir. I’m not sure she was even at the wedding. If she was, she didn’t go to the reception.”

“What about the place – the castle – did you get a look around there? Any hint as to why they chose to have the wedding there?”

“Only what was in the kitchen and the main dining room, where the reception was held. It looked more like a home than a business establishment. There were no signs anywhere, and they moved about the place as if they knew it well. I suspect whoever owned it also had close connections with the Triplets.”

Eli’s cell phone rang. He took it out and read the flashing name. “Shit!” he hissed. He knew he couldn’t take the call. If he did, it would give him away. He let it ring.

Forrest glanced toward the toilet. “I have to get that!” he growled. “Get in there and don’t come out until you’ve found that fucking mine! Go – now!”

Liu drew in a calming breath and rose to his feet. “Yes, Sir,” he said and turned to leave. “Oh, I almost forgot. As a

favour to me, Daneekah made you some more doughnuts. I hope you....”

Forrest jerked the bag from Liu’s hand and pointed. “The mine, you fucking moron!”

Liu closed the door and finished his statement. “...Choke on them,” he said with a sigh of exasperation.

Eli waited until he heard the door close. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t answer. What is it?”

“I think you should come to the hospital. There’s a problem with the patient.”

“What kind of problem?”

“I’d rather not discuss that over the phone.”

“Understood.” Eli ended the call.

“What’s going on?” Forrest asked. “Who was that on the phone?”

Eli motioned to the door to Liu’s room. “Keep him occupied. I have to go to the hospital. There’s a problem. Stay close. I may have to do another bone marrow transplant.”

Forrest frowned. “What do I look like? A fucking cell factory?”

Eli narrowed his eyes. “Unless you want this operation to blow up in your face, you’ll do what I tell you.”

Forrest growled. “Stand out of view. Get down there and let me know what’s going on!” He jerked the door to Liu’s room open without even knocking. Again the draft from the door sent some of Liu’s papers flying.

Liu sighed in exasperation. “Sir, I wish you wouldn’t do that!”

“I’ll do whatever I fucking want to do.” He grabbed the front of Liu’s shirt, lifting him out of his chair. “You will do what I tell you to do!” he growled and slung Liu back in his chair.

Liu clenched his teeth and slowly lifted his head until their eyes met. He swallowed hard. “I will do as I’m told, but I need to concentrate. I cannot do that with you breathing down my

neck and scattering my papers all over the room, every time you come storming in here unannounced, *Sir*.”

Forrest went back to his room, took a shower and dressed for his evening meal. He'd just picked up his room phone to order, when his cell phone rang.

“It’s Eli. The news is not quite as dire as I’d expected, but for you, it’s still isn’t good. We need to increase the number of harvested stem cells in our patient’s treatment. When I tried to culture more, for some reason, the procedure we’ve been using didn’t work. I’m trying something new, but as it is experimental, it has to be tested before we can use it.”

“How long will it be before you’ll know?”

“Possibly a month or so. In the meantime, we have to go back to the old method, so I need you to come to the hospital for the procedure. I don’t think we can risk doing it in your hotel room anymore.”

“Can he last another month?”

“If you cooperate. What did John find out?”

“Nothing useful, other than the new Mrs. Triplet does not seem particularly happy. Like I give a flying fuck whether she’s happy or not. She’s caused me more hell than she’s worth. If it wouldn’t screw everything up, I’d cut my losses and get the hell out of here. I’m sick of kissing ass. It seems to me the task is done.”

“So what? You’ll walk away and chance his recovery?”

“He’s not going to come out of this, and you know that.”

“He could if Dr. Rigden completes her research.”

“I’m on my way!”

Eli grinned and locked his cell phone. “I thought you might be.”

Once Sir Richard and his party got back to the complex, Richard was faced with a dilemma. With his injured shoulder, he wouldn’t be able to carry Donna over the threshold to their quarters. Instead, what he did was have her face him and stand

on top of his feet. He then walked her over the threshold, which Donna found unusual but sweet.

After their meal, Richard and Donna made plans to go visit Lady Triplet. Something Donna was not looking forward to. Her stomach roiled every time she thought about it.

Lady Triplet had awoken and was quite perturbed with Sheila for sedating her again. Lady Triplet watched Joyce with curious eyes, when she came in to check her vitals. “Joyce... are you afraid of me?” Lady Triplet asked.

Joyce swallowed her fear and faked a laugh. “Of course not, Lady Triplet.”

Lady Triplet narrowed her eyes. “Too bad. You should be,” she said deadpan.

Chapter 94

Donna took the casserole out of the oven and set it on the counter. She set the table and then went into the lounge. Richard put his Kindle on the coffee table and stood. He took her hand, pulled her into his arms and kissed her. “Ready to go see Grandma?”

Donna sighed. “OK, but I don’t want to stay too long. I’d like to go to the genetics lab and work a while.”

“No, today was our wedding day. We’re not going back to work, until in the morning.”

Donna pushed away from him. “Look, if you’re going to start trying to tell me what I can and can’t do, I will move into my own quarters. We’re married. You and your grandmother got what you wanted. The baby will be born a Triplet now, whether we’re together or not, so stop ordering me around. If I want to work, I will work.”

Richard frowned. “OK, pet – geez. I was kidding.”

Donna sighed deeply and pressed her forehead against his chest. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you. It’s just that I’ve been waiting for so long, and we’re this close to success,” she indicated with her fingers. “I guess I’m anxious.”

Richard held her and rested his cheek on the top of Donna’s head. “Let’s go see Grandma, and then we’ll come back here and eat our tea. When we’re done, we’ll go to the lab, and you can work, until your heart’s desire. VICi, connect me with Sir Richard Triplet.”

An image of Sir Richard appeared on the wallscreen. He was sitting in his office. “*Afternoon Ricky.*”

“Dad, we’re on our way to the infirmary to talk to Grandma. Have you been in to see her, yet?”

“No Ricky. I got tied up when we got back to the complex. I’ll meet you there.”

Donna, Richard, Sir Richard, Sam and Sheila gathered around Lady Triplet's bed. "Mum, Sam and Donna need to ask you some questions, but first I need to know if you approve of them treating you?"

Lady Triplet glanced from Sam to Donna and then back to Sir Richard. "Now that you've finally decided to come and see if I was still alive, maybe you can tell me where I am."

"You're in one of our special medical facilities."

"And I suppose the wedding took place without me?"

"Yes, Mum, it did. I know you wanted to be there, but we couldn't risk your health."

"Do you know why you're here, Lady Triplet?" Sam asked. "What's the last thing you remember, before you woke up?"

Lady Triplet slowly lifted her eyes to meet Sam's. She furrowed her brow. "Do I know you?"

Richard's eyes widened. Grandma, what are you doing?

Donna glanced at Richard out the corner of her eye as she fought to maintain her composure. *You lying bitch!* She shared a quick look with Sam.

Sam softly cleared his throat. "I'm Sam Kaliea. I'm over the medical department, here. As far as I'm aware, unless you refuse, I'm your doctor. Well, Donna and I are."

"I have my own GP, thank you, and I want to be taken back to my castle."

Sir Richard's mouth gaped. "Mum, you can't go back to the castle. You're extremely ill."

"Lady Triplet, if you don't let us fix your heart, you could die," Donna spoke up. "You need to be fitted with a pacemaker to correct your irregular heartbeat. How long has your doctor had you on vepramil?"

Lady Triplet's eyebrows shot up. "About a year now, but I don't have an irregular heartbeat. I have arthritis in my knees. What is all this nonsense about a pacemaker?"

Donna shared a look with Sam. "Did your doctor give you nitroglycerine – some little white pills in a small brown bottle to put under your tongue for pains in your chest?"

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Donna. The only kind of chest pains I have is from indigestion, and I take antacids for that. I don’t know what you’re trying to prove, but I do not have a heart problem!”

Donna arched an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, Lady Triplet, but I’m a cardiac specialist, and you *do* have a heart problem. With a pacemaker, proper diet and exercise, I believe you could live out the rest of your life with little change to your daily activities. However, if we don’t correct this problem, eventually you will find walking from your bed to your bathroom a major task. Having said that, I will not treat you without your permission.” Donna stood. “Think about that. When you decide, let me know. Dad, if you need me, I’ll be in the lab. Sam... could I speak to you in your office, please?”

Sam glanced at Richard. “Right behind you, sweetheart.” He leaned close to Richard’s ear. “Try to talk some sense into her, before you’re standing over her grave,” he whispered and left.

Donna was pacing the floor when Sam stepped into his office. “VICi, secure office door, no entry mode.”

“Can VICi block out our voices, too?”

“Yeah,” Sam responded. “VICi, soundproof room.”

“VICi, connect me with Gary Browne,” Donna snapped. “I can’t believe she’s doing this! Why is she lying?”

“Hi D,” Gary smiled.

“Where are you, and can you talk?”

Gary’s smile faded. “I’m in my quarters. I was about to have a sandwich. What’s wrong?”

“Quite frankly, Richard’s grandmother is a lying bitch and I don’t trust her.”

“What do you mean, D? What’s happened?”

“Lady Triplet will not accept that she has a heart problem. She said she was taking vepramil for arthritis in her knees. Vepramil is an unconventional treatment for arthritis, but I’d bet my bottom dollar that’s not why she’s taking it. I asked her

if her doctor gave her nitroglycerine pills for angina and she denied that too. The killer lie - despite the conversation she had with Richard – Lady Triplet denied even knowing Sam.”

“Calm down D, or someone is going to overhear you.”

“No, they won’t! Sam sound proofed the room.”

“Good,” Gary said with a sigh of relief. “Now, stop and remember. Lady Triplet and Richard don’t know that you overheard their conversation. How did Richard react?”

“He just stood there and didn’t open his mouth. Sir Richard didn’t have a lot to say either.”

Gary paused. “Is it possible she’s demented? Maybe she doesn’t remember.”

Sam chuckled. “Oh, she’s demented, alright. I don’t think she’s going to let us treat her.”

“Legally, without her consent,” Donna groaned, “...we can’t! I know Richard said his father has a separate set of laws for the people in the complex, Gary, but I won’t treat his mother against her wishes! There are just some standards that I’m not willing to break!”

“Have you tried asking her about her GP?”

“She’s not going to tell us anything. She doesn’t even trust her own son!”

“Have you thought about talking to Richard about this?”

“She can’t,” Sam interjected. “If she does, he’ll know she overheard their conversation.”

Gary winced and blew air between his lips. “Damn. That’s right. I guess you’ll just have to wait and see whether or not Richard says anything about it. What about talking to Sir Richard?”

“Same problem,” Donna said. “Sir Richard has already said he doesn’t know anything about Lady Triplet’s doctor, or her, for that fact.”

“Can I say something here?”

Donna turned to face Sam. “Please do.”

“You already have trust issues with Richard. I think Gary is right. You should wait and see if he comes clean. If he doesn’t, then I would say our suspicions are well-founded.”

“*I agree,*” Gary said.

Donna turned to Sam and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek tightly to his chest. Sam held her and kissed the top of her head. Donna inhaled and pulled his scent deeply into her lungs. Despite their problems, she felt safe in his arms. Sam’s door panel chirped. Donna jerked away and sat in the chair in front of his desk. “VICi, display Lady Triplet’s body scan. Focus on sinus node and magnify by 150%.” She turned her chair, so she was facing the wallscreen.

Gary grinned. “*Clever, D. I’ll talk to you later.*” The screen went blank.

Sam sat behind his desk. “VICi, stop previous command and unlock door panel. It doesn’t make sense to me either, sweetheart. I don’t understand why she would – come in Richard,” he said. “We were just discussing your grandmother’s case.”

Richard studied Sam’s eyes. “Well, it will have to wait. Donna has our tea on the counter, and I’m hungry. We’ll be in the genetics lab after we’re done eating.”

Donna frowned. “Richard, aren’t you the least bit concerned about your grandmother?”

Richard sighed. “Of course I’m concerned about her, but it’s her life.”

“What do you mean?” She paused. “What happened after I left the room?”

“We’ll talk about it over our meal.” Richard took her hand and started leading her to the door.

Donna stopped and turned. “We’ll talk later, Sam.” She followed Richard out the door.

Donna put the casserole on the table and started making the salad. “Can I help?” Richard asked.

“Do you know how to make garlic toast?”

“Of course. How hard can that be?”

“It depends on how you like yours made. Most people butter the French bread after they take it out of the oven. I prefer mine done beforehand. You don’t cook a lot. Do you Richard?”

“No. With Alice and Alan around, there’s no need. In fact, I was thinking of hiring someone like that for us.”

“Don’t! If you don’t want to cook, I’ll do it myself.”

Richard frowned. “With servants, you would have more time to devote to me.”

Donna sighed. *That’s what I’m trying to avoid.* “I like doing things myself.”

Richard grinned. “Don’t I know it!”

Donna blushed. “That wasn’t what I was talking about. It’s just the way I was brought up.”

“Well, pet, not everyone was brought up that way. I had servants who used to clean my room for me. I kind of grew out of that, when I went to Cambridge.”

“Did you live in the dorm?”

“Hell no! I had my own flat. In fact, I owned the building. Students leased flats from me,” he laughed.

“Was that so you could pick and choose who lived around you?”

Richard softly chuckled. “Something like that. Are you going to tell me how to do this, since you like it prepared a specific way?”

“It’s simple. Pull off a piece of tin foil, big enough to wrap the bread. Do you have garlic butter?”

“I have garlic, and I have butter. Won’t that do?”

“It will for this time. I’ll make some up after our meal. I’ll use garlic granules, this time, but I prefer fresh. How do you grow vegetables, in the complex?”

Richard laughed. “The same way you would anywhere else. What Jim and Nancy can’t grow on the farm, we grow in tunnels. Instead of sunlight, we have special lights that simulate the full solar spectrum. VICi, of course, regulates, or

better yet, simulates weather and other environmental conditions.”

“So, VICi is technically the brain of the complex. If something went wrong with her....”

“...It would be disastrous,” Richard finished her sentence.

“Seems to me that it would be unwise to put so much trust in a computer.”

“Oh – yes – but you see, VICi has multiple redundancy and error correction.”

Donna frowned and started mixing the garlic granules with the margarine. “You’re not talking to Gary here, Richard. Talk DNA, and I’ll talk circles around you. What do you mean by multiple redundancy?”

“VICi is self-diagnostic. She constantly checks for errors, both in herself and the complex. If she detects a problem, she stores information in one of her many memory banks and then re-routes her operations to a different area.”

Donna arched an eyebrow. “Sounds complicated.”

“It can be, but that’s what we’ve got Gary and the rest of our computer techs for. Gary knows VICi inside and out because he helped program her. So does Jeff Wein.”

Donna finished mixing the garlic butter. “There, that should do. Now use the serrated knife and cut slants along the bread, about an inch apart but don’t cut all the way through. Pry the slants apart a little and then using either your fingers – which I like to do – or a butter knife, spread garlic butter on both sides of the cut. When you’re done, push the bread back together and wrap it in foil. That’s it,” she said and licked the garlic butter off her finger. “Now, you can put it in the oven.”

“Seems to me it would be faster just to buy the bread already made.”

“You’re spoilt, Richard.”

Richard grabbed her around the waist and kissed her neck. “Yes, I am. Why have a dog and bark yourself? Being wealthy has its advantages, pet.”

Donna narrowed her eyes. “So does being able to do something yourself,” she snorted. “That’s what self-sufficiency means. Isn’t that what this biosphere project is all about? Being self-sufficient.”

“The complex will eventually be self-sufficient, but we’re not yet ready to isolate it from the outside world.”

“I assume we can still go outside.”

“Sure we can. We’re not prisoners down here, pet. We just need to wait, until...” he broke off.

Donna sighed and looked down at her plate. “Until your Dad gets rid of Forrest?”

Richard reached across the table and held her hand. “Try to understand, pet. This really is for the best.”

Donna locked her eyes on his. “Maybe from your point of view, but not mine. Now, are you going to tell me what went on with your grandmother, after I left the room?”

Richard sighed and hesitated. “She doesn’t want the pacemaker, and she doesn’t want you, or Sam, or anyone else from the complex to treat her.”

“I see....”

“I’m sorry, Donna.”

“No – it’s fine.” She stood and pushed her chair under the table. “Your grandmother is entitled to her opinion and so am I.” *The stubborn bitch!*

“Where are you going?”

“To find a way to save stupid people like your grandmother. I’ll be in the genetics lab.”

“What about your meal?”

Donna studied his eyes for a few seconds. “I’m not hungry anymore.” She left.

“Joyce, where’s Sam?” Donna asked as she stepped out of his office.

“He went to the genetics lab.”

“Is anyone with Lady Triplet?”

“No, Donna, but she’s asked not to be disturbed.”

The corners of Donna's mouth twitched. "That's too bad because I'm about to disturb her," she pushed through her teeth.

"VICi," Joyce said. "Connect me with Sam Kaliea."

"What is it Joyce," Sam answered.

"I think you'd better get in here. Donna just came back, and she's going to see Lady Triplet."

"I'm on my way!"

Gary looked up. "What's going on?"

"I'll handle this. Donna is going to talk to Lady Triplet."

Gary's eyes widened. "Oh shit! Call me if you need me."

"Will do!"

Chapter 95

Before Sam even neared Lady Triplet's room, he could hear Donna's voice. Boy was she riled. When he heard her call Lady Triplet a spoiled selfish bitch, he thought it might be time to at least see what was going on. Sam didn't trust Lady Triplet, and if she tried to harm Donna in any way, he would take Donna's part. It didn't matter to him, in the slightest that she was Sir Richard's mother. Out of sight, Sam paused by Lady Triplet's door, listening.

"How dare you speak to me this way!"

Donna softly chuckled. "I'm sorry, Lady Triplet, but I call them as I see them!"

"I knew you would be trouble. You're too much like your mother. You'll never be a proper Triplet. You're too self-righteous!"

"Leave my mother out... of this conversation, Lady Triplet. I could make things extremely uncomfortable for you."

Lady Triplet arched an eyebrow. "How do you think you could do that?"

"Because, if I wanted to, I could wrap your grandson around my little finger, so don't try! If you care anything about your son, or your grandson, you wouldn't put them through this, Lady Triplet. You're not even *considering* what losing you would do to either of them. *That* is what I call selfish!"

Sam stepped through the doorway. "Ahem!" he grinned and softly chuckled. "Mind if I join the party?"

Donna cut her eyes on Sam and smirked. "Let me guess. Joyce called you?"

"Of course she did, but don't worry," Sam leaned his back against the wall and folded his arms across his chest. "I'm just here to observe and make sure you don't give her royal heininess – I mean her royal highness - a black eye. Although,

it would be quite entertaining, I doubt your husband, or your father-in-law would agree.”

Donna narrowed her eyes at Sam. “Do you honestly think I would waste my strength on someone like her?” She turned to leave.

Sam gently held her wrist. “Where are you going?”

“To the genetics lab. She doesn’t want our help. She’s made up her mind. Turn her loose. She wants to die. Why should it bother me? She doesn’t care about her son, or her grandson. She certainly doesn’t care about me, or this baby. I thought I could reason with her, but it’s like talking to the wind.” Donna removed Sam’s hand from her wrist. “She raved about being a great-grandmother, now she’ll be dead before he’s even born!” She turned and headed for the door.

Sam studied Lady Triplet’s eyes. “If I were you, I’d think about what she’s said. Unless you let us help you, or you tell us who your doctor is, so we can talk to him/her, you will be dead before your great-grandson is born.” Sam turned to leave.

“Donna – wait!” Lady Triplet called out.

Donna turned. “I’ll be in the office if you need me,” Sam said and discreetly caressed her wrist.

Donna softly smiled and nodded. “Yes, Lady Triplet?”

Richard finished his meal, cleared away and went to the genetics lab. When Gary told him that Donna had gone to see Lady Triplet and that Joyce had called Sam to the infirmary, he went there himself. Joyce met him in the waiting area. She smiled. It was always pleasant to see Richard. He; however, dismissed her, getting straight to the point. “Where is Sam?”

Sam, who had been monitoring him through VICi, stepped out of his office and approached Joyce and Richard. “Afternoon, Richard,” he spoke cordially. “Is there a problem?”

Richard studied his eyes. “Is Donna in your office?”

“No, she’s in the room with your grandmother.”

“What is she doing in there?”

“Talking to Lady Triplet about being fitted with a pacemaker.”

Richard frowned. “Grandma has already stated her wishes on that matter.”

“Yeah, well, your wife wasn’t happy with Lady Triplet’s answer.”

Richard groaned. “I’d better get in there and....”

Donna came out of Lady Triplet’s room. “Hi Richard,” she softly smiled. “Sam, you need to have a surgical team ready in the morning.”

Sam furrowed his brow. “What for?”

“Lady Triplet’s pacemaker.”

“I thought you wanted to wait until she was stronger.”

“I’ve explained the risks to her, but Lady Triplet doesn’t want to wait. Personally, I don’t think it will make any difference.”

“Something else,” Richard spoke up. “If you don’t do it when Grandma wants to, chances are that she’ll change her mind, or forget.”

Donna chuckled. “That’s kind of what I thought, too. So, Sam, I’ll see you in the morning – provided this baby doesn’t decide otherwise.”

“Are you having trouble with morning sickness, sweetheart?”

“I did this morning, but I think it was nerves.”

Sam grinned and glanced at Richard. “All things considered... it probably was.”

“I’ll let you know if it gets unbearable. Are you coming to the genetics lab?”

“As a matter of fact, I have a date with our newest doctor.”

Donna studied his eyes. “Boy you didn’t waste any time. Did you?”

Richard chuckled. “That’s Sam’s style, pet – conquer and move on to new territory.”

Sam swallowed hard. “That’s normally the case. But even I know when I’ve been defeated. It’s more of a case of licking my wounds.”

Richard grinned. “I’m sure they’re not as deep as you think they are.”

Sam studied Richard’s eyes. *Deeper than they’ve ever been.* “Oh, I’m sure I’ll survive. Anyway... I will talk to Sheila tonight, Pretty Lady, and I will be at your disposal in the morning.”

Donna softly smiled. “Thank you. Now,” she said in turning. She placed her hand in the crook of Richard’s arm. “Let’s go see if we can get started on that vector.” She followed him to the genetics lab.

Richard started preparing culture medium. Using the simulation of her modified HIV1 template from VICi’s database, Donna interfaced the template, with her electron microscope and started isolating and collecting mRNA, from the active HIV1 virus, to be used for reverse transcription. Gary started setting up for the next step; replicating Donna’s modified HIV1 and inserting it into bacterial plasmids.

Donna’s cell phone vibrated. She made sure Richard’s back was turned and quickly unlocked it. Gary frowned and watched her out of the corner of his eye. Donna read the name; the corners of her mouth turned up. She pressed hold and put her cell phone back in her pocket. “I’ll be right back - bathroom break.”

Richard grinned. “Go for me, as well.”

Donna softly smiled. “Richard, in the future that may very well be possible, but right now, I have enough trouble with my own bladder, than worrying about yours.” She unlocked her cell phone. “What did you need?”

Sam chuckled. “Haven’t I already answered that question? I need you.”

Donna pressed her lips into a tight smile and softly chuckled. “Sam, I was in the middle of something. I don’t have time to make small talk with you. Why did you call?”

“I saw the look in your eyes, when I told you I was seeing Sheila, tonight. I just wanted to make sure you understood.”

“What’s to understand? You’re having dinner with a work colleague. I don’t own you, Sam.”

Sam cleared his throat; his voice became serious. “Yes... you do.”

“Ok – fine!” Donna groaned and shook her head. “If that’s the way you want to look at it. Just tell me what you called for. I have work to do.”

“I wanted to make sure you understood this is part of what we talked about. It’s just for show Donna. I’d much rather be having dinner with you. I’d much rather *be* with you, full stop.”

“Sam, I’m married to Richard, now. That changes things between us. I’m not going to dictate what you do or who you do it with. I have to go. I’ll see you in the morning after breakfast.” She ended the call. When she was finished, Donna sat back at her electron microscope and started isolating and collecting more mRNA for reverse transcription.

Gary glanced at Richard and leaned close to Donna’s ear. “Was that Sam?”

“Yes, and he’s starting to get on my nerves. Let’s get this done. I want to get some rest tonight.”

Gary grinned and motioned with his head. “Do you think he’s going to let you?”

“Until Richard’s shoulder heals, I’m in control of that department.”

Gary smirked and shook his head.

Richard put the last of the culture dishes in the incubator and took off his bio-suit. Donna’s stomach rumbled. Without looking up, she reached for a wholegrain cracker. Richard took it and put it back in the packet. “No. We’re going home, and you

are going to eat a proper meal. We've done all we can do tonight. Besides, you have Grandma's surgery in the morning."

Donna grinned. "Wouldn't want to fall asleep and accidentally slit granny's throat."

Richard winced. "Pet, whatever you do, don't *ever* let her hear you call her granny. Grandma would have a stroke."

"Hmm. I'll try to remember that." *If I ever need it.*

Richard laced his fingers with Donna's. "I'll see you in the morning, Gary."

"Night, Gary," Donna said and followed Richard out into the corridor.

Once Liu had compiled all his information on lead mines owned by British Steel, he was looking at about fifty red circles on his map, as possible locations for Sir Richard's lair. By a process of elimination and information he'd coerced from Mildred, one-by-one, Liu had discounted them.

Assuming Mildred's information had been accurate; the mine he was looking for had to meet certain criteria. It couldn't be close to civilisation. It wasn't in range of a cell phone tower, and it couldn't currently be in use as a tourist attraction. Carrshield looked promising until he discovered there were houses within sight of the mine.

Now Liu was left with two red circles, about eleven miles apart, on his map. One of these locations had to be the mine they were looking for.

After several attempts, using '*moor mine lead*' he found a document relating to the purchase of an area of land on Swinhope Moor. At last, he was on the right track. He compared this with his list of mines. There had been a mine at Swinhope. British Steel had purchased an old lead mine to mine fluorspar. The mine had closed in 1960 but, the report said it had been used to dump waste taken from Allenheads Mine.

Liu looked the mine up on his ordinance survey map and found Swinhope Moor, but no label for Swinhope Mine.

By using the map reference he'd found, he was able to get an aerial view using Google Earth. It showed traces of a road, apparently leading to nowhere other than a large area of bare ground. It didn't look promising. Liu filled his cup with tea and tried again.

Remembering the comment he'd found about the mine at Allenheads, Liu returned to his map and traced the route from Swinhope Moor to Allenheads. He almost missed it! The web page had said that they had taken waste material from Allenheads Mine to Swinhope; yet, the road involved was extremely narrow, steep and had several hairpin bends. *With a full load, what sort of truck could have made it up that kind of incline?*

He re-examined Swinhope. The area was extremely remote with the nearest residence being on the other side of the hill. More than a mile away, in the other direction, there was a farm, and there were no cell phone towers in the area. He found complaints in the villages of Allenheads, Carrshield and Allendale Town that cell phones were inoperative. It fit!

Liu narrowed his eyes and smiled. "First, Mohope Head, and then Swinhope," he mused. "Now, maybe we can end this game and I can go home and claim my rewards."

Chapter 96

Because his guide had failed to warn him to duck; the only thing Liu got from Mohope mine was a cracked lip, from an overhang of rock he'd banged into. Since Liu didn't sleep much, last night, he napped on the way to their next destination. Sing, Liu's guide pulled off onto the verge near the road to Swinhope mine. "We're here, John," Sing said as he shook Liu awake.

Liu yawned and straightened in his seat. As he reached for his seatbelt buckle, his satellite phone rang. "Mr. Liu, this is Dr. Phorrestson, at Royal Victoria Infirmary. Mr. Forrest has suffered another stroke. He's in ICU. He's been asking for you. I've given him medication to bring his blood pressure down, and I've given him several units of whole blood, but there were complications. He's not going to last much longer."

Liu walked out of earshot. "I am very close to concluding my assignment. I know Mr. Forrest wouldn't want me to stop now. Tell him I will be there as soon as I can." He ended the call and walked back to the jeep. "Let's get busy!"

When they were done with breakfast, Richard escorted Donna to the infirmary. Sam stepped out of his office. "Well, how did your date with Sheila go?" Richard asked.

Sam grinned. "Wouldn't you like to know? Good morning, Pretty Lady," he smiled. "Ready to get to work?"

"Yep."

"No bending over the porcelain god before breakfast, I hope."

"Not this morning. I explained the situation to Rich last night before I went to bed."

Sam arched an eyebrow. "Another one of those telepathic conversations, I assume?"

Donna frowned. "Yes, Sam. It was." She turned to face Richard and kissed him.

Richard smiled. "I'll see you later. Behave yourself, Sam," he warned and left.

Sam waited until Richard had left the infirmary. He reached for Donna's hand and led her to the scrub room. "You never told me what you said to Lady Triplet last night, to change her mind."

"I reminded her that there were other people's feelings to be considered."

"Threatening to turn Richard against her didn't hurt."

Donna chuckled. "No, but I hope I don't have to follow through with that!"

Richard was walking across the corridor to the genetics lab when Sir Richard, John, and Gary came running toward them. He followed them to the security room. "What's going on?"

"Someone is snooping around the old mine entrance," Gary responded. "VICi's proximity alarm went off."

"VICi, access front entrance security cameras."

The wallscreen showed two men, carrying torches and other equipment at the entrance of the complex. "They're probably either tourists or cave explorers," John said.

Sir Richard narrowed his eyes. "Just watch them for a while, to be sure."

Sheila was in the scrub room, when Sam and Donna got there. She looked up and grinned at Sam. "I see you managed to crawl out of bed, after all," she chuckled.

Sam frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"Joyce isn't here. She wasn't feeling well this morning. Said she had a migraine and asked if I would serve as your scrub nurse. Hadn't you noticed she wasn't here?"

"No," Sam groaned. "I hadn't."

"Good morning, Dr. Rigden. I'm looking forward to working with you."

Donna turned on the water and started scrubbing her hands. “Morning, Sheila. I prefer Donna, if you don’t mind,” she responded tersely.

“No, that’s fine. Sam, you have a beautiful piano and you’re a very talented musician. When are you going to show me the rest... of your talents?”

Donna pretended not to listen. She hummed to herself, as she reached for a brush and started cleaning her nails.

Sam swallowed hard and glanced at Donna. “You’ve seen all you’re going to see, Sheila,” he said, holding up his hands to be gloved. Donna held up her hands. “That’s a beautiful ring, Donna. Richard’s grandmother obviously approves of you.”

Donna arched an eyebrow. “We tolerate each other,” she responded and went into the OR. She leaned down, so her patient could see her. “Are you feeling nice and relaxed, Lady Triplet?”

“Yes, Dear, thank you.”

“OK, we’re going to give you a little something to make you groggy.” Donna nodded.

“Lady Triplet, I want you to count backwards from ten for me,” the anaesthesiologist said.

One man examined the pair of rusty narrow gauge rail tracks while another one concentrated on the huge concrete slab. Finding it unyielding, he took a digital camera from one of his pockets and snapped a few shots. He examined the side of the slab, looking directly into the camera lens.

Liu could see no evidence of recent visitors to the mine. After wandering around a little more, they got in their car and drove off.

A little less than a mile away, Liu stopped on the left where a dirt road led up the hill. Blocking vehicle access was a single-bar swing gate with a huge padlock on it. They walked round the gate, and down the narrow road. The road was wide enough for a truck but obviously didn’t get a lot of use. It would

around until it stopped at a huge circular gravel drive surrounded by a tall mound of earth.

There was a timber building with a porch off to the left. Walking around it, Liu discovered another building behind it. The door to that building wasn't locked so he went inside. Apart from the low bench that surrounded the room, it was empty. Finding nothing of interest, he turned his attention back to the other building with the veranda. The windows were covered and padlocked, as was the door. He pressed his shoulder against the door, and gave it a couple of strong shoves. It wouldn't budge.

Liu walked toward the gravel drive. Something shiny on the ground caught his attention, and he went to investigate. Kneeling down, he found a metal strip partially covered by the gravel. He attempted to rake the loose gravel aside, only to find it was embedded in the metal. Examining its edges he realised what he was standing on was a metal door about twelve feet wide, cleverly camouflaged with embedded and loose gravel.

John watched them wandering about aimlessly, around and over the mound of earth. One of them tugged at the hatchway and traced its edge. There was little else to see. He took a short movie with his camera. They examined the backdoor entrance to the complex. It was originally an old missile silo briefly used, in the late 50's, for the UK nuclear deterrent, the Blue Streak missile.

Sir Richard groaned. "Until the Internet mapping services started putting aerial photographs of the area on the web, no one knew that was there. Now we get a few visitors every year. It's not a problem to us, since they can't get in. These men have obviously seen the site on Internet, and have come to investigate."

Liu and his men retraced their steps back to the car. They drove back towards the mine about a thousand yards, and got out. Guided by a portable GPS system, they walked across the open

fell up the hill. They could vaguely make out another road, much older than the other one. Eventually they reached a dry-stone wall surrounding a mineshaft.

The shaft was blocked with what appeared to be old, rusty mine rails. In places, concrete had been put over the bars, but most of it had fallen away. Liu's assistant picked up a loose stone and dropped it down the shaft. They waited for it to hit bottom; there was no sound.

Walking back to the car, Liu noted that the shaft was almost in a direct line with the mine entrance over the brow of the hill. Liu and his assistant changed into their gear. They each had plastic helmets fitted with miner's lamps, climbing equipment and a large coil of rope. Anticipating it would be cold and wet at the bottom of the shaft, they changed into wet suits and overalls. They put on climbing boots and harnesses and made their way back to the shaft.

"It appears we are going to have some visitors," John said. "Not the first time. We've had people visit before who gained access through the old lead mine entrance near the stream. They didn't know they were being watched. Tim and I found it quite entertaining. The complex is blocked off behind a concealed doorway that looks like a rock fall. They couldn't get in."

Sir Richard sighed. "It seems these two plan to use the old ventilation shaft to get in past the block."

The complex was secure. Intruders could only gain access to the upper levels. When they got to the main level, they would find their way blocked by another rock fall. This block was made up of bigger stones that were too heavy to shift. In order to supply the mine with clean air, gaps were left, but the gaps were too small for anyone to get through.

Liu and his assistant, Sing, moved some of the bars covering the shaft. They anchored the end of their rope by tying it to one of the bars left, and dropped it down the shaft. Sing, an expert

climber, went first. He clipped onto the rope, and started descending.

The vertical shaft was cased in stone blocks for the first ten feet, and then turned to solid rock. About a hundred and seventy feet down there was a ledge. Fastened to the wall from this ledge, were the remains of a wooden ladder going down. Sing called up to Liu. He knew, by pulling on the rope, he could slow Liu's descent, if he got out of control.

"It's a lot deeper than I thought," Liu said peering over the ledge. He ran his hand along the solid rock wall. He couldn't help but admire the men who sank the shaft using only hand drills and gunpowder.

Sing hammered a piton into a crack, and attached another rope to continue their descent.

"Is it normal to have a draft going down a shaft like this?" Liu asked.

"There's normally a certain amount of air movement," Sing replied. "Down here, the temperature stays, more or less, a constant ten degrees Celsius. If the temperature is hotter or colder up top, then you get air movement. This does seem stronger than normal though. Maybe something is pulling air in."

Liu checked the gun in his overalls. "Like a ventilation system..."

It was another hundred and twenty feet to the base of the shaft. When they reached it, they found passages leading off northwest and southeast. A wooden door was fastened across the southeast tunnel. Sing tested it and found it still swung easily. The draft, however, blew northwest. "Let's go this way first," Liu said, and they headed in that direction.

Richard pointed to the screen. "That shorter guy looks like he knows what he's doing. The other one looks vaguely familiar. Notice how he ignored the southeast route, and chose to follow our ventilation draft."

"Maybe we should shut the fans down," Gary suggested.

“If we shut them down now, he’ll be even more suspicious,” Sir Richard responded.

John grinned. “Let’s see how they deal with the other block.”

Sing and Liu rounded a bend in the tunnel and found themselves at the rock fall. “It can’t extend far,” Sing said. “The air current seems to be going through the rocks.”

Liu wasn’t surprised to find their way blocked. He reached between two of the rocks as though trying to pull them apart then gave up. They tried using a loose iron rail from the track to pry the rocks apart. Even with both of them hanging on the rail, the rocks wouldn’t budge. The only way they could get through the block would be to blast it. “Let’s explore through that doorway,” Liu suggested.

They walked back to the base of the shaft, and spent some more time exploring the southeast tunnels. Eventually, they made their way back. Sing showed Liu how to climb the rope using single-rope ascending technique. Even though they were reasonably fit, they were out of breath by the time they reached the top of the shaft. They sat and shared a canteen as they rested and discussed their exploration.

“I still think they were just explorers,” John commented.

“Probably so,” Sir Richard said, straightening up and turning. “What did Donna say to Mum that made her change her mind about the pacemaker?”

Richard shrugged. “I don’t know Dad,” he said as he followed him out into the corridor. Gary and John followed close behind. “I wasn’t there. You’d have to ask Sam or Donna. I’ll see you later,” he said and followed Gary back to the genetics lab.

Richard’s cell phone rang. He put in his Bluetooth ear bud and continued to work. “Richard, it’s Jeff. I need to see you in the entertainment hall that we’re setting up for Donna.”

“Can you wait a little while? I just started working on something.”

“If you want everything working by tomorrow night, no. It can’t wait.”

Richard groaned. “All right. I’ll be there in about ten minutes.” He ended the call. “Gary, Mate, I’m sorry, but that was Jeff. He needs me in the entertainment hall.”

“Go on. I’ll take care of this. I still think you should have warned Donna. Building her an entertainment hall is one thing, but building one that’s exactly like Jared’s, might not get the reaction you’re hoping for.”

Richard grinned. “I’ll take that chance,” he said and headed for the door.

“OK, but don’t say I didn’t warn you!” Gary called out.

Once Sam and Donna finished with Lady Triplet’s surgery, they went back to the changing room and put on fresh scrubs. “I think that went well,” Sam commented and pulled her close.

Donna loosely wrapped her arms around his waist, looking up at him and studying his eyes. “So... did you have a pleasant date, last night?”

Sam narrowed his eyes; one corner of his mouth turned up. “I knew you were jealous. You were jealous last night when you found out I was seeing Sheila, and you were jealous because I was talking to her in the scrub room.”

“I’m not jealous. I was just trying to understand why you felt you had to go out with her. I thought you were meeting in the cafeteria. You didn’t say you were taking her back to your quarters.”

Sam lifted her chin and tenderly kissed her. “We talked about work, sweetheart.”

Donna cocked her head to one side. “Since when has work had anything to do with you playing the piano for her?”

“...And singing – don’t forget that part,” Sheila interjected as she entered the room.

Donna's eyes widened. "Shit!" She hissed. She and Sam slowly turned.

"Oh! Don't mind me."

"You're not going to tell Richard?" Sam asked.

"If Richard slept around on Donna like he did with me, as far as I'm concerned, Richard is getting what he deserves. I haven't seen a thing."

Donna let her breath out, relieved. She stepped beside Sam, holding his hand. "I'm sorry, Sheila. My relationship with my... husband is complicated."

"That's an understatement," Sam snorted.

Donna briefly explained the situation, leaving out the details about Jared and Sarabeth, and the fact that she believed Richard was blackmailing her. Sheila took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Wow – that is complicated. It explains why you behaved the way you did last night," she said, turning her attention to Sam.

Sam grinned. "Well, I didn't want to... disappoint you, Sheila, but as far as I'm concerned, I'm taken."

"Oh, I understand. There's something else I think you should know. It's about Joyce."

"What's that?"

"Just between the three of us, I don't think Joyce had a migraine. I think she's trying to avoid Richard's grandmother, for some reason."

Sam furrowed his brow. "That's strange. As far as I know, she's never seen Lady Triplet, before we brought her here."

"Yeah, well, anyway. I'm running back to my quarters and grabbing a few more hours sleep. I wasn't supposed to start work until two this afternoon. I'll see you two later."

Donna waited until Sheila had left the room. "Do you think she'll tell Richard what she saw?"

"She said she wouldn't."

"Yeah, but can we trust her?"

Chapter 97

“Where is everybody?” Donna mused as she and Sam entered an empty genetics lab.

Gary came from the back. “Richard had to take care of something. I just finished checking on the cultures.”

“Did we get the growth we were hoping for?” Donna asked.

Gary softly smiled. “I think there’s enough there to keep you busy for a while.”

“In that case, I guess I’d better roll my sleeves up and get busy, then. If things go to plan, we should be able to run the first set of tests in a couple of hours.”

When Richard finished helping Jeff, he decided to check with Alice to make sure everything else was set up, for the grand opening of Donna’s entertainment hall.

“Master Richard,” Alice responded. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. Your job will be to get Donna to the cafeteria. Alice, Alan and I will take care of the rest.”

“I’ll get her there – somehow. I’d better get back,” Richard responded. “Donna and Sam should be finished with Grandma’s surgery, by now. She’ll be wondering what happened to me.”

“What is your grandmother going to do, after she’s recovered? Is she going back to the castle, or staying here?”

Richard sighed and stood to leave. “Jack and Vera and the other house staff can take care of the castle. There’s no reason for her to go back, but knowing Grandma, she probably will. I’ll see you at lunch, unless Donna decides to make lunch for us.”

“Wait! I’ll be right back.” Alice said and disappeared into the kitchen. She came back and handed Richard something warm rolled up in a cloth napkin.

Richard sniffed and smiled. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Just took them out of the oven. I thought you might like to take Donna some.”

“Thanks, Alice,” Richard smiled, stepped out of earshot and unlocked his cell phone.

“Sam, it’s Richard. Where’s Donna?”

Sam glanced over his shoulder. “She just went in the back to check on the animals.”

“That must mean she’s running the first set of tests. Then the cultures were successful?”

“Yes. There was enough for the first set of tests.”

“Meet me. I’m in the cafeteria.”

“I’m a little busy, right now, doing your job. What is this about?”

“Donna and it’s important. I need your help.”

“I’ll be there, when I finish with this culture dish.”

“Fine, but don’t tell Donna.” The call ended. Sam sighed in exasperation and put his cell phone away. He frowned. “What the fuck is he up to now?” he mused.

Gary looked up and pushed his glasses back in place. “Pardon?”

“That was Richard. He wants me to meet him in the cafeteria.”

One of Gary’s eyebrows slowly lifted. “Now?”

“He said he needed my help.”

“With what?”

Sam put the culture dish he was working with in the incubator and turned. “I don’t know, but he said it was important and that it had something to do with Donna. I’m going to see what he wants. Tell Donna I went to pick up lunch.”

Gary glanced at his watch. “It’s a little early for lunch.”

“I know, but it gives me an excuse. Richard doesn’t want Donna to know about this.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

Sam sighed. “Neither do I.” He headed for the door.

Liu walked into Forrest's hospital room and found him lying in bed, reclined at a forty-five degree angle. He looked frail and sickly, but had a bit of colour in his cheeks due to the fresh infusion of red blood cells the doctor had given him. Liu sat in a chair beside the bed.

Forrest glared at him. "Why the fuck didn't you come when I sent for you?" He broke out in a coughing fit.

Liu handed him a glass of water. Forrest took a sip and shoved it back at him, splashing water on the front of Liu's clean shirt. "Because I was there, at the door to Sir Richard's lair. They were watching every move we made. They thought we were mine explorers."

Forrest's eyes widened. "Then you have it? You have the cure? How did Rigden die?"

"She hasn't - yet. Once we have what we need, I figured you would want to witness her death."

"You fucking fool! If you knew Sir Richard was watching you, what makes you think he didn't know why you were there? You underestimate your enemy, Mr. Liu. You should have jumped at the opportunity. Sir Richard will never let you that close again!"

Liu smiled smugly. "But I *did* jump at the opportunity, Sir. Let me show you. And remember, if she and Triplet's son are married, she's no longer a Rigden." He set a laptop on Forrest's food tray, and pushed it so Forrest could see. Liu clicked on the webcam icon in the taskbar and waited. A few seconds later an image appeared.

Forrest studied Liu's eyes. "Do you think I care what her surname is?"

"Probably not," Liu sighed.

Forrest moved his finger around on the touchpad and turned up the volume. They began to hear pots clanking, machine sounds from what appeared to be a kitchen. He adjusted the directional microphone on the bug, and the voices became clearer.

Alice was busy preparing the fresh vegetable and fruit tray. A timer went off. "Rita put the tray of hors d'oeuvres on the rack to cool and put the last of the shortbread in the oven."

"I thought Lady Triplet preferred her biscuits while they were hot."

"I'll bake another batch, right before the party."

Forrest narrowed his eyes. "Where is this?"

"In the old Swinhope mine," Liu smiled.

Forrest's evil grin returned. "So, that's where the old bitch has been hiding out?"

"It would seem so, Sir."

Forrest frowned. "But this is a kitchen. Where's the lab? That's where Rigden will be."

"I figured I would use the old 'waterhole' strategy and let her come to us, instead of risking them finding my bugs."

"It looks as if they're planning some kind of celebration."

"Yes, Sir, it does."

"But that doesn't mean it's about Rigden. You don't even know if she's there."

"If she is, sooner or later, she will have to eat. When she does...."

Forrest groaned. "I don't have a 'later' Liu. The doctor has given me a transfusion, and the last of the harvested stem cells. I have to either get the cure or find another donor. He warned the time was fast approaching when the transfusions would not be enough."

"This food preparation has to be for a reason. I have a hunch that sometime tonight, Dr. Triplet will show. When she does, I'll be ready. I have to get out closer to the mine for this to work. I'm going to leave this laptop, so you can monitor from here. There's a voice link if you want to talk to me. I'll be able to hear through my Bluetooth ear bud."

"This had better work!"

Liu stood to leave. "Oh... trust me, Sir. It will work, but until I link our laptops together, the screen will go blank. Once

I get set up on location, your picture will come back on. Soon, you'll have your cure, and your revenge." Liu grinned and left.

Forrest smiled smugly. "In more ways than one... Mr. Liu," he mused.

"Sir Richard, it's Pam, at the Centre. I'm sorry to bother you, but since Mildred died, I didn't know whether you wanted your calls put through to the Hall, or what."

Sir Richard pressed his palm to his forehead and sighed. "Melissa Hart is taking Mildred's place. All calls need to be put through to her."

"I'm sorry, Sir. I didn't know. I have Jasmine White, from the pathology department at the Royal Victorian Infirmary, on hold. She's trying to reach Dr. Kaliea. She says it's important."

"It's OK, Pam. It's my fault. I'll take care of it. Put her through. I'll talk to her."

"Yes, Sir."

"Miss White, this is Sir Richard. I understand you're trying to reach Sam. He's unavailable, at the moment. Was there something I could help you with?"

"Sam wanted me to let him know if Mr. Forrest was brought back to the hospital."

Sir Richard narrowed his eyes and leaned forward. "And...?"

"He was re-admitted to intensive care a couple of hours ago. I've been trying to reach Sam since I found out. Mr. Forrest is being constantly monitored. They won't let anyone in to see him. The press are going mad, but his associate refuses to comment on Mr. Forrest's condition."

"I'll pass that information along. Thank you, Miss White," he said and ended the call. He turned to John. "That was one of Sam's associates, Jasmine White, at the RVI. She said Forrest had been admitted to intensive care. Do we know anything about this?"

John frowned. "No, Sir, but I'll get someone to check on it."

“I’m going to talk to Sam first, since this is a medical matter, and see if he knows anyone at RVI that might be able to find out more about Forrest’s condition. One thing for sure, this puts a damper on our plans.”

“If we’re lucky, he’ll die and do us all a favour.”

Sir Richard sighed. “It would certainly patch-up things between me and Donna, and between her and Ricky, as well. Hang on a second. Let me take care of something, before I forget it. VICi, connect me with Gary Browne.”

“What do you need, Sir Richard?”

“Gary, I need you to reroute incoming communication to Missy’s desk. From now on, she’ll be screening outside calls.”

“Give me just a second and I’ll take care of that for you.”

“Finish whatever you’re doing. There’s no rush, just as long as it gets done today. How’s the testing going?”

“Donna is analysing samples from the first set of tests now, Sir. She’s smiling, so that must mean good news.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I’ve visited with Mum. Is Sam handy?”

Gary glanced over his shoulder and stepped out of earshot. “No, Sir. He’s – ah – he’s meeting with Richard, in the cafeteria.”

“Really? Listen, there’s something else I wanted to talk to you about. Do you have a link with RVI’s database?”

“No, Sir, I don’t and the only way to establish one would be from the inside. I can’t get past their firewall. It’s more sophisticated than the hospital in Wickenburg, and we don’t have Jared to help us.”

Sir Richard paused and scratched his head. “Hmm. I guess that wouldn’t work then.”

“Why? What’s up?”

“Miss White just called, trying to reach Sam. Forrest is in intensive care again. I was hoping we could find out the status of his condition. If he’s dying, we wouldn’t want anything to interfere with that.”

John chuckled. "Perhaps Gary could add a 'do not resuscitate' order to his medical records."

"I could... if I could get in," Gary interjected.

"We'll keep that option open," Sir Richard responded. "I'll see you in a few minutes. VICi, end communication." Sir Richard stood. "I'm going to see Mum. Want to ...?"

The wallscreen flashed. "Sorry to bother you, Sir, but I have Vera on the phone. A Mr. Victor Van Holden, from Amsterdam is trying to reach your mother."

Sir Richard grinned. "At least we know who *one* of Mum's informants is," he softly chuckled. "Check with Sheila, first. If Mum is up to it, then put the call through. VICi, end communication. I think I'll go see Sam first, and give Mum a chance to chat with her... friend."

Sheila confirmed that Lady Triplet had recovered enough to talk. "Put the call on hold. I'll check and see if Lady Triplet is awake." Sheila lightly tapped on the door and eased it open. "Are you awake, Lady Triplet?"

Lady Triplet looked up from her book. "Obviously," she responded tersely.

"There's a call for you from Amsterdam. A Mr. Van Holden. Do you want to talk to him?"

Lady Triplet furrowed her brow, and narrowed her eyes; trying to place who he could be. "Van Holden..." she mused.

"He says he's a friend of yours. Do you remember him?" Lady Triplet didn't respond. "Perhaps you're still a little confused. Shall I take a message and tell him you'll ring back?"

Lady Triplet's eyes widened; she put her book away and pulled the sheet up over her breasts. "No, it's fine. I'll speak with him."

"VICi, take call off hold. I'll leave you alone," Sheila said and left. She stood just on the other side of the door, listening.

"Annabelle. It's Victor. It was good to see you, again. Our visits seem to be few and far between, now. How are you?"

“I’m fine... Victor. It was... good to see you, again, too.”
Who in the hell is he?

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I came across some information, since our last meeting.”

“Last meeting...?”

“Of The Order – where you told everyone off, for trying to black list Sir Richard.”

Blacklist Sir Richard? Who in the hell is he, and what is he on about? “Oh yes – that!” she feigned a growl. “How dare they try and blacklist my son! They *needed* to be put in their places.”

Victor chuckled. “*That, they did.*”

“You said you had some information for me....”

“Yes. You need to be on your guard. It seems Forrest has some nasty plans for your grandson and his bride to be.”

Lady Triplet sat up straight. “Tell me....”

Chapter 98

Sam studied Sir Richard's eyes. "You want me to talk Jazz into uploading 'Acid Rain' to RVI's database? Are you kidding? Sir Richard, I'd rather not deal with Jasmine. We had a – ah – misunderstanding. I'm surprised she even let me know about Forrest."

"Then maybe you know someone else there, who could help us."

Sam snorted. "Sir Richard, I'm not interested in re-establishing my... female connections. Besides, now that Richard and Donna are married, I've sort of set my sights on someone else."

Sir Richard arched an eyebrow. "Anyone I know?" he hedged.

Sam swallowed hard and said the first name that came to mind. "Dr. McGowan."

Sir Richard's eyebrows shot up. "Really? It's nice to see you're moving on. Let me give you a word of warning. Her older brother – Timothy McGowan – is extremely protective of his little sister and can carry a lifetime grudge. He won't hesitate to rearrange your face."

Sam pursed his lips and winced. "I'll... keep that in mind."

Sir Richard waved it off. "Anyway, getting back on the subject. Will you consider asking Miss White if she'll help us?"

"Is this an order?"

Sir Richard grinned. "It could be, but I'd rather have your cooperation."

Sam studied Sir Richard's eyes. He forced the air from his lungs. "I'll see what I can do."

Sir Richard looked at his watch and stood. "Use that playboy charm of yours," he softly chuckled. "VICi, has Lady Triplet finished with her call from Amsterdam?"

VICi; Checking line. Negative. The line to Lady Triplet's infirmary room is still engaged.

"In that case, I'll go see what Donna found out first."

Sam's head jerked up. "What do you mean, Sir?"

"I just talked to Gary. Donna was analysing the samples from the first set of tests."

Sam stood; his eyes widened. "Let me get lunch, and I'll go back with you." Sam approached the counter. "Two meals and two fruit salads, with poppy seed and lemon dressing, Alice. Sprinkle a handful of pomegranate seeds over the top, please, and make those to go."

Alice smiled as Sir Richard approached the counter. "Will that be all?" she asked.

"Add another fruit salad to that," Sir Richard interjected. "I've changed my mind. I'll have lunch with you four, and then go see Mum. Maybe she'll be in a better mood, after her phone call. I want you to work with John and Gary and get this thing sorted with Miss White."

Sam groaned and collected the lunches. "I'll see what I can do, Sir, but like I said. Jasmine and I had a misunderstanding."

Sir Richard grinned and patted Sam's shoulder. "I'm sure you can sort it out."

The RVI doctor was solemn. "Mr. Forrest, I've checked your test results. The new treatment isn't working. I'm afraid the only thing I can do for you, now is give you morphine, and other pain killers to keep you reasonably comfortable, but that's about all. You haven't changed your mind, about the other thing we talked about?"

"No!" Forrest groaned. "I don't want to die a fucking zombie. I'll deal with the pain. When the end is near, I expect my wishes to be carried out." The doctor stood to leave. Forrest grabbed his arm. "All... of my wishes," he warned.

The doctor studied Forrest's eyes and nodded. "Of course, Mr. Forrest. I'll check on you later. I've left orders for you to

be given pain killers every six hours. If you wish to remain alert, that's about all I can give you. Try and get some rest."

Forrest squeezed his eyes shut. It was beginning to dawn on him that if he had handled the situation with Donna differently, she probably would have helped him. It was too late to start feeling remorse now.

Donna, Richard, Gary, Sam and Sir Richard gathered around the table, in the genetics lab lounge. Sam passed out their meals. Gary and Richard had bangers and apple mash, spring greens and mint sauce. For dessert, they had apple rhubarb crumble with custard and cream. Donna swallowed hard when she saw what they were having.

Cautiously, she lifted her lid and sighed with relief. She glanced at Sam and softly smiled. Her mouth watered, now eager to get tucked into her lunch. "It's good to see you're taking my advice," Donna said to Sir Richard.

Sir Richard smiled. "I trust your judgement."

"Too bad Richard won't follow suit," Sam grumbled.

Donna looked at Richard's plate and shook her head. "He's right, you know. The way you eat, it's a good thing we were successful. Otherwise, I might have to raise this baby alone."

Sir Richard's head jerked up; his eyes twinkled. "What did you say?"

Sam studied Donna's eyes; one corner of his mouth turned up. "The test was successful?"

Richard smiled. "You have a working virus?"

Donna reflected his smile. "As far as I can tell, yes, and I was right. The EHG works fast. All we have to do now is run more tests and study the long-term effects."

Sir Richard frowned. "How long will that take?"

"That's difficult to say, Dad. I wouldn't feel safe using it on a human, until I can make sure cell growth stays under control. So far, the tests I've run indicate rapid regeneration – the same results we saw in Missy, and Alan - with no carcinoma."

"How is Alan, by the way?" Gary asked.

“He’s doing fine,” Sam spoke up. “However, he is having a slight problem.”

Sir Richard’s smile faded. “What kind of problem, Son?”

“He said he’s been feeling incredibly randy lately, and he hasn’t felt that way in years,” Sam laughed. The other men laughed along with Sam.

Donna pressed her lips into a thin line and shook her head; her cheeks showing some colour. “I might have known,” she groaned. “Anyway... I think we’re making some real progress, now.” She swallowed hard. “And, whether anyone wants to give him credit or not... we have Jared to thank for that.”

Sir Richard smiled. “Yes, petal... we do.”

Liu drove back to Coalcleugh and set up his radio transmitting equipment. If there was an event taking place, he wanted to know what it was about. He flew his bug around the room to find the best possible position, and decided to land it on the ceiling in the middle of the room facing the door. He adjusted the camera angle to maximum zoom and called Forrest.

Eli and Forrest were talking, when the call came through to Forrest’s cell phone. Forrest read the name. “It’s him. Keep it down. What is it Liu?”

“Everything is set up, and I’ve got good news. By listening to random conversations in the cafeteria, I’ve managed to find out what the celebration is about.”

“What is it?”

“Apparently, Triplet’s son has built his new wife an entertainment hall, in the complex. He’s planning on presenting it to her tonight, as a wedding present. Considering she’s the centre of the celebration, all we have to do is wait.”

“What about the cure? Has she perfected it?”

“I’m hoping that’s something else we’ll find out, tonight, at the party.”

Forrest roughened his voice. “It seems you and I have a different definition for ‘good news’ Mr. Liu. We still don’t

know jack shit! You said my screen would come back on. I still can't see a fucking thing!"

"I'm sorry, Sir. I was about to connect the link. There... is that better?"

Forrest grinned. "Yes, at least you did that right!" he growled and started coughing and wheezing. "I have to go now. The nurse has brought me some more pain killer. Notify me when you know more." Forrest ended the call and turned to Eli. "Is everything set up on our end?"

"Yes, it is."

"You might show a little more respect for a dying man."

"I'm sorry. Yes, it is, Sir. Is that better?"

"Arrogant asshole. I have a chore for you. Since it's likely I'll be speaking with Sir Richard, sometime tomorrow, I want to be prepared, beforehand."

"In what way?"

"As you know, I've been waiting for this moment for a long time. Go to our hotel suite, and bring back one of my finest suits. I intend to look my best. I want you to bring in a makeup team and hairdresser. I want you to go out and buy me a box of cigars."

"Against your doctor's advice you're going to smoke a cigar?"

Forrest responded quickly. "No! Are you kidding? I'm not going to smoke the fucking cigar. It's just for appearances. I have to make this look good. Now get out of here and do as I told you!"

Eli groaned. "If you don't plan on talking to Sir Richard until tomorrow, what's the big hurry?"

"Because that prick just might pull it off tonight. I want to be ready, in case he does."

Eli groaned again and stood to leave. "Sometimes I wonder why I put up with you," he said and left the room.

Lady Triplet was quite shaken after her phone conversation with Victor Van Holden. When the call ended, VICi automatically

disconnected the line, but Lady Triplet didn't know what to say to contact Sir Richard. She started shouting for someone. When no one came, she got out of bed and stumbled to the door. "Is anyone here?" she shouted again.

Sheila was in the exam room, dealing with another patient. She rolled her eyes. "Would you excuse me a moment, please? Mrs. High and Mighty has her knickers in a twist."

The miner sitting on the exam table gave her a strange look. "Eh?"

Sheila waved a dismissive hand. "Never mind. She'll wake the dead, if I don't see what she wants. I'll be right back."

"Whey aye," the miner chuckled.

"Lady Triplet, will you keep it down. What is your problem?"

"I need to speak to my son immediately. Where is he?"

Lady Triplet staggered; Sheila caught her arm and started leading her back to her room. "I don't know, but if you'll give me time to get finished with this patient, I'll see if I can locate him for you. Now get back in that bed and stay there."

Sheila pulled the covers up around Lady Triplet. "That patient can wait! This is important," she insisted and tried to get back up. Sheila pushed her back down.

"Lady Triplet, don't make me sedate you again."

Lady Triplet glared at her. "Do that and you'll regret it – mark my words – young lady! Where's Joyce? Isn't she supposed to be in charge of patient care?"

"She's not here, today. She wasn't feeling well."

Lady Triplet arched an eyebrow. "What's wrong with her?"

"She'll be here tomorrow. If you want to know, you can ask her then." Sheila turned to leave.

"Wait a minute! Where are you going? I told you I needed to speak with my son!"

"Fine!" Sheila groaned. "I'll go find him now." She went back to the exam room. "I'm sorry, about that," she said as she taped the bandage and snipped off the end. "There, that is going to be sore for a few days." She reached into the cabinet

and handed the miner a tube of antibiotic cream and some fresh bandages. "Are you married?"

"Aye."

"Before you get ready for bed tonight, get her to put some of that cream on it and change the bandage."

"Thanks, Doc," the miner said and left.

Sheila waited until he was out of earshot. "VICi, where is Sir Richard?"

VICi; Sir Richard is in the genetics lab lounge.

Sheila crossed the corridor and entered the room. She glanced at Sam and softly smiled. "Excuse me, Sir," she said, turning her attention to Sir Richard. "I'm sorry to disturb your lunch, but your mum is demanding to speak to you at once. She says it's very important."

Sir Richard stood. "I better go see what she wants."

"Please do, Sir. She's been wailing like a banshee."

Sir Richard chuckled. "Thanks, Sheila," he said and left.

One side of Sam's mouth turned up. "Hello, Sheila."

Sheila reflected his grin. "Hi, Sam. I have to pop back to the infirmary for a second, but I was about to go to lunch. Care to join me?"

Sam glanced at Donna out of the corner of his eye and stood. "Sure. I've already had mine, but I'll tag a long and keep you company. Richard. Gary. Pretty Lady. I'll see you later," he said, offered Sheila his arm and led her out into the corridor. "Why don't we have lunch in the park?"

"OK. I'll meet you there," Sheila said and went in the infirmary.

Donna sighed, gathered the empty food containers and put them in the bin. She took Richard's hand and laced her fingers with his. "It's going to be a while, before I can collect samples from the primates. I think I'd like to spend some time with my husband. If that's all right with you?"

Gary shrugged. "Yeah – sure. I think I'll drop by the electronics lab and bug Jeff."

“We’ll see you later, then,” Richard smiled. “If I let her out of my arms.”

“TMI, Richard,” Gary groaned.

“Forrest had planned to have one of his goons on the roof across from St Nicholas, with the intention of kidnapping Richard and Donna. Worse than that, and just to show you how mad he is....”

Sir Richard tightened his jaw and held up an imperious hand. “Forrest had plans to do what, to Richard and Donna?”

“I have it on good authority that Forrest’s plans were to shoot Ricky in the gonads to prevent him from fathering a child with Donna or any other woman. He’s trying to destroy the bloodline. Richard we have to do something! We have to strike back!”

“I know that Mum, I’m just not sure how we’re going to do that, now.”

Lady Triplet narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Forrest is back in the intensive care room, at the RVI. Unless Sam can convince his friend to help us, there’s not a lot we can do, but hope this will be the end for him. If Sam comes through, someone is going to make sure Forrest’s medical record has a ‘do not resuscitate’ order on it.”

“That man will never go that easily, Richard. You know that, but we could make *sure* he does.”

“How? Forrest is *not* going to let *anyone* get close to him. It’s too risky, Mum!”

“What about Donna? Surely she could develop a discreet method of getting rid of him.”

Sir Richard sat on the side of the bed. He shoved a hand through his hair and sighed. “Mum, you know how she felt about our original plan. I don’t think it would be easy to convince Donna to ‘get rid’ of anybody. She’s dedicated to preserving life, not destroying it.”

Lady Triplet slapped the bed; Sir Richard started. “Donna is part of this family now, and like it or not, she’s inherited the

problems that go with it. We have to make Donna see what kind of monster we're dealing with!"

Chapter 99

Gary pushed the door panel to Sir Richard's office and waited. The doors slid open, and he stepped inside. His mouth gaped. "Lady Triplet," he said, sounding surprised. She was sitting in a wheelchair, beside Sir Richard's desk.

"Hello, Gary," she softly smiled.

"Gary," Sir Richard spoke up. "Where are Ricky and Donna?"

"They went back to their quarters, shortly after you left. They're on their way. Have you told Lady Triplet, about tonight?"

"Yes, Gary. I know about the party, and I know about the cure you've developed, as well. The party will still take place, but there is business to attend to in the meantime. Well, don't just stand there, Richard, offer the man something to drink!"

"Forgive my manners, Gary. What would you like?"

"Coffee is fine." Gary grinned.

"I'll join you. Gary, can I talk to you about Donna *before* they get here?"

Gary looked over the top of his cup. "I suppose...."

"You know, now that Forrest is back in the hospital if we want to get rid of him we're going to need Donna's help."

Gary lifted an eyebrow. "I understand that Sir Richard, but I doubt D will agree to it. She doesn't see death as a punishment nor does she believe...."

Richard walked up to the door and almost slammed his nose into it when it didn't open on cue. He waved his hand in front of the sensor and still nothing. Sir Richard unlocked the door, and it slid open.

"Sorry Ricky, I didn't realise the sensor was locked. Come in and have a seat."

"Lady Triplet, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be resting. Does Sam know...?"

“Sheila said as long as she took it easy, she could leave the infirmary.”

“Funny, she didn’t say anything to me, or Sam.” Donna bent down, hugged Lady Triplet and kissed her cheek. “I’m glad you’re feeling better, Lady Triplet.”

Lady Triplet smiled. “Thank you, Dear. You know, Ricky, you and your father could take some lessons from your wife, on manners.”

Richard hugged her and kissed her cheek. “Sorry, Grandma. I’m pleased to see you up and about.”

Lady Triplet sighed. “Sit down, Ricky. I’m afraid I have some disturbing news. Donna, dear, you remember our plans to deal with Forrest?”

Donna inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. “Yes, Lady Triplet.”

“My sources have told me that Forrest was prepared to shoot, badly injure Ricky, and then kidnap you both. He was then going to use you to get to Gary.”

Donna tightened her jaw and glanced at Sir Richard. “And you don’t plan to involve the police in this either. Do you?”

“Donna you have to stop this thing with involving the police!” Lady Triplet snapped. “GW Forrest does *not* operate within the realms of the laws of the land, and he never will. If you want the future to be safe for your son, and other children, you have to realise that, now!”

“It seems, even The Order has turned its back on me,” Sir Richard added. “In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if they haven’t been behind the whole thing.”

Richard frowned. “Surely not all the members, Dad!”

“Maybe not all of them, but judging from the reaction at our last meeting at Kent, the ones we need to worry about are the Chinese, Russian and probably Indian representatives.”

“Forrest is after the cure. Why don’t we just give it to him?” Gary asked.

Donna looked at him in astonishment. “What did you say?”

Richard turned and looked at his friend in utter surprise. “Gary, are you mad?”

“He’s right,” Lady Triplet interjected. “I think we *should* give Forrest the cure.”

“OK you two,” Sir Richard said bluntly. “Explain yourselves.”

“It’s simple,” Gary said. “We alter the virus. We’ve been trying to prevent carcinogenic growth. We need to make a version of the virus that promotes it.”

“...And we give *that* to Forrest. Or make it possible for him to steal it!” Lady Triplet grinned evilly.

“Donna, could you make a version like that?”

Donna’s eyes widened. “I suppose, Dad, but....”

“But what, Donna?”

“If I do that it wouldn’t be any different than what you’d planned in the first place. I would still be killing him. I’m not comfortable with that.”

“We’ve already been over this, Donna. Forrest is a monster!” Lady Triplet snapped. “If we don’t stop him, he won’t stop until he gets what he wants. He’s already killed a lot of good people, your mother included. It’s for the greater good Dear. You *must* help us,” she persisted.

“No!” Donna shot to her feet and glared at Lady Triplet. “I will not do it,” she pushed through her teeth. “If you want to kill Forrest, then you do it without my help. I will not create a killer virus and risk it getting out of our hands!” She stormed from the room.

Richard jumped to his feet. “Grandma, I know we need to get rid of Forrest, but don’t you think you could have handled that a little more tactfully?”

“Your wife is being unreasonable, Ricky!”

“No more than you! Donna does not think the same as we do. Give me a chance to talk to her. Maybe I can convince her, but if she disagrees, we find another way,” Richard said, turning his attention to Sir Richard. “Agreed?”

Sir Richard sighed and nodded. "Richard..." Gary interjected. "Give D some time to cool off, first. If you approach her now, she won't listen. You'll just piss her off more."

"I'll check with the engineers and make sure everything is going to be ready for tonight, and then I'll go find her."

"She'll probably be in the park," Gary suggested.

"I know," Richard grinned and left.

"Gary, if Donna says no, I guess it will be up to you and Sam."

Gary nodded. "I tried to warn you."

Sheila and Sam were sitting at one of the picnic tables, toward the back of the park, talking. Sheila stood to leave. "Thanks, for keeping me company, and for inviting me to the party, tonight. I haven't been out, in a while."

Sam slowly walked with her toward the front entrance of the park. "I will be happy to change that for you. I'll be at your quarters around half past five, then. Are things going smoothly, at the infirmary?"

"Nothing I can't handle," Sheila chuckled. "Lady Triplet was a handful until I turned her loose, earlier."

"Did you tell Donna?"

"No. Do I have to?"

"Not really, but it might have been a good idea."

Sheila frowned. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to step on her toes."

"It's all right. I'll talk to her and explain."

Sheila looked up. "Speaking of Donna, wasn't that her on the bench by the waterfall?"

Sam glanced over his shoulder and groaned. Donna was bent over with her face buried in her hands. "Yes, it is. I wonder what her asshole of a husband has done to her now. I'll catch you later," he said. "Do you mind?"

"No – sure – go on. I'll see you this evening." Sheila left.

Sam slowly approached and sat on the bench beside her. “Leave me alone, Richard!” Donna snapped without looking up.

“Easy, sweetheart. It’s me,” Sam said and slid closer to her. “What’s wrong?”

Donna sighed, rested her head on Sam’s shoulder and explained. “Sam... they want me to create a killer virus to get rid of Forrest.”

Sam frowned. “What do you mean create a killer virus?”

“They want me to reverse what I did with our virus and use the EHG to create a killer version, so they can give that to Forrest.”

“Have you tested the virus to see if it’s transmittable?”

“No, I haven’t had a chance, but if the killer version is as aggressive as our version, this could get really nasty.”

Sam rested his cheek on top of Donna’s head and sighed. “What did Richard say or do?”

“Nothing. He just sat there. I can’t believe they’re willing to risk a pandemic to take out one man – no matter who it is.”

“What if you were to engineer it, so it only took out Forrest?”

Donna looked up at Sam and frowned. “Are you suggesting I should do this? We’re doctors – we save lives – we don’t take them.”

“Under normal circumstances, I would agree with you, but think about all the people this one man has killed. Think about what he tried to do to Missy, and what he did to the Wilsons and to Mildred. What he would do to your baby. I don’t know why, but for some reason, yours and Richard’s son is special in some way. Rich would be a prize for Forrest.”

“Not my son!” Donna’s eyes danced with anger; she stood. “Let’s get back to the lab. I would kill Forrest myself before I let him have my son! Will you help me?”

“Of course, sweetheart. I would do anything for you – you know that.”

“VICi, notify Richard Triplet and Gary Browne to come to the genetics lab. Connect me with Sir Richard.”

VICi; Richard Triplet and Gary Browne have been notified and have acknowledged. Communication line is now open with Sir Richard.

Donna didn't wait for him to speak. “I'll make the virus, but you'll have to figure out how to get it to him. I won't do that part.”

Sir Richard smiled. “Understood. How long will it take you to make the virus?”

“It will be ready before I leave today. I'll test it tonight. We should know something by this time tomorrow, or the next day. VICi, end communication.”

“That was quick. I guess Ricky convinced her.”

Lady Triplet grinned wryly. “I never doubted him. He's every bit the leader his father is. Now, where are *my* living quarters?”

“You've changed your mind about staying with us?”

“Of course I have, you silly boy. I belong with my family.”

Sir Richard offered his arm. “I'd rather you stayed with me until you've completely recovered.”

“Nonsense. I'll be just fine on my own.”

“What about Vera and Jack, and your yap dogs?”

“They'll do fine, with Jack and Vera, at the castle.”

“Then I'll assign someone to look after you. I'll not have you living alone without any help.”

“Fine!” Lady Triplet groaned. “But Jack and Vera stay where they are.”

Sir Richard furrowed his brow in confusion. Why wouldn't Mum want her trusted servants with her?

Gary had gone back to the genetics lab straight away. Wanting to make sure everything in the entertainment hall was ready; Richard had lagged, again. Gary, Donna, and Sam carried on working. When Richard and Dave had finished connecting the

last few pieces of equipment, Richard looked at his watch and panicked. “Oh shit! Frank. Dave. I’m sorry, but I have to dash,” he said and ran for the door. “VICi, where is Donna Triplet?” He smiled, liking the sound of that.

VICi; Donna Triplet is not listed as a resident or visitor in my database.

Richard frowned as he entered the back entrance to the park. “What the hell? VICi, where is Donna Rigden?”

VICi; Dr. Donna Rigden is in the genetics lab lounge.

“VICi, who is with her?”

VICi; Dr. Sam Kaliea and Dr. Gary Browne.

“Great!” Richard groaned.

Sir Richard and John were taking Lady Triplet for a stroll in the park. They stopped in front of the waterfall. Sir Richard and John sat on the bench. “Hello, Ricky,” Sir Richard said. “Making sure everything is ready for this evening?”

“Yes I was, and as usual, I got tied up.”

“Thank you for convincing Donna to help us, with Forrest,” Sir Richard said.

“At least she’s willing to make the virus,” Lady Triplet grumbled. “Now all your father has to do is figure out how to get it to the no-account.”

Richard furrowed his brow. “Donna changed her mind?”

Lady Triplet looked up. The conversation had peaked her attention. Sir Richard frowned. “Yes. You didn’t know?”

“I haven’t talked to her. Like I said, I got tied up with stuff for the party.”

“I spoke to her, about an hour ago. She was getting ready to test the virus.”

“She’s already made it?”

“Apparently. You didn’t help them with it?”

Richard sighed in exasperation. “Dad, I haven’t been to the genetics lab since I left your office.”

“She must have talked to Gary, or Sam, and one of them convinced her,” John said.

“Possibly. I’d better run. See you tonight.” Richard left.

Lady Triplet narrowed her eyes. “Perhaps there are one too many roosters in the chicken coop.”

“What do you mean, Mum?”

“Maybe it’s time you sent Sam somewhere else to work. Donna and Sheila can handle the infirmary. You don’t need him here.”

Sir Richard frowned. “I’m not getting rid of Sam, Mum.”

Lady Triplet scoffed. “You may wish you had before this thing with Donna is over.”

Chapter 100

Richard entered the genetics lab. Sam and Gary were sitting in the lounge, having a scotch. Sam smirked. "It's like you to show up *after* the job's been done."

Richard cut his cold eyes on Sam. "You know what I was doing, and why."

"Did you get finished?" Gary asked.

"Yes. Where's Donna?"

"Collecting and analysing samples, from the test subjects."

"This soon?"

"She wanted to see if the EHG worked as fast with this vector as it did with the CTZ5."

"I just bumped into Dad, in the park. He said you three had already created the virus. Surely, Donna doesn't expect to see results, this soon."

"Not really," Sam snorted. "She's just making sure she's still in control of it, and not the other way around."

"What do you mean?"

"Depending on how transmittable the new virus is Donna is concerned if it fell into the wrong hands that it could be used as a bioterrorist weapon. She's trying to make sure the virus can't jump to a new host."

Sam looked up. Donna was standing, with her back propped against the doorway. The expression on her face was dire. "Sweetheart, what's wrong?" Sam asked.

Donna didn't respond. She kept her eyes focused straight ahead. Sam stood and closed the distance between them. "Donna?"

Donna slowly lifted her eyes until they met Sam's. "We can't use it," she said her voice barely above a whisper."

Sam wrapped his arm around her waist and led her back to the lounge. She sat beside Richard. Sam sat on the other side, by Gary. Richard laid his arm across her shoulders. Donna

looked up; disgusted at the sight of him. She jerked his arm off and quickly slid away from him. Richard was puzzled by her reaction. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again; unsure of what to say.

“What do you mean, D?”

Donna looked at Gary with the same vacant stare. She shook her head and shrugged. “I can’t control it. I’ve opened Pandora’s Box.”

“What do you mean, you can’t control it?” Richard asked, slowly. “You just created the virus. It couldn’t possibly have spread this quickly.”

Donna glared at Richard. “Well, trust me, it has, and at this rate, it will kill a human in twelve hours, or less! We have to destroy it. We have to tell Sir Richard that we failed, and there’s no time to waste! If this thing mutates and becomes airborne, we’re all dead!”

“Then you need to quarantine the animal testing lab,” Sam urgently suggested. “Please tell me you were wearing a bio-suit.”

Donna’s eyebrows shot up. “Are you kidding? Of course, I was, and I’ve already quarantine that lab until we can figure this out. VICi, connect me to Sir Richard’s cell phone.”

“I’m here, petal,” Sir Richard responded, stepping out of earshot. “What did you find out about the virus?”

“That’s what I needed to talk to you about. Can you come to the lab?”

“On my way. VICi, end communication. John take Mum back to her quarters. I’ll send someone to get you, when it’s time to go to the entertainment hall.”

Lady Triplet looked up. “What’s going on Richard?”

“I have to go to the genetics lab.”

“Is this about Donna’s new virus?”

“Yes, it is.”

Lady Triplet sat up straight. “Then, I want to be included in the discussion.”

“Not this time, Mum.”

Lady Triplet narrowed her eyes. “Richard, I want to help.”

John sighed. More like control.

“Mum, I don’t have time to argue with you. Donna sounded urgent. If there’s anything you need to know, I will tell you.” He motioned with his head. “Take her John, and then come back to the lab.”

John grinned and nodded. “Yes, Sir. Away we go, Lady Triplet.”

“What’s up, petal?” Sir Richard asked as he entered the genetics lab lounge.

Sam handed Sir Richard a shot of scotch. “I think you’ll need that.”

Sir Richard sat beside Donna and turned to face her. “Tell me, Donna.”

Donna drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “The virus works, Dad, but it works too well.”

Sir Richard’s eyes widened. “Has it killed your test subjects?”

“No. The animals I gave it to are still alive, but they are metastasised with accelerated carcinogenic tumours. The rate at which the virus spreads is horrifying. I can’t control its growth. If it follows the vector’s characteristics, it will be transmittable by body fluids. If we gave this to Forrest, he could easily infect others. It could become pandemic, killing millions in days. I have to destroy it.”

“How long would Forrest last?”

Donna frowned. “No more than twelve hours, but Dad, you’re not listening.”

Sir Richard held up a hand. “If the virus lasts for twelve hours....”

“I don’t know that!” Donna interjected. “I said it would *kill* in twelve hours. I don’t know how long it can remain virulent in a cadaver. I won’t know that until the test subjects expire.”

“As I see it,” Richard began. “It kills too quickly to be a successful pandemic. If people were in the habit of having sex with different partners or biting each other within the twelve hour virulent window, then yes. But that doesn’t normally happen in the real world. I think the virus is too lethal to spread successfully.”

Donna tightened her jaw and glared at Richard. “I will not be a part of this!”

Donna was shocked. She’d expected Richard to stand by her. She stared at him in confusion, unable to believe what he was implying. Could the man she thought she knew be capable of releasing this type of pandemic? If this was to get out of hand, it would be worse than AIDS ever was. A virus as aggressive as this would have a high mutation factor and would quickly adapt and breach its twelve hour lifespan. No matter what, Donna couldn’t support this or be a part of it. “Richard, I can’t believe you’re willing to take this risk!”

“Donna, if it gets rid of Forrest...”

“Richard, for God’s sake, listen to what you’re saying. I know how important it is that we get rid of Forrest, but I won’t risk the lives of millions of people, for the sake of one man!” Donna stood. “I love you, Richard, but if you’re going to go along with this, then I’m sorry. We don’t have a future together!” She left.

“Sam, what is your opinion, on the subject?”

“Sir Richard, I agree with what Richard is saying. If the virus kills in twelve hours, it would never be a successful pandemic, but... as Donna loves pointing out, evolution changes things. We don’t know enough about the virus to say what it may do on a long-term basis. So, having said that, I agree with Donna. It’s too risky.”

Sir Richard pressed his lips into a thin line and forced air through his nose. “Then let’s wait until morning. I’ll make a decision then. Sam, have you spoken to Miss White?”

“I left a message on her answering service. I’m waiting for her to ring me back. It depends on whether or not she’s still pissed off at me.”

“Gary, if you can access Forrest’s medical records, it may save us from having to use this virus.” He looked at his watch and stood. “We need to get ready for tonight. Ricky, you have an hour to reconcile with your wife, or the life of the party isn’t going to be there. Sam, I’ll see you there. I’m looking forward to hearing you play, again. If Donna cools off, maybe the two of you can sing for us.”

Sir Richard stopped on the other side of the door. “Tomorrow, when the test subjects expire, and Donna is finished with them, dispose of the bodies, but I want the virus preserved. Keep this between us. I don’t know how, but if we have to use the virus on Forrest, I will make sure he infects no one! Mum, is to know *nothing* about any of this.”

Chapter 101

“I don’t understand what your fascination with this waterfall is, but when you run out on me, I know exactly where to find you.”

Donna sighed. “I wasn’t running out on you. I was running from myself. I don’t like... who I am, right now.” She wouldn’t look at Richard.

“I do. Can I sit with you? I’d like to talk about this future that you say we don’t have.”

Donna waved to the spot next to her. “Please yourself. Your father owns the park. I can’t very well tell you not to.”

“Yes you can. I won’t force myself on you, Donna. Tell me to leave, and I’ll go.”

Donna lifted her head. Richard patiently waited. For a long while, she studied his eyes. She swallowed hard and held out her hand. Richard lifted her to her feet and wrapped his free arm around her, pulling her against his chest. “How did things get so complicated, between us? Why can’t we be the carefree children in the video?”

Richard softly chuckled. “We grew up, pet. At least one of us did.”

“Thanks a lot,” Donna snorted.

“I wasn’t talking about you.”

“Richard, you’re more grown up, than I will ever be. You see things as they are. You don’t let your self-righteous morals get in the way, like I do.”

Richard grinned. “That doesn’t mean I’ve grown up. It just means I’m spoilt. You’re right. I’m used to getting what I want – manipulating things, so they go my way.” He led her to the bench and cuddled her close.

“Richard, everyone wants things to go their way.”

“Yeah... but not everyone is in a position to make it happen,” Richard snorted. “Do you have any idea, how much I’m worth? Do you have the slightest notion, of what I can give

you? What would be yours, if something happened to me? Donna..." he paused. "I don't have any idea, where my bottom dollar is, and I don't care. Without you... it means nothing. My *life*... means nothing."

Donna rested her head against his shoulder and leaned her head back, looking up at him. She rested her palm on his cheek and turned her face up. Richard tilted his head and kissed her. "I'm sorry," she whispered, after a long pause.

Richard smiled and brushed the side of his nose against hers. "Sorry for what, pet? You were right. It's not worth the risk, but what if we could figure out a way, so only Forrest was affected by the virus?"

"You mean like a vaccine – used once – and then thrown away?"

"Something like that."

"I don't know. It would depend on whether or not the virus remained active after death. If it does, Forrest would have to be treated as a biohazard – isolated - until no trace of the virus remained. But, to do that doesn't make a lot of sense to me. Why not just follow through with your previous plan? If you're going to kill him anyway, why put him on display, like a lab rat. Just shoot him and get it over with."

"We could have, but now that he's in the hospital, all that's changed. We can't get close to him. That's why we were trying to draw him out into the open, where we could take him out."

"Well, if he's dying, why not let nature run its course."

Richard sighed. "Forrest has a nasty habit of finding a way out. Now that we've got the EHG virus – the real virus – if he were to get his hands on it..." Richard paused again. "I mean, can you imagine a world with an immortal Forrest?"

Donna's eyes widened. "Hell no!"

"I don't want our children living with that threat, Donna, and neither does Dad. So, can you see Dad's motive?"

Donna sighed and nodded. "Yes, Richard. I can. So, what did he decide?"

“He hasn’t. He’s waiting to see what you find out in the morning. He said he’ll make a decision then.”

“So... he says and it’s law,” she made it a statement.

“Pretty much.”

“What if someone disagrees, or finds a better way?”

“I don’t know, pet. I try not to think about it a lot.” He discreetly glanced at his watch. “Why don’t we go home, take a shower and get changed, and then go have a meal in the cafeteria? That way, you don’t have to cook, and I can admire my beautiful wife, all evening.”

Donna softly smiled. “Sure, as long as it doesn’t have animal entrails and mountains of cholesterol, in it.”

Richard grinned. “I guess that means you don’t want a bowl of chocolate fudge ice-cream.”

Donna frowned and blushed. “I didn’t say that.”

Richard stood and brought her to her feet. He smiled and kissed her. “Come on. Let’s go get changed.”

Not knowing exactly when the celebration would commence, in order to operate his bug network, Liu had been sitting in his vehicle, for the last three and a half hours. At least he had the constant chat in the cafeteria to keep him company, but after a while, even that got on his nerves, so he turned the volume down. Liu had learned a lot, today. Sir Richard, Sam, and even Richard had shown up, in the cafeteria, but the star of the show had remained in the shadows. If Donna didn’t show tonight, Liu knew he would be in hot water, with Forrest. He decided to turn the volume back up, but the screen remained dark.

Liu checked his connection to make sure the bug was still transmitting; it was. “They must have the lights off, or the celebration isn’t taking place, after all,” he mused.

Richard and Donna walked hand in hand toward the cafeteria. Richard stopped her at the door and turned to face her. He grinned and kissed her. He produced a black scarf from his

pocket. "I have something to show you, but first, I have to put this over your eyes."

Donna narrowed her eyes and smirked. "I knew you were up to something." Again, visions of her and Jared in her apartment in Shreveport threatened to spoil her night. She swallowed hard and pushed the pain aside.

Richard secured the blindfold and kissed the side of her neck. It made Donna feel slightly erotic. "This isn't fair. I can't see where I'm going."

Richard chuckled. "That's the whole point. You'll have to trust me."

Donna sighed. *After everything he's done to me, he expects me to trust him.* "I do trust you, Richard," she lied, trying desperately to stay in her role.

Richard led her to the middle of the dance floor and took off her blindfold. "VICi, lights on."

The room filled with light and smiling faces. "Surprise!" everyone yelled.

Donna's mouth gaped; her eyes glossed with tears. She slowly scanned the room. All the love and pain, of that special night with Jared tore at her heart with razor sharp claws. Donna stepped forward, putting her mouth close to Richard's ear. "What is this?" she enunciated with a hiss of anger.

Richard swallowed hard; his eyes widened. "It's your wedding present, pet."

"What in the hell are you trying to do to me? How dare you do this to me, Richard?"

Richard glanced around the room; shocked at her reaction. People were wondering what was going on, in the middle of the dance floor. "Donna... people are staring at us. What's wrong? Don't you like your present?"

"No Richard – I don't!" she pushed through her teeth. "What possessed you to build a replica of Jared's music studio? Didn't you stop to think how it might affect me?"

Sam started playing an unrehearsed number; 'Lady In Red', in honour of Donna's red sequined gown. "People are staring at

us, pet. Dance with me,” Richard suggested, pulling her into his arms. “Dance with me and we’ll discuss this.” Donna nodded and submitted, giving the crowd a plastic half-hearted smile. “I know how much you love music and performing. I wanted to build you something special. Jared’s studio was unique. I wanted you to have that here. Not as a reminder, but because I wanted the best for you.”

“But it’s exactly like his studio, Richard. Couldn’t you have made it a little different?”

Richard grinned. “It’s exactly like Jared’s because he helped with the design, when he was here.” *And he knew exactly what he was doing, when he did. Hats off to you Jared. You’ve successfully lodged yourself in her memory.* “Since you’ve perfected the virus, we decided to make this a two-fold celebration.”

“*That’s it!*” Forrest shouted through Liu’s earpiece almost deafening him.

“I was wondering when you would say something. Do you think it might be possible next time not to yell quite so loudly, Sir?”

“Get in closer! I want to be certain she has a working virus!”

“Oh – I plan to get a lot closer, Sir.”

Forrest watched as the camera zoomed in and focused on the side of Donna’s neck. Liu pressed a control and the camera zoomed out again. Forrest saw Donna wince and rub the side of her neck.

“What’s wrong pet?” Richard asked.

“It felt like something stung me.”

“Let me have a look. There’s nothing to see but a tiny red mark. Maybe your locket chain caught in your hair.”

Donna rubbed the side of her neck with her fingertips. “Maybe so,” she sighed and moved away from him.

Richard pulled her back. "Grandma is looking suspicious. Could we please just get through this evening? You can be mad at me when we get home. She already suspects we're not getting along."

Donna studied his eyes. "What difference would it make to her, whether we get along, or not? I don't think she likes me, anyway."

"Like I said, she likes things her way."

Donna narrowed her eyes. "So do I, and right now, I feel like singing. Do you think Sam would mind if I cut in on his action?" Donna pushed away from him and approached Sam. She leaned close to his ear. "I need rescuing," she whispered.

Sam grinned. "Name the tune, Pretty Lady. My fingers are at your disposal."

Sheila approached Richard. "Do you think your wife would mind if I danced with her husband?"

"I don't think she would come out of her skin, over an old friend," Richard smiled, opening his arms.

Sheila watched Sam and Donna as they sang. "Your wife seems a bit taken with my boss."

Richard grinned. "She is, but it will pass. On matters of romance, Sam has never been, nor will he ever be competition for me."

Sheila studied his eyes. "Are you sure?"

"The idiot!" Forrest's voice was a low rumble. "What has he done to her? Poisoned her? We need her alive, or we're both dead."

Eli watched the screen with Forrest. "If I'm correct, I believe he has made her a tad more agreeable."

"If he hasn't...?"

Eli shrugged. "There's always the Bahamas, or the Moon."

Forrest glared at Eli. "That's not funny."

Eli arched an eyebrow. "It wasn't meant to be," he responded, deadpan. "Tomorrow will either be your finest hour, or your biggest disaster."

Chapter 102

The next morning, when Donna went to the lab to check on the test subjects, she found them all lying dead, on the bottom of their cages. More disturbingly, the chimp, which she hadn't infected with the variant virus, was dead, also. For a while, she panicked, fearing the worse. The variant virus had mutated and become airborne.

Before everyone in the lab completely lost it, Gary checked VICi's security feed for the animal testing lab. He, Sam, Donna, and Richard watched the chimp reaching through the rat's cage, trying to steal its food. Out of instinct, the rat had bitten the chimp's finger. This ended their panic, from one point of view, but alarmed them, from another. Like the original HIV1 virus, the variant was also, transmittable by body fluids. Unlike HIV1, the variant was much more aggressive.

Donna examined the rat's blood. She found that the virus had caused a huge increase in the white cell count. There were signs of carcinoma in all the major organs; the liver, spleen, lungs and kidneys. She was petrified at the speed the virus had spread. Sir Richard eagerly awaited the news.

"VICi, connect me with Sir Richard," Donna said and waited.

"Well? Were you right?"

"All three animals are dead," she sighed. "Dad, the variant virus will definitely kill within twelve hours, possibly less, depending on size, and immunity condition. It hasn't become airborne, but it can still spread through body fluids. It's not quite as lethal as I'd feared, but I still believe it should be destroyed. It and everything pertaining to it, including my research data. If I can create it, using my notes, someone else could, as well." Donna vigorously scratched the left side of her neck.

Sir Richard sighed deeply. “All right, petal. I’ll have a clean-up team take care of that. Sam?”

Sam cleared his throat. “*Yes, Sir?*”

“Any news from Mrs. White?”

“No, Sir, but I’ll try her again.”

“Do so. It seems that’s our best option, now.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“We’re going to carry on with our original virus, now,” Donna spoke up.

“Not until the clean-up crew are finished. I’m not risking anyone getting infected. Ricky you can help with complex operations. Gary you can help Jeff, in electronics, and Donna you can help Sam and Sheila, in the infirmary.”

Sam glanced at Richard and smirked. Donna’s mouth gaped. “*But Dad... I need to*”

“Donna, I’m sorry the variant virus didn’t work, but this is not open to debate.”

“Right...” Donna groaned. “VICi, end communication.”

Sir Richard turned to John. “Take care of that. Remember what I said about the variant virus. Also, extract Donna’s research on VICi’s database and then wipe it. I do not want the data destroyed. I want it locked in the safe in my office. As I said before, no one is to know about this – not even Donna.”

Richard closed his laptop and put it in its case. He glanced at Sam, again. “Try nicking my wife and I’ll have you castrated - or worse,” he warned and kissed Donna.

Sam chuckled. “Sounds kinky, Richard. I’ll look forward to that.”

Richard locked his eyes with Sam. “It wasn’t meant, as a joke, Sam,” he warned and left.

“Man! That guy needs an enema. Does he always take everything, so seriously?”

Donna laughed. “Most of the time.”

Sam took Donna's hand and kissed the back of it. He smiled at her. "How do you like that? Richard gets the bride, and I get the honeymoon. Not a bad deal, eh Gary?" Sam led Donna to the door.

Gary softly smiled and shook his head. Already, he could see a change in Donna's personality. The sparkle had returned to her dark eyes. "Donna, you and Sam be careful. I think Richard is getting suspicious."

Donna reluctantly let go of Sam's hand and sighed. "So do I," she said and followed him out into the corridor.

With Liu on location, a safe distance from the complex, Eli didn't have to hide away in the toilet, every time someone came in the room. Forrest stood in front of the mirror, not so much admiring his reflection, but staring at it in shock. The suit was his, but the face didn't match. He looked more like a corpse that had been sufficiently made over, for its funeral. The special effects artist Eli hired had earned his money. Apart from a few, disease-inflicted wrinkles, a man on a galloping horse, wouldn't know the difference.

Forrest took his place on the bed. Eli pushed the IV pump, and other equipment to the side, barely out of camera view.

Liu had worked throughout most of the night, covertly connecting his nanobug network to the complex's computer system. This was one of the most sophisticated hacks he'd ever attempted, and he'd been successful. Apart from a few protected files, Liu now had access to VICI's entire database. He took his laptop speaker off mute and notified Forrest.

The light on Forrest's webcam flashed, indicating an incoming communication request. He looked to Eli. "I think that's your cue to stay out of camera view," he chuckled at his pun.

Eli sighed in exasperation and shook his head. "You need to get into the role... *Mr.* Forrest - mean - ruthless - domineering!"

“You’re right.” Forrest cleared his throat, straightened his tie and squared his shoulders. He clicked on the flashing icon to accept the call. “Well, it’s about fucking time!” he growled. “What have you been doing? Warming a sheep’s ass, while I lay in here dying?”

Liu tightened his jaw and took a slow calming breath. “I’m sorry, Mr. Forrest. It was difficult to break through their defences. Press the call button and you may begin when ready.”

It was 11:00am. Sir Richard, Lady Triplet and John, were in Sir Richard’s office.

Donna was in the infirmary with Sam and Sheila. Gary was in the electronics lab, working with Wein on their joint nanotechnology project. Richard was working with Dave Hinckley, in the astronomy lab, preparing to bring the department systems online.

Everyone’s cell phone rang at the same time; Sir Richard’s, Gary’s, Donna’s, Richard’s, and Sam’s. Everyone could hear the conversation, but Forrest directed his attention at Sir Richard.

“Hello, Triplet, ‘old pal. Did you honestly think you could take my property and get away with it? There isn’t a hole in hell deep enough that I can’t find you. You stole my lifeline, and I want it back, but I’m prepared to make you a deal.”

“Forrest! How did you get this number?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves here! Else, I might have to spring the trap before it’s time. Switch on your main computer screen and connect this call so we can see each other. The rest of you, come and join us in the office.”

Feeling he had no choice since Forrest had clearly hacked into their computer system, Sir Richard complied. “VICi, establish a video link with the outside source.”

The wallscreen was black at first, and then Forrest’s image came into focus. Donna, Gary, and Sam entered Sir Richard’s office. Donna narrowed her eyes, when she saw Forrest’s

image. Protectively, Sam rested his hands on her shoulders. Forrest raised an eyebrow, glancing from face to face. “Donna, you’re looking as lovely as ever. You should have taken me up on my offer. We would have made a remarkable pair. Our children could have ruled the World.”

Donna glared at Forrest. “When hell freezes over! You disgusted me then, and you disgust me, even more, now.”

“What fire!” Forrest chuckled. “It seems shameful that it should be wasted on immature and in-experienced children, such as your husband, and the fine doctor, so intent on protecting his woman. Haven’t you figured it out yet, Sam? She doesn’t want either one of you. Your hair is too short, and your skin is the wrong colour.”

“What do you want, Forrest?” Sir Richard pushed through his teeth.

“Oh, yes, of course. How rude of me. Actually, I was waiting on your son, but it looks like he may not make it in time. No matter. He is of little importance. I know you’re a busy man, Triplet, and since you’re her godfather, you can probably speak for her in her husband’s absence, so I’ll get right to the point. By the way, Donna, how’s your neck? Still itchy?”

Donna’s eyes widened. Absentmindedly, she touched her neck and looked up into Sam’s worried eyes. “Sweetheart, what is he talking about?”

“*You mean she didn’t tell you?*” Forrest interjected. He moved the slider on his laptop.

“Ow!” Donna winced and rubbed her neck.

“Itchy spot getting a little tingly, now, Donna?” Forrest moved the slider again.

Donna groaned and held her hand to the side of her neck, her face contorted in pain. Sir Richard tightened his jaw. “Forrest, whatever you’re doing to her stop it now!”

Forrest narrowed his eyes. “Don’t rile me, Triplet!” he pushed through his teeth. “Your precious daughter-in-law is at my mercy, and if you don’t do as I say, I may have to blow her

fucking head off. You're in no position to threaten me. All I have to do is move this little slider over a little too much, to the right, and it's curtain calls, for the newest Mrs. Triplet. But she'd much rather it had been... Mrs. Thundercloud. Isn't that right, Donna? And to think... you were almost a mommy to sweet little Sarabeth, or should I say, Beth?"

Angry tears glossed Donna's eyes. She slowly clenched her fist. "Stay away from Jared, and my daughter!" she hissed, finding her voice. "It was your fault. You forced us apart. You fucking...!"

"*Don't... petal,*" Sir Richard whispered, slowly shaking his head; his eyes begging her to bridle her anger before it was too late. He leaned toward John, slightly turning his head to the side. John stepped closer. "Go find Ricky and get him back here - now!" he whispered. John gave a slight nod, straightening back up, waiting for Sir Richard's cue.

Sir Richard drew Forrest's attention back to him, rising from his chair and circling his desk. "Leave Donna out of this. She has nothing to do with it. It isn't her fight. It's ours. That's how it's always been - yours and mine."

John cautiously edged his way to the door.

"She has two things I need, so that makes her involved. It is sad that your 'godchild' got caught in our crossfire, though."

Sam's eyes widened. His heart started pounding. He was starting to see the picture. Gary stepped closer to Donna, gently taking her hand and squeezing it. He stood, staring at the screen. His face turning white as a sheet; a terrible foreboding building in the pit of his stomach. He sensed what was coming.

"Don't try to pretend that you care, Forrest," Sir Richard calmly said. "Innocent blood always did smell sweeter to you."

Forrest glared at Sir Richard. "Innocent? Is that what you think? Donna is innocent! You don't know the little bitch like I do. Donna is far from innocent. For once, her and her smart-assed mouth has been put in its place. Like all the other women I've broken, Donna will succumb as a woman should. Would

be saviour of the World. Pick and choose who lives... and who dies. That is not innocent.”

“Stop waffling Forrest, and tell us what you want. What you *want* from me.”

“Oh I will, but first, a little demonstration of what’s in store for your self-righteous godchild. Since her husband has chosen not to make an appearance, Dr. Kaliea, you might want to grab your lover. She’s about to hit the floor.” Forrest flicked the slider almost all the way to the right, and back.

A sharp pain went through the left side of Donna’s neck and up through to her head. She put her hand to her neck. Her body jerked, her eyes rolled back and she started to collapse. Gary and Sam reached out simultaneously and grabbed one of her arms and eased her to a chair. Sam’s wide eyes glossed. He held his breath as he checked her pulse. He let it out in one long gust, lifting her into his arms. “She’s just fainted, but I need to get her to the infirmary.”

“You can’t do anything for her Lover boy, and if I were you, I wouldn’t try using the defibrillators on her either. It would make her light up like a Christmas tree, besides; she’ll come round in a few minutes. She’s probably going to have one hell of a headache, unfortunately.”

Lady Triplet felt utterly helpless. “What have you done to her, Forrest?”

“Ah the old witch has found her voice. It’s really quite simple. Last night while you all were partying, Donna thought something stung her neck. It wasn’t a sting, you see, it was the work of one of my newest toys, a little insectoid. I’m using one of them now to transmit my signal to you. My little insect injected a tiny chip, about the size of a human hair, into Donna’s neck. Once it was in her bloodstream the protective casing dissolved, releasing a device that attached itself to the inside of her carotid artery. This little device has an even smaller explosive, which I can detonate whenever I get the urge. I’m transmitting a signal to it right now. If I stop transmitting that signal, the device goes off, ripping a hole in

Donna's neck and releasing a neurotoxin that will turn her into a turnip, permanently. The fine doctor here is probably the only person that would recognise it."

"What toxin, you fucking bastard?" Sam growled.

"I'll give you a hint. There's no known antidote, and Donna would be dead before you could synthesise one – if it's even possible."

"What do you *want* Forrest?" Sir Richard reiterated.

"I was really looking forward to neutering your son, but since you stopped that, I want the cure, and I want Donna to bring it to me, personally. I want her to kneel at my feet and beg for her life. And then – if she does as she's told and doesn't shoot off her mouth again – then, I might let her live. Oh you can send your little brat, your goon, Lover boy, and even the old witch. I don't care. If anyone tries anything it's curtains for your new daughter-in-law, so I'm not worried, I know you'll make them mind their manners."

"What guarantee do I have that you won't go back on your word?"

Forrest laughed evilly. "You don't, that's the beauty of it. But... if you don't do as I say, Donna will die. So I guess you're just going to have to trust me. I'm going to be extremely generous with you, Triplet. I'm going to give you seventy-two hours to comply with my wishes, which starts, right... now."

"Why does it have to be Donna? Why not let me bring the cure? We both know I'm the one you really want."

"Because, if I've got you, then you're the person that suffers. If I have her, all of you suffer, even the great Jared Thundercloud and his precious daughter. I'll make sure he witnesses her last breath. You know the old saying, 'misery loves company'?" Forrest laughed again and glanced at his watch. "The game is a foot, to coin a phrase. You've got exactly seventy-one hours, fifty-nine minutes and forty-five seconds left. Or, better yet, you may have eternity, but Donna doesn't. Best get hopping old chap."

Sir Richard synchronised the clock on his cell phone. “Tell me exactly what you want me to do.”

Forrest turned his face to the side, coughing furiously. “Do it and make it look good!” he commanded. Eli misted Forrest’s face. Forrest made sure he was in full view of the camera. As soon as Liu gave the signal that the call had ended, Forrest grabbed for the oxygen mask and collapsed on the bed. His face was covered with sweat, and he could hardly breathe. He smiled sardonically. Liu watched the camera.

“We’ve got them...” Forrest grabbed at his chest and fell back onto the bed.

Chapter 103

Sam walked through the doors to the infirmary, carrying Donna in his arms. Sir Richard and Gary followed, with Gary pushing Lady Triplet's wheelchair. Sheila and Joyce met them. "Sam what happened?" Sheila asked.

"Joyce, stay here and wait for Richard. Sir Richard, I need you all to wait here, as well. Explain things to Richard. Sheila come with me! VICi, connect me to Ian Allen."

"What's up, Sam?"

"Ian, I'm in the infirmary. I need a CBC, Chemistry and blood gases run on Donna – STAT!"

"I'm headed that way, Sam!"

Sam laid Donna on a biobed. "VICi, emergency, full body scan. Display to wallscreen."

VICi; Body scan complete. Subject, Donna Marie Rigden. Data updated. Awaiting further instructions.

"VICi, display vitals, and vitals of foetus, screen right. Deep scan. Focus on carotid artery. Scan for foreign objects. If detected enhance and magnify, screen left."

VICi; Deep scan complete. One object found.

"VICi, deep scan. Analyse and display 3D model of foreign object."

VICi; Displaying 3D model of foreign object. Cannot penetrate outer casing of object. Unable to perform deep scan.

"Fuck!" Sam spat. "VICi, analyse foreign object. Does outer casing show any signs of deterioration?" Sam held his breath.

VICi; Negative.

Sam let his breath out. "At least that's something. Maybe, if we can keep her immune system from attacking the chip and dissolving the outer casing, we might be able to...."

Sheila held up a hand. “Sam, would you like to fill me in, before you go into great detail, about this thing because I don’t have a clue, as to what’s going on, here.”

Sam sighed and started explaining.

Richard burst through the doors, with John close following behind him. “Where is she? Where is Donna?”

“Easy, Ricky,” Sir Richard said. “Sam and Sheila are examining her. Sam asked us all to wait out here. Why didn’t you come to my office, when Forrest told you to?”

“Because I had my fucking cell phone switched off. I didn’t know what was going on, until John showed up. I was in the astronomy lab, getting ready to bring the systems online. I patched into the conversation right before Forrest started talking about the device. Does Sam know what neurotoxin Forrest used? Are Donna and the baby, OK?”

Joyce’s mouth gaped; her heart sank. “Donna is *pregnant*?”

“Yes, Joyce!” Richard growled. “That’s one of the reasons why we got married, so soon.”

The infirmary doors slid open. Ian held up his collection tray. “Sam ordered some blood work, for Donna. Where is she?”

“In the scan room, next to the operating theatre,” Joyce spoke up. “I’ll show you.”

“I’m going with you,” Richard said, jumping at the opportunity.

“I’m coming, too,” Sir Richard added. “Gary, you and John, stay with Mum. If she gets tired, take her back to her quarters.”

“I’m staying,” Lady Triplet interjected.

Avoiding Lady Triplet’s cold stare, Joyce briefly glanced into two pair of determined eyes. She knew she wasn’t going to win this argument. Besides, she was curious, as to what was going on. “Come on,” she responded, with a resolving sigh.

Ian entered the room first; Joyce, Richard, and Sir Richard followed.

Sam glanced up and scowled at Joyce. “What are they doing in here? Can’t you follow a simple order?” He jerked his head, not anticipating an answer. “Escort them back to the waiting area!”

“No, Sam!” Sir Richard stepped forward. “We’re staying, and unless you want a fight on your hands, leave Joyce alone. This was my idea. She had nothing to do with our being here.”

Sam groaned in exasperation and shook his head. “Fine!” he snapped. “Just move out of the way, so Ian can get in there.”

Ian meandered his way around to Donna’s arm. From experience, he had learned to just do his job and not ask questions. But, having been taught by a master, Ian also knew how to discreetly pick up needful information.

Sir Richard glanced at him, out of the corner of his eye, cautiously choosing his words. “What have you found out, Sam?”

Sam motioned with his head. “Sheila, take them to my office and explain the situation. I’ve got this.”

Sheila rested her hand on Richard’s shoulder and guided him and Sir Richard back to Sam’s office. Joyce stayed. Sam checked Donna’s eyes, ears, and nose, for signs of cerebral haemorrhage. Due to the electrical shock, Donna’s pupils were wider than normal, but responsive. Ian finished collecting his samples.

“I want those results as soon as you have them,” Sam firmly stated. Ian nodded and left.

Joyce discreetly cleared her throat; her mouth dry from dread. “Sam...?”

Sam glanced at her from the corner of his eye, dismissing her as dross. He hadn’t forgiven her, for the incident at his apartment, at Whitley Bay. “What are you still doing here?”

Joyce pressed her lips together, swallowed hard and sighed. “I need to speak with you, in your office. It’s... important, Sam.”

Sam frowned and stared at her through hooded eyes. “I’m a little busy, *Joyce!*”

“I know, Sam. I didn’t mean, right now – when you’re done, with Donna. I need to make this right.”

Sam softly brushed the back of his fingers down Donna’s cheek. “Joyce... I really *don’t* want to hear what you have to say. I...”

VICi’s computer voice interjected. “Sam, it’s Missy. I have Jasmine White on hold, for you.”

“Keep her on the line, Missy. Tell her I will be right with her.” He glared at Joyce. “Stay with her!” he growled. “If you want to make this right, don’t let anyone in here.”

“Sam, you can’t keep Richard and Sir Richard out.”

“Fine, but under no circumstances is Lady Triplet to come anywhere near Donna. Do you understand me? You fuck up on this, and we’re finished – *forever* Joyce!”

Joyce’s eyes glossed. “I won’t, Sam.”

“VICi, display Donna Rigden’s latest neurological scan to wallscreen,” Sheila said and waited. She pointed to the scan. “As you can see, the device is attached to the inside of her carotid artery. It has nano-sized wires plugged directly into Donna’s neural system. According to what Sam told me, if we try to remove it, the device is rigged to explode. This is advanced nanotechnology, Sir Richard. We simply don’t have anything to counteract it. I’m sorry Richard.”

Richard clenched his fists and swallowed hard. “Is she going to be all right, Sheila?”

Sheila sighed. “Richard, as long as her immune system doesn’t find a way to dissolve the outside casing, and Forrest doesn’t do anything else to her, I think she’ll be fine.”

“And the baby?”

“Your son is fine, Richard,” she smiled. “And, as far as it goes, your wife is fine, too. I think I should point out that Forrest, or whoever was controlling the device knew exactly how much current to apply. They could have easily killed Donna. For that fact, they still could. It’s not my place to say

this, but as your friend, if Forrest made demands, I think you should take him seriously.”

Sam tapped on his office door. Gary stood by his side. The door slid open; Sam and Gary stepped inside. “I’m sorry to disturb your discussion, but Jazz is on hold, Sir Richard. If we don’t talk to her now...” Sam broke off.

Sir Richard stood. “Ricky, stay and look after Mum. Let’s talk to Miss White in my office.” Gary followed Sam and Sir Richard out into the waiting area. “John, come with us,” Sir Richard said and led them back to his office.

Sam looked to Sir Richard. “Ready?” Sir Richard nodded. “VICi, connect with outside source.”

“Sam, are you there?”

“Hi Jazz. Thanks for ringing me back. My boss, Sir Richard Triplet wants to speak with you.”

“Hello, Miss White.”

“Sir Richard...”

“Miss White, we need your help. I understand you have access to The Royal Victoria Infirmary’s computer system.”

“Yes, Sir. I use it from the pathology department.”

Sir Richard glanced at Sam. “Miss White, what do you know about GW Forrest and Forrest Enterprises?”

“Not a lot, I’m afraid, Sir Richard. Only what Sam has told me, and from what I’ve heard on telly. Forrest is not the kind of man I would want to know that much more about. The media paint a grim picture.”

Sir Richard softly chuckled. Sam grinned. “Trust me, Love. Forrest is worse than the person you’ve seen on the news,” Sam said.

“Miss White, we will not put your life in danger, but we need access to Forrest’s medical records. I know this may sound like an unorthodox request, but the less you know the better. One of my employees, Dr. Gary Browne, has unique talents, when it comes to computers.”

“I could lose my job over this, Sam.”

Sam glanced at Sir Richard, who softly smiled and nodded. “Jazz, I wouldn’t worry about a place to work, if it should come to that. Gary is extremely gifted. I’ve seen him do things that I never would have believed possible.”

“Sam, if I end up on the bread line, I’ll rip your...”

“It won’t come to that, Miss White. I assure you,” Sir Richard interjected. “I’m going back to relieve Ricky, so he can be with Donna. John. Gary. Sam, tell Miss White what she *needs*... to know.”

Sir Richard and Lady Triplet sat in the waiting area, silently pondering Forrest’s demands. “What did Sheila say about Donna? Was the baby harmed?”

“Donna and the baby are fine, for now.”

“What do you mean, for now, Richard?”

“Sheila and Sam can’t do anything about the device in Donna’s neck. They can’t even find out which neurotoxin is in it.”

“Why not?”

“VICi can’t penetrate the outer casing. If Donna’s immune system is able to dissolve the casing, or Forrest takes the notion to detonate the explosive in it, Donna will die.” Sir Richard leaned over, resting his forearms on his knees, as he buried his face in his hands. Lady Triplet rested a hand on Sir Richard’s shoulder. “Mum,” he sighed, “...I feel as if I’ve completely lost control of the situation. If we don’t let Donna go, she’s going to die. If we let Donna go, Ricky will want to go with her, and I risk losing both of them.”

“Yes, he would, and you wouldn’t be able to talk him out of it either.”

“Exactly,” Sir Richard groaned and leaned back in his chair. “I’ve never felt so helpless in all my life. I’ve got all this power and yet I can’t protect the ones I love. What am I going to do Mum?”

Lady Triplet sighed. “Richard, I’ve never doubted your judgement. You’ve always done the right thing, no matter how

much it hurt, or how high the price. I know you'll do that now."

"I know Mum, but I'm tired of it! I'm tired of deciding who lives and who dies! I'm tired of watching that bastard destroy everything I hold dear! I want to wake up in the morning, and not worry about what The Order is going to do, or what country the Prime Minister is going to go to war with next. I want to wake up, and worry about what colour socks to wear or whether or not I want to shave. Silly things like that." Sir Richard sighed in exasperation. "I want a normal life. Is that so much to ask?"

"For us, it is. Triplets have never known what it was like to live a normal life. It has always been our duty to look out for the underdog."

Donna slowly opened her eyes. She blinked, trying to adjust to the bright lights. When she could focus, Richard was leaning over her. "Hi gorgeous," he smiled and softly kissed her.

Donna tried to sit up but she was too weak. Her head felt as if it was going to explode, and the room spun around, making her nauseous. "Oh no, pet," Richard said and eased her back onto the pillow. Donna forced the air from her lungs and pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. "Where am I? What happened?"

"You're in the infirmary. Don't you remember?"

"No Richard... I don't. The last thing I remember was Forrest saying something about Jared and Beth, and I lost it. I'm sorry, but after that everything else just sort of faded out. Why have I got this damn headache?"

Sam tapped on the door. "Hi, Pretty Lady," he smiled, as he and Sheila entered the room. "Did you have a nice nap?"

"Hi Donna," Sheila smiled.

Donna rolled her eyes. "Oh yes, Sam. I love waking up with a splitting headache."

Sam shared a concerned look with Sheila. “That’s because you received a direct charge to your neural system,” Sheila said.

Donna looked to Sam. “Sweetheart, someone working for Forrest injected some kind of device into your carotid artery. It attached itself to the wall and shot wires into your nervous system. He boasted that the device had an explosive in it that would release a deadly neurotoxin into your bloodstream, if we didn’t meet his demands.”

Donna’s eyes widened; her heart started pounding. “Show me!”

Sheila shared another look with Sam and sighed. “VICi, display Donna Rigden’s latest body scan to wallscreen. Focus on foreign object detected in carotid artery and magnify.”

Donna looked at the device and read the magnification level, on the bottom right of the screen. “Nanotechnology...” she sighed. “It resembles a bacteriophage – not much bigger than a human hair. The sting must have come when the wires attached themselves to my nerve endings.”

Sheila frowned. Sam grinned. “Isn’t it fun to have a doctor for a patient?”

Sheila laughed. “You know what they say about us doctors. We make the worst patients, because we’re always arguing with *our* doctor’s diagnosis.”

“Did the shock affect Rich in any way?” Donna asked.

Sheila cocked her head to the side. “Rich?”

“Our son.” Richard smiled and took Donna’s hand. “We’ve seen a 3D time advanced image of him as a ten-year-old.”

Sheila’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh! That would be in the HIC?”

“Yes,” Donna sighed. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“As far as I can tell, no Donna. Rich hasn’t been harmed in any way, but, I’m not a neonatologist.”

Donna narrowed her eyes and turned her attention to Sam. “You said you were going to talk to Sir Richard, about that!”

“I am. I just haven’t had time. I’ll do it tomorrow – I promise, sweetheart.”

“Richard... you said Forrest threatened to detonate the device in my neck, if we didn’t meet his demands. What were his demands?”

Richard glanced at Sam and then at Sheila. He drew in a deep breath and started explaining.

Chapter 104

Gary and John talked with Jasmine and explained what they wanted to do. Since Jasmine was already in the pathology department at the hospital, when she rang Sam back, the process was dead easy. In a few minutes, using the same method he'd used, on the computer system at D'Netics, in Shreveport, Gary had created a back door and slipped past their firewall without any resistance. No one ever knew he was there.

Sir Richard scratched the nape of his neck and leaned back in his chair. "Gary..." he said with a sigh of exasperation, "... this doesn't make sense," "Forrest *knew* when Donna left the States that she was extremely close to completing her stem cell therapy research. When I even *hinted* that Triplet International had reason to believe immortality might be possible, Forrest was the first person to jump on the bandwagon. Later, when I told The Order that our experiment had failed, Forrest convinced The Order that we were holding out on them and that they should seize control of the project, and all the scientists involved with its research. For him to throw in the towel when he's within reach of immortality, well, it just doesn't fit – especially after what he's done to Donna."

"D said the EHG wouldn't work for Lady Triplet, maybe Forrest found out that it wouldn't work for him, either," Gary suggested.

"If that's the case, what in the hell does he want it for?"

"He doesn't want the virus. He wants D. The ultimate revenge for him would be to have her beg, knowing full well he had no intention of letting her live. Remember? He bragged about the women he had broken. He wants to break Donna in that same way."

"There's something else," Sir Richard added. "Forrest's previous instructions, for the disposal of his body was that seconds before his death, Forrest's body was to be put into

cryogenic stasis and preserved until someone found a cure. He was so infatuated with the continuation of his bloodline that he has donated sperm to every sperm bank known. Although he would never acknowledge it, there's no telling how many illegitimate children Forrest has fathered to achieve that goal. I don't believe Forrest had anything to do with the DNR order on his medical record. Someone else *has* to be responsible, but who, and why?"

"I think figuring out why would be easier than trying to figure out who. Forrest has more enemies than anyone on this planet," John scoffed. "Jared Thundercloud being one of them."

"True..." Gary spoke up, "...but, when it comes to killing, Jared is like Donna, and so is Sam. The only way they would kill would be, out of self-defence, or for love. In Donna's case, she has several strong motives – Jared, Sarabeth, Sam, and now Rich. That's the only reason Donna would succumb to Forrest's wishes. If it were just her, I guarantee you, after what he did to her and Jared, D would die before she even *considered* helping Forrest."

Sir Richard slammed his fist against the top of his desk. "I don't care what Donna decides. I am not letting her do this. We've got seventy-one hours to figure this out. Forrest said he was sending a signal to the device. Unless he was lying, he also said stopping the signal is what detonated the explosive. Is it possible that we could somehow find out the frequency of that signal and then duplicate it?"

"Yes," Gary said. "But, not knowing exactly how the device works, it's also possible that instead of telling the device to switch off, we might end up telling it the opposite. Duplicating the signal is not the problem. Understanding the program that's sending the signal is the problem. Think of it, like trying to fly an airplane, where the controls have been flipped. There just doesn't seem to be a solution, other than letting D take Forrest the virus."

“I’m not buying that,” Sir Richard groaned and stood. “I need to think. Keep working on this. If you need me, I’ll be in the cafeteria.”

Alice and Rita watched Sir Richard as he walked through the cafeteria and into the new entertainment hall. “You look like a man who could use a cup of tea and a willing ear.” She smiled.

“Alice, you read my mind.”

“I’ll get us one,” she said and disappeared. She came back with a serving tray. On it were two cups of tea and a plate of shortbread. “So go on tell me what’s put that frown on such a handsome face?” Alice asked as she sat opposite to Sir Richard.

Sir Richard grinned. “Alice, you need glasses! This face can’t even *remember* what it felt like to be handsome. If it ever was.”

“I disagree....”

Sir Richard looked down at his tea. “I have seventy-one hours to stop a mad man, or Donna and my grandson are going to die,” he confided without prompting.

Alice gasped. “Sir Richard, no!”

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt so tired, so helpless and so damn old.”

Alice placed her hand on Sir Richard’s.

“Alice....”

There was a loud clatter from the kitchen area. “Bloody hell!” Rita shouted. “What is that thing?”

“Duty calls,” Alice interrupted and ran back to the kitchen. “What is it Rita?”

“I don’t know. At first I thought it was a bug, but when I swatted at it, and it fell in the stew, it started sparking and making all sorts of hissing noises and smoking.”

“Where is it?”

“There, in the stew, on top of one of the carrots.” She pulled a face and pointed to the pot of simmering liquid.

Alice leaned over the pot. "Oh it can't be that bad... you probably just saw - Holy Mary, Mother of God!" she shrieked.

Sir Richard spilt tea down the front of his shirt. He dropped the cup and ran to the kitchen. "What's wrong?"

"There, in the stew! Some sort of..." Alice replied.

Sir Richard carefully fished out the small metallic bug.

Alice approached it with a meat mallet held above her head. "Here, put it down, I'll get it."

"No! Don't! We need this! Give me something to put it in," Sir Richard said.

Rita passed him a plastic food container with an airtight lid. Sir Richard carefully tipped the device in the container and snapped the lid tight. He kissed Rita on the cheek. "You may have just saved the day!" He dashed out the door.

Rita touched her cheek and gave Alice a confused look. "Saved the day?"

"This design is incredible!" Wein said as he examined the mechanical insect. "I've read about this in the science magazines, but I've never actually come across one. Just look at the intricate detail, and the piezoelectric 'muscles' that drive its wings!"

"Jeff, this kind of technology has been around for years. This is the first time it's been used openly. It shouldn't be used now, Forrest knows that but..."

"So the stories I read on those conspiracy sites are true?"

"Some - but not all of them - especially those of this type. The US have been dominating the research on nanotechnology for some time, they just don't publish their work."

"Nothing has changed then!" Wein commented.

"Not a lot," Sir Richard replied. "So, what can you tell me about it? How does it differ from our nanobug?"

"Well, it uses light to build up an electrical charge, which it stores in tiny capacitors. It's amazing how it manages to store so much power. That was one of the problems we were dealing with. This capacitor must work on an atomic scale. The body is

made of a titanium composite - very strong yet *incredibly* light. Like ours, it flies around, much like a wasp.”

Wein lifted the wing with a pair of tweezers. “The wings are on a carbon-fibre frame. The shape of the wing’s edge makes it virtually silent in flight. The interesting bit is that the wings are multifunctional. They seem to be able to pick up sound, but they also act like solar cells. Having said that light is not their only source of energy. There’s a camera here...” he said, pointing with his tweezers, “...that works much like our own.”

Wein gingerly turned the device over. “Here’s where it differs from ours. It has a tiny fuel cell, and like a bee, is capable of using sugars as another power source. The interesting bit is the proboscis tube. It’s also multifunctional, sort of like a cross between an elephant’s trunk and the nectar-feeding mechanism of a bee. It has a rasp at the end of its proboscis suggesting it can grind its way through the skin. It then uses a powerful explosive as a propellant to inject its payload. This has to be the device Forrest used on Donna.”

“Can you reactivate it?”

Gary grinned. “Watch.”

Wein reached to turn it on. Richard stopped him. “How do you know that it won’t go after Donna again?”

“Because,” Gary said, “I’m controlling it. I haven’t re-connected the camera. Besides, it shorted out when it took a dive in the stew. Even technology as sophisticated as this, still has its limits.”

Gary reactivated the device. For a few minutes, it did nothing. Slowly it started to flap its wings. Then it lifted a few inches, hovering as if waiting for instructions. Using his laptop, Gary landed the bug on Wein’s right shoulder. Wein tilted his head and rolled his eyes, towards the bug. “Now watch this.”

“What’s supposed to happen?” Sir Richard asked impatiently.

“Just give it a second,” Gary replied. “It’s a little low on power right now.”

As they watched, the device slowly began to mimic Wein's purple shirt, and then appeared to vanish. "Where did it go?" Richard asked, alarmed.

"Relax," Gary said. "It's still on his shoulder."

Sir Richard and Richard leaned closer, straining to see, but they couldn't see anything. Wein felt the slightest bit of air current, and heard a very high pitch from the device's wings as it lifted off his shoulder. Gary flew it to Richard's shoulder.

Sir Richard and Richard leaned forward again. Still they couldn't see anything on Wein's shoulder. "Gary, you're seeing things," Sir Richard said. "There's nothing on Jeff's shoulder."

Gary laughed. "That's because it's not there anymore. Now it's on Richard's shoulder."

Richard moved his head around in short robotic jerks. "What - where?"

Gary shut off the chameleon feature, pulled the magnifying glass to Richard's shoulder and there it was. Gary then flew it back to the plastic container, and once again, turned on its chameleon feature. The device vanished. "You see..." Gary began, making it visible again, "...its entire belly is covered with some tiny sensors. It can mimic whatever it's sitting on, whether it be Jeff's purple shirt, Richard's light blue cardigan, or the plastic container. It's ingenious!"

"Here's the concerning bit," Wein said, flipping the bug on its back. He focused the microscope and a set of numbers appeared.

"What are those?" Sir Richard asked.

"I'm guessing they're serial numbers, series numbers, or manufacturing numbers. If they're serial numbers..."

Sir Richard read the number again; 00262.

Chapter 105

When they got a break, Joyce convinced Sam to meet with her in his office. Joyce had hoped, by coming clean to Sam it would mend the bridges between them. It seemed she was wrong. Instead, it had pushed Sam further away from her. He glared at her in contempt.

“Don’t you think it’s a little late for a confessional? Why didn’t you tell me before now - when it might have made a difference?”

“Because, I was afraid for you. Don’t you see? Everything I did... was for you.”

“I didn’t need your help, Joyce. Did *you* threaten Donna? Of course, you didn’t. You couldn’t have. You’re not that smart with computers. Who were you working for, Joyce?”

“I don’t know Sam! Whoever it was used some kind of device to alter their voice. It sounded robotic, distorted.”

“So you don’t even know if it was a man or a woman that was talking to you.”

“No, Sam! I don’t!”

“And you think that person is who gave you the Euphoria?”

“Yes!”

“But the second delivery was an empty box?”

“Yes! The box was the same as the first one, but when I opened it there was nothing there. I got another call that said the box was far from empty.”

“And, this all happened, right before we picked you up, for the carnival?”

“Yes, Sam. Please stop talking like you don’t believe me.”

Sam’s eyebrows shot up. “That’s because I don’t! You’re lying to me. You know who’s behind this, and you’re not telling me.”

Sam’s door panel chirped. “Sam, it’s me. Can I come in?”

Sam narrowed his eyes and grinned. “VICi, unlock door panel.”

The door slid open; Donna stepped inside. “Sam I need to...” she paused when she saw Joyce sitting in the chair in front of his desk. “Did I come at a bad time?”

Sam stood. “No. Joyce was just leaving.”

Joyce stood. “We can finish this later.”

“No, Joyce – we won’t!” Sam firmly stated. “By the way, the next time you decide to take a day off, I’d better know about it first. Now, go do your job, or I’ll find someone else who can.”

Joyce studied Sam’s eyes for a few seconds and turned. Donna moved to let Joyce past. She glanced over her shoulder and then locked her eyes on Sam’s. “What was that all about?”

Sam scoffed. “Joyce’s idea of bearing her soul.”

Donna frowned. “What did she say?”

Sam waved it off. “Doesn’t matter. What did you want to talk to me about?”

Donna sat in the chair. “Me, and the baby, and this thing in my neck.”

Sam swallowed hard. “What about it, sweetheart?”

“Sam, if the worst should happen, and a choice has to be made, between me and the baby, I want you to save him. You were right. He’s special. He has a purpose here. He *has* to be born, even if it’s in another woman’s body. Use whatever means necessary to keep my body alive, until you can find a surrogate mother.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “You’re not going to...?”

Donna slowly shook her head. “No. I’m not. If it’s going to happen, it has to happen here. Forrest is not going to let me live, whether I take him the cure or not. When he releases the neurotoxin, if I’m here, you can save the baby. If it happens with Forrest, both of us would die. That can’t happen, Sam. Daria said ‘Protect him well. In his hands lies the fate of two realms.’ At first I didn’t understand it. Before I found out I was pregnant with Rich, I couldn’t decide whether ‘he’ meant you,

or Richard. Then I realised it didn't mean either of you. Daria was referring to the baby."

Sam furrowed his brow. His mouth gaped. He stared at her incredulously. "You're willing to risk your life, and the life of your baby, all because of something a fortune teller told you? One of *Richard's* friends? Sweetheart, that's crazy!"

Donna's eyes glossed. She swallowed to cool her burning throat. "I'm sorry. I thought you would understand. I guess I was wrong."

Sam walked around the desk and crouched in front of her. He took her hands and stared into her eyes. Donna pressed her lips together to keep them from trembling. She looked down at their hands. "Sweetheart, look at me. I can't let you do that. I can't let you go!"

Donna studied his eyes. "It's not your choice. If you won't help me, I'll ask Sheila. Besides, it's too late."

"What do you mean, it's too late?"

"The spot on my neck is tender, and I think I'm running a temperature. If you give me antibiotics, it's just going to compound the problem."

Sam held the back of his hand to Donna's forehead. He frowned. "You're a little warm," he said, putting a digital thermometer under her tongue. He turned her head to the side and examined her neck. "It's swollen slightly, and a little red," he said, gently pressing it with his fingertips.

"Ow!" Donna groaned. "Not so hard!"

"Sorry," he said and pressed a gentle kiss over it. Sam took the thermometer out and kissed her. He glanced at the thermometer, sighed and kissed her again. "38.7 – low grade temp," he said and stood.

Donna sighed. "Then I was right. My immune system has identified Forrest's bug and marked it for termination."

Sam opened a box of topical antibiotic and threw the empty carton in the bin beside his desk. "Turn your head."

"What are you doing?"

He started gently rubbing the cream on her neck. “You’re right. I can’t give you oral antibiotics or an injection, but I can try treating it from the outside. I want you to stay in the infirmary so I can keep an eye on you. If something goes wrong, I need you close.”

“Sam, my neck is not the reason I’m here.” She handed him a jewel cased DVD.

Sam read the words on the front of it, *‘Just In Case’*. “What is this?”

“It’s for Gary, and Richard, and his father. This...” she said, taking an envelope from her pocket, “...is for you. Never, under any circumstances, let Richard or anyone else, see this letter. If, by some miracle, I get through this, I want you to destroy it. Maybe, when this is over, we can pick up where we left off.”

Sam held her chin in the palm of his left hand and studied her eyes. The knot in his throat was choking him. “Donna, sweetheart, you can’t do this to me – to us. If Forrest detonates the explosive in that little bastard, in your neck, I’m not sure I can do anything for you or the baby.”

Donna softly smiled. “I know you can. All I’m asking you to do is try. Will you?”

Sam lifted her to her feet and kissed her again. He took her hand. “Let’s see what condition the casing is in now.” He led her to a biobed. “VICi, deep scan. Focus on carotid artery. Analyse and identify neurotoxin in foreign object.” Sam held his breath. His heart pounded as they waited. A few seconds later, his worst fears were confirmed.

VICi; Deep scan complete.

Sam closed his eyes for a few seconds and swallowed hard. Taking a breath, he completed the command. “VICi, display results to wallscreen.” His eyes glossed. He blinked to clear his vision.

Donna looked up at him through tear dimmed eyes. "I'll stay in the infirmary. Get Richard and the others." She rose up and kissed him. "Remember what I said."

Sam nodded. "VICi, emergency, notify the following to come to the infirmary: Dr. Sheila McGowan, Richard Triplet, Sir Richard Triplet, and Gary Browne." Sam handed Donna a surgical gown. "Sweetheart, get this on. We have to hurry."

VICi; Dr. McGowan, Richard Triplet, Sir Richard Triplet, and Dr. Browne have acknowledged and are on their way.

"Go ! I can handle this."

"I love you," Sam said, lifted her hand, kissed it and left the room. Joyce met him in the waiting area. Sam started barking orders. "When Sheila gets here, send her to the scrub room. Deal with Richard and the others, and then assist Donna."

"What should I tell them?"

"Tell them I've identified the neurotoxin in the vial. Donna's immune system is destroying the outer casing. It's dangerously thin. We have no choice but to try and remove it. I'll explain more when I come out, but tell them if we don't act fast, we're going to lose Donna and the baby." Sam closed his eyes for a second as he fought stinging tears. He couldn't lose it. He had to hold it together, for Donna. "VICi, reduce temperature in OR to ten degrees Celsius and hold. I have to go, Joyce!" Sam whirled and left.

Joyce took a deep breath and waited by the infirmary doors. Sheila, who had been in the medical lab, got there first; Joyce directed her to the scrub room. Sam looked up as Sheila entered the room. "Sheila, this is your expertise. I'm going to assist. I've reduced the temperature, so wear long sleeves."

"Where's Donna? Has she been prepped?"

"No. When the rest of the team get here, we'll put her straight under. I didn't want to waste valuable time. Sheila, you have to save her!"

Sheila started scrubbing. "I'll do my best, Sam."

Richard and Gary came through the infirmary doors first; Sir Richard not far behind them. “What’s going on, Joyce? Where’s Donna?” Richard asked.

“Dr. McGowan is scrubbing for surgery. When Sam checked it, the outer casing on the vial was dangerously thin. Sheila is going to try and remove it before it ruptures.”

“Did he find out which neurotoxin Forrest used?” Sir Richard asked.

Joyce sighed. “I’m sorry, Sir Richard. Sam didn’t have time to explain, but he mentioned if they weren’t successful that they could lose Donna and the baby. I need to get back and assist Donna. Please, stay here.”

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Back in Shreveport, Louisiana, Jared had finished getting dressed to take his family to the airport. They’d been with him since he got back from the UK. He and his daughter, Sarabeth, had spent some much needed quality time together. Leaving Donna again, had been hard on Jared, but his family being there had helped. Juanita’s being there had helped, as well. In her, Jared had someone he could confide in who knew all his secrets. Juanita was good with Sarabeth, as well. She wasn’t Donna, but Sarabeth had formed a special bond with Juanita, as well as Nano, Juanita’s yellow tabby.

As Jared had suspected, the only bond he and Nano had formed was a measure of paranoiac tolerance. To Nano, Jared smelled like a wild animal, and could send him skittering across the marble tile in the entrance hall, with just a look. If Jared was feeling particularly mischievous, a growl or flash of his glowing crimson eyes turned the cat into a giant yellow hissing puffball. At least the cat made him laugh. Jared hadn’t done that a lot lately, and to Nadine, it was pleasant to see.

Tom, Jared’s father, was sitting at the snack bar, finishing up his cup of coffee, while he waited for Jared to come downstairs. Nadine, Jared’s mother was in the kitchen, helping Cassie prepare snacks, for their flight back to Arizona. Nadine was not looking forward to this parting. Sarabeth had begged to

stay with her father, but Jared had told her he had something to take care of. He'd promised Sarabeth that he and Juanita would visit soon, if time allowed.

Jared stepped into the kitchen. Nadine turned to go collect Sarabeth and Myra, who were out by the pool, watching Nano chasing a squirrel around the back garden. Nadine stopped in her tracks and grabbed the wall for support. She felt as if someone had knocked her legs out from under her.

Using preternatural speed, Tom and Jared were by Nadine's side instantly. "Mother, what's wrong?" he asked, helping her to a bar stool.

Nadine's eyes glossed. She swallowed hard and shared a look of concern with Tom. Jared's eyes glowed crimson red. He felt like a boulder was pressing down on his chest. "It's Donna," he choked. "Something is seriously wrong... with Donna." He reached for his cell phone.

Nadine rested her hand over Jared's. She slowly shook her head. "Not yet. There is a choice to be made. You must wait for them to come to you."

Jared tightened his jaw. His voice became a growl, low in his throat. "I need to be there, Mother. She's going to die. I wasn't there for Sara. I have to be there for Donna!"

"You may yet have to go to her, but that time has not yet come. Reach for her thoughts. That's how you can help her the most."

"But, what if she's still blocking me out. I can't risk penetrating her warning barrier, especially now!"

"That is Donna's choice Jared. You must abide her wishes, or you will lose her forever." Nadine turned. "We're not leaving him, Tom. Not until we know for sure." Tom let out a long sigh and nodded.

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"Donna!" Joyce shouted and checked her pulse. "Sam, Sheila, get in here!"

Sam burst out of the scrub room; Sheila was right behind him. Donna had collapsed to the floor. "No!" Sam groaned and

checked her pupils. He pressed his stethoscope to her chest and listened. “She’s in arrest! Sweetheart don’t do this to me!”

Sam lifted Donna’s listless body and laid her on the table. “VICi, monitor BPR of mother and foetus. Sheila charge paddles to 200! Clear!” Zap!

“Sheila, how’s the baby?”

“He seems unaffected.”

Donna’s body lifted off the table – no response – she was still in arrest. “Come on baby, don’t do this to me! Charge to 300! Clear!” Still no change.

“Come on Donna – come back sweetheart. I don’t want to go much higher. Charge to 350! Clear!”

Donna’s body jerked; there was a blip on the screen. “She has a sinus,” Sheila announced. “Intubate her, Sam and let’s get that damn thing out of her neck.”

With their hands turning blue and their fingers going numb, Sheila, Sam and the rest of the surgical team worked as quickly as they could. Sheila carefully guided the fibre optic camera and microsurgical instruments to the chip. The image on the wallscreen confirmed her worst fears. The vial’s outer shell had dissolved and released the toxin. “I’m sorry, Sam. The damage is done. It’s in her bloodstream. We can keep her on the respirator, or we can let her go. I don’t think it’s going to make any difference. The toxin has already destroyed her brain cells.”

Sam thought about Donna’s request. “She stays on life support, at least until I can keep my promise.”

“What was the promise?”

“She wants the baby saved at all costs. I have to find a suitable surrogate mother to carry the baby to term.”

Sheila’s eyes widened. “Does Richard know about this?”

“I don’t know, she didn’t say, but he will when I tell him.”

“In that case, let’s flush as much of the toxin out of her system, as possible. At this stage, that’s about all we can do.”

Three hours later, Sam and Sheila took off their surgical caps and masks. Sam blotted his eyes on his sleeve. Donna's blood had been reheated to thirty-seven degrees Celsius and returned to her body. Sheila turned to the respiratory technician. "Is there any indication she's even *trying* to breathe?" she asked.

"No, Dr. McGowan."

Sam sighed and removed the rest of his surgical gear; dumping them in the bin. He couldn't see any hope for Donna. "VICi, gradually increase room temperature to twenty degrees Celsius. Move her to an ICU. Keep the respirator on full assist."

Sheila studied his eyes. "We've done all we can, Sam. Now it's up to Donna. Stay with her. I'll talk to Richard and his father."

Chapter 106

Sheila entered the waiting area; everyone stood. There was silence until Sheila spoke. "She's in a deep coma, Richard. Under the circumstances, that's probably the best thing for her."

Richard's voice was choked. "And the baby?"

"The baby seems fine."

Richard slumped in the chair behind him.

"I have something for you, Richard."

Richard held out his hand. "You took off her wedding rings and locket?"

"We had to, Richard. I figured you would want them."

Richard slowly closed his hand.

Sheila stood. "Sam is with Donna, in ICU. Let's talk in his office."

"I'm going in with D," Gary said.

Sheila softly smiled and nodded. "Sure."

Sheila walked behind the desk and waved Sir Richard and Richard to a chair. "Please sit. I know you both want to be with Donna, so I'll make this brief." She looked from Sir Richard to Richard. "Donna is gone. Clinically speaking, she died before she collapsed. All that's keeping her body alive are the drugs, and the machines. If we take her off life support, whether it's today or a hundred years from now, it's not going to make any difference."

Richard swallowed hard. "With all this technology there's nothing you can do?"

Sheila slowly shook her head. "I'm sorry, Richard."

Richard stood. "I'm going to see her."

Sir Richard grabbed his arm. "Not yet, Ricky. Sam can stay with her a while longer. I need to talk to you and Gary. Go get him, and then come to my office."

Richard paused in the ICU doorway. Tears filled his eyes. Donna didn't even *look* alive. He clutched her rings and locket in his hand and entered the room. Sam was sitting on one side of the bed, holding Donna's hand. Gary was on the other. Sam let go of Donna's hand and stood, making room. Richard caressed her face with the back of his fingers, bent down and kissed her forehead. He turned to Gary. "Dad wants to see us in his office." He directed his attention to Sam. "Don't let her slip away."

Sam swallowed the lump in his throat. "I won't."

Gary laid his hand on Sam's shoulder as they shared a knowing look. Gary knew Sam was dying inside. Sam nodded. Gary left.

Sam sat in the chair and took Donna's hand, again. He softly kissed the back of it. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I've let you down. I've let your baby down. What I wouldn't give to have you open those beautiful brown eyes, and smile at me, one last time. I love you Donna."

Gary and Richard stood outside Sir Richard's office. Gary looked at Richard. "I don't need to be here!" Richard said as he pushed the door panel.

Sir Richard came to the door. "Ricky, wait outside."

"Dad I need to be with my wife!"

"Ricky, wait outside until I call you. Time is short!"

Richard stepped back and the door slid shut. He put his back against the wall and slid down to a sitting position, pulling his knees to his chest. He played with his gold wedding band. As he toyed with it, he closed his eyes, remembering everything that had happened since Donna came back into his life.

His mind went back even further; to the day at the beach. He could almost hear Donna's little-girl cries as the tide came in and washed her sand castle away. Images, sounds and sensations flashed through his mind like a slide show, until

their wedding day. Tears blurred his vision. “Donna, you have to live. I can’t make it without you,” he choked.

As Gary came in, Sir Richard stood and shook his hand, leaving a tiny piece of paper behind. Then he started looking around the room as if he’d lost something. Gary was confused. They both sat down. Sir Richard was blunt. “Gary what I’m about to tell you is the worst news I’ve ever had to tell anyone.”

Gary grabbed the arms of the chair and swallowed hard.

“This is not going to be easy for you, but I need you to hold it together for Richard’s sake.”

Gary’s heart began to pound. He sensed finality in Sir Richard’s tone.

“Donna is dead! Her body is still alive and so is the baby, but Donna is brain dead. The toxin Forrest used killed her within seconds after it was released into her bloodstream and there’s no antidote.”

Gary blinked and swallowed the knot in his throat, threatening to choke him. “How could this happen? Why did this happen?”

“Revenge!” Sir Richard tightened his jaw. “Forrest used something he knew we couldn’t stop! The vial was filled with modified blue ring octopus venom. It’s native to Australia, but its venom is known throughout the world as the most toxic and the most fatal of all. Forrest may look stupid, but he’s not as stupid as The Order thinks he is.”

Gary sat and said nothing; clenching the arms of the chair tighter and tighter until his fingers numbed from lack of circulation.

Sir Richard opened a drawer on his file cabinet. Gary watched as he took out a roll of wide duct tape. Without saying a word, Sir Richard started pulling off long strips of tape. He stuck them around the bottom of the door and the entire doorframe, sealing all the cracks.

Gary sat with his mouth slightly open and watched in amazement. Had Sir Richard gone off the deep end? Then he

remembered the piece of paper. Discreetly, with several short glances, he read the message: *'thr still mght b hpe mst fnd bgs sy nthng ply alng.'* Gary pondered the cryptic writing. *'There still might be hope... must find bgs say nothing play along. Must find bgs? What the heck is bgs? Bags?'*

Sir Richard sealed the door and doorframe to the toilet. He opened the file cabinet, put the tape away and sat back in his chair. "Gary, how long can the bugs operate before they have to recharge?"

Gary glanced at the paper in his hand, and then at Sir Richard. Sir Richard slightly raised his left eyebrow. Gary's eyes beamed with recognition. Finally it made sense. "Well Sir, judging from the size of the fuel cell - assuming they don't find a source of glucose - I would say they have to get to a light source - give or take, every ten minutes. After that, they start relying on whatever alternative power reserve they have collected."

"How long can they operate on this alternative power source, provided they don't have access to any form of light?"

"I'm guessing, around thirty-five to forty minutes tops."

Sir Richard began to act and talk strangely; at least to Gary. "You know, you would think, way down here in this mine we wouldn't be bothered with earwigs."

Sir Richard reached into the side-door of his desk and produced a spray bottle filled with some yellowish-green liquid. Gary was getting confused again. "Sir?" he prompted.

Sir Richard then took out a small tin container with a lid, took off the lid and sprayed inside the box. He began to spray the liquid all around the room as he continued talking to Gary. Once again, Gary was convinced Sir Richard had gone mad.

"What do you think I saw run under my file cabinet - a disgusting earwig. I hate earwigs! Don't you Gary?"

Gary turned his head to follow Sir Richard as he walked about the room. "Yyyes Sir, I do," he said, attempting to pacify him.

“Jeff assured me this insect repellent will get rid of it. I’m a bit sceptical, but I thought; what the hell, right?”

Once he’d sprayed over the entire office, he handed the bottle to Gary. *That’s it – he’s bloody bonkers! It’s all become too much for him.* He held too much respect for Sir Richard to say it out loud. Over time, Sir Richard had become a father figure to him. He was concerned about Sir Richard’s mental stability.

“When I close my eyes, I want you to spray me down with this – head to toe, front and back.” Sir Richard squeezed his eyes shut and waited. Curiously, Gary looked from the bottle to Sir Richard. He sprayed a little in his hand and smelled it. It had little odour. Finally, he shrugged.

“Good. Now it’s your turn.” Sir Richard took the bottle and prepared to spray Gary. “Close your eyes and keep them shut. Jeff assures me if you get this stuff in your mouth you’ll get a nasty surprise.”

Gary couldn’t see the purpose of spraying the room, himself and Sir Richard with what appeared to be no more than a sports drink. “Sir Richard...” he attempted slowly.

Sir Richard held up a hand and frowned. “I told you to keep your mouth shut Gary! Can’t you follow orders?” Gary grimaced and dropped his shoulders in defeat. “There, now you can talk if you must. But before you do, I already know what you’re thinking, and the answer is no – I’m not going insane, just be patient and observe.”

Sir Richard removed the soft white bulb from the lamp on the corner of his desk and replaced it with a dark blue one. “VICi, lights off.” He switched the desk lamp on and the room was filled with a bright yellow-green glow. Sir Richard advanced on Gary with a pair of tweezers. “There - on your shoulder - another one of the little buggers.” Sir Richard put the bug in the tin container and quickly closed the lid. “Now check me.” Gary found a second bug, clinging to the side of Sir Richard’s collar.

Together, they examined the office and found a bug under the phone, one on the filing cabinet and one on a spider web in the corner of the room; next to the spider's empty shell. The device had apparently been feeding on it as an alternative power source. After successfully collecting the bugs that were in the office and double checking each other, Sir Richard sealed the container. "Now, we can talk freely," Sir Richard said. "VICi, lights on." He pointed to the tin. "How do we disable these things?"

Gary submerged the box in Sir Richard's fifty gallon aquarium and removed the lid. The bugs sparked and jerked as the water shorted out their circuitry. Leaving enough water in the tin to keep the devices submerged, Gary removed the box and sat it on a facial tissue, on the edge of the desk. Fishing out one of the bugs, he then produced a small magnifying glass from the top pocket of his lab coat and examined the bug more closely.

"There are at least two things these bugs don't react well to – stew and salt water. It stops them working until they dry out again. This bug is different to the one we have in the electronics lab. It doesn't have the payload mechanism. These are probably just surveillance drones. To function, they have to have light or draw on their reserved power. What was in the spray we used to expose them?"

"Fluorescein dye. Jeff discovered the bugs can't duplicate the colour it fluoresces when exposed to UV light. Now that we have more than one to work with, is there a way we could disable all of them at one time without spraying the entire complex and half the hillside in the process?"

"Yes, once we've established how they communicate, we could then jam their signal. With any luck, we can seize control from Forrest and make them do what *we* want. But I don't understand what all this has to do with Donna. I *assumed* that's what this was about."

"Sheila said they've done everything they could for Donna. Even, if by some miracle, she manages to pull through, Sheila

believes she will be little more than a vegetable. Can you do anything? Are you confident enough in the virus, to use it on Donna?"

"What have we got to lose? It will work or it won't. Either way, Donna will be no worse off, than she is now. The baby is another matter. If this affects it, the only thing we should be worrying about is Donna's wrath. If this were her decision to make...."

Sir Richard held up a hand. "At this point, it's not her decision to make. It's mine. If you think it will work, we have to try, otherwise we're going to lose her." He rang the RVI in Newcastle. "This is Sir Richard Triplet. Connect me to George Forrest's room, please."

"One moment please," a female voice replied.

Sir Richard impatiently drummed his fingers on his desk as he waited.

"I'm sorry, Sir Richard. Mr. Forrest has a 'do not disturb' order on his room, and visiting hours are over."

"Put my call through, or I will phone the Home Secretary; with whom I am well acquainted, and who would not take kindly to any form of obstruction. Do we settle this through those channels, or, are you going to put me through?"

"I'm sorry, Sir Richard, but I'll have to speak to my supervisor, first. One moment, please."

Sir Richard was getting annoyed. Triplet International made frequent substantial donations to the hospital, and he was well known among the administrative staff. Two minutes later, after having been properly rebuked by the hospital administrator, the lady came back. *"I apologise for making you wait Sir Richard, it won't happen again, Sir,"* she said with great humility and connected the call.

Chapter 107

The stress and strain of the last few weeks had taken its toll on Forrest. He was taking a much needed nap. Liu was sitting in the chair reading. The phone rang several times before Liu could pick it up. “Yes?”

“Let me speak to George!”

“Who is this? Mr. Forrest is not to be disturbed.”

“Get him now!”

Forrest opened his eyes and glared at Liu; the sound of the phone had awakened him. “Give it to me. I’ll teach them some fucking manners!” Liu passed the receiver to him. “What part of ‘do not disturb’ went over your fucking head?” he growled.

“Don’t be so rude, George. Is that any way to talk to an old friend?” Sir Richard’s voice was calm and even.

Forrest’s eyes widened. His face flushed with rage. The blip of his EKG sped up.

“In case you haven’t already figured it out - you can’t see me, or hear what I’m saying, anymore.”

“Triplet as usual, you’re full of yourself; which means you’re full of shit; like all you filthy, disgusting, wanky....”

“Forrest you fucking moron! Shut your mouth and prepare to eat your bollocks!” Sir Richard spat back impatiently. “If you still think you can see me and Gary, go for it. Turn on your little monitor, which I’m sure you have in the room there with you and see for yourself.”

“So, if you’ve found one of my little ‘toys’, then you’ll know that you can’t turn them off. If you do, you’ll kill your precious Donna!”

Forrest was perturbed that Sir Richard had discovered his bugs, even though Liu had assured him they were untraceable. Forrest switched on the monitoring system as he continued their conversation. “I’ll give you two hours to repair any

damage you've managed to do and release the ones in your possession. Failing that, I turn them all off, and Donna dies."

"You can't hurt Donna anymore! Her immune system beat you to it. Check your bugs in our infirmary. Donna is brain dead. You've managed to destroy the one person that was willing to help someone as worthless as you! Enjoy your date with the Grim Reaper, with any luck his visit will be sooner rather than later."

"Then I'll just target someone else close to you; how about your son?"

"Nice try! If you could, you would have already done that. You're bluffing now, George. We found the bug you used on Donna. It's different from your others. I don't think you can hurt anyone else. My team really enjoyed dissecting your 'toys'. They've already made some impressive improvements and would delight in sharing their talents with you personally; especially the replacement for the tetrodotoxin. Tell me - is that a buzz I heard? VICi, end communication."

Forrest sat there, carefully listening. He couldn't hear anything. Was his hearing strong enough? The bugs were virtually silent, unless they were right next to your ear. Forrest was frantic - paranoid! His monitor displayed a summary of the bug operations. Of the one hundred and fifty-two bugs in the network, six were malfunctioning, including the prototype.

Forrest switched to the bug that was supposed to be on Sir Richard, nothing but static. He switched to the one that was supposed to be on Gary - static. The bug outside Sir Richard's office showed an image of Richard sitting on the floor with his head in his hands, obviously suffering. Forrest smiled.

The two bugs in ICU and the one on Sam were still functional. He directed one of the bugs toward Donna. It showed her heartbeat was steady, but the EEG indicated no brain activity. Sir Richard hadn't been lying. Donna *was* brain dead. *Why are they keeping her alive? Wait a minute, there are two heartbeats there.* "Donna's pregnant!"

Richard had waited as long as he was going to. "VICi, connect me with Sam Kaliea."

"I'm here, Richard," Sam hesitantly said.

"Sam, how is she? Has there been any change?"

"Have you talked to your father yet?"

"No, he's still talking to Gary, and I'm getting bloody well tired of waiting, when I could be in there with my wife and baby. You avoided my question. Has there been any change?"

Sam lowered his gaze for a few seconds and looked back at the camera.

Richard narrowed his eyes. "Sam, if there's something you're not telling me..."

"Richard, I'm not trying to keep anything from you," Sam interrupted. "I'm just following orders. I can't discuss the options with you until after you've spoken to your father. He was adamant about that. I'm sorry. VICi, end communication."

"Sam, wait!" Richard was furious. "God damn it! I'm fucking tired of this shit! If it wasn't for this stupid project..."

"Gary, ask Ricky to come in." Gary carefully peeled the duct tape from the door, leaving it attached to the doorframe. "VICi, unlock door panel," Sir Richard said and the door slid open.

Gary waved his hand, urging Richard inside. "Richard, get in here, quick!"

Richard stood. "Well it's about bloody time!" As the door slid shut behind him, he noticed the silver tape. Gary quickly re-stuck the tape, and put a fresh strip over the centre where the doors met.

"Dad...?"

Sir Richard tossed the spray bottle to Gary. "Not yet, Ricky! Close your eyes and keep your mouth shut. Don't open them until I tell you." He nodded to Gary.

Gary aimed the nozzle at Richard and started spraying him down, feet upwards. Richard blocked the bottle below his neck. "What the bloody hell has this got to do with Donna?"

“Ricky, don’t talk and keep your eyes shut!” Sir Richard commanded.

Richard groaned, and complied.

“Believe me Son; you don’t want this in your eyes, and especially not in your mouth.”

Gary finished spraying Richard and then sprayed around the edge of the door, again. Sir Richard switched on the UV lamp. “VICi, lights off.” Again the room was filled with a yellow-green glow. Sir Richard pointed to the top of Richard’s head. “There! In his hair!”

Gary snatched the bug with his tweezers, plunged it into the fish tank and added it to the tin.

Sir Richard smiled weakly. “I hope this doesn’t kill my fish.”

Richard touched his hair where Gary retrieved the bug, and shook his head, confused.

“There may be more. Help us look,” Gary said.

A thorough search revealed one more, green glowing bug on the door frame, near the top of the door where the doors fit together. “VICi, lights on.” Sir Richard motioned Richard to a chair. He fought to keep his voice steady, tears dimming his eyes. “Son, did you and Donna discuss anything about the baby – what her wishes were if something like this were to happen?”

Richard hesitated. “Yes, we discussed it. In fact, we had a row over it. She said if it came to a choice between her and the baby that the baby must come first. I didn’t agree.”

Sir Richard closed his eyes for a second and shook his head. “We think there’s a chance we can save her.”

“There *is* a chance!” Gary interrupted. “We can give her the virus. It’s designed to repair this kind of damage. The risk is it may not be able to recover her memory. She could wake up with a clean slate. She may even have to learn how to talk and walk again.”

“Aren’t we jumping to conclusions? Donna’s body is not exactly normal – remember? If we wait, maybe her EHG will kick in. Her gunshot wound healed in a few hours.”

“Richard... this is a little different from a gunshot wound,” Gary spoke up.

“There’s a slight chance, by keeping Donna’s body alive until she’s closer to term that we may be able to save the baby. We know it’s been done before. Ricky, this is your wife and your baby.”

“The thing is,” Gary interjected. “If we give Donna the virus, we don’t know how it will affect the baby. It’s not something we’ve considered. We could lose the baby, and even if Donna survived, she may not remember anything - even you.”

Richard nodded. “I’m well aware of the options. If I do nothing, then we might save the baby. If we give her the virus there’s a chance the baby will survive and Donna will recover; or, Donna could survive and the baby could die; or, the baby could survive, and Donna might not recover. Without the virus, *only* the baby might survive. With the virus...”

Sir Richard held up a hand. “Son Stop! You’re talking in circles, slow down. We have to make a decision while there’s still time.”

“No, Dad, I’m not talking in circles. Either way, there’s an even chance that one of them will survive but only by giving Donna the virus is there a chance that *both* will survive.” He paused for a few seconds and then spoke with surety. “Donna may hate me for this, but I can’t live without her. If there’s a chance... I have to take it!”

“Richard, you realise if Donna recovers... contact with her will mean that you... will...” Gary broke off.

Richard smiled slightly. “...Be infected with life? That’s not a hard choice for me if I can have my wife *and* baby with me.”

Sir Richard smiled. “In that case, we need to get rid of these damn bugs. We can’t do anything until then. We’ve got eight so far; who knows how many more there may be.”

Richard furrowed his brow. “Why can’t we just give her the virus now and...?”

Sir Richard shook his head. "It's too risky while the bugs are still operational."

"It won't be necessary to destroy all of them," Gary interrupted. "There's no way these bugs can get a signal topside, on their own. We know how they got into the complex. It was that Asian guy. He must have released them into the air intake at the rockfall, and that *has* to be the same route the signal is taking back out." He paused briefly and continued.

"What we have to do is target that route! By doing that, we'll cut off the signal, both to *and* from the bugs. That's the answer - we need to turn off the power to the ventilation tunnel. We then seal it at each end and wait for the bugs in the sealed section to run out of power. They can't get energy from light, and they won't be able to move to find alternative sources. Give it an hour, and the link topside should be broken."

"How would we seal the ends?" Richard asked.

Sir Richard glanced at the door and grinned. "Plastic sheeting and tape - we have some in the storage areas. It's been here since the cold war, but it should be OK."

For a second they studied each other's eyes, and then all headed towards the door at the same time. "We have to be careful of what we say until the bugs are neutralised," Sir Richard reminded them.

Chapter 108

Liu sat in the chair next to Forrest's hospital bed, drinking his cup of tea. "I suspected they might find at least one of the bugs, but now eight of the devices have gone down. I still wouldn't worry. Even at this rate, it will take several weeks before we lose the signal completely."

Forrest groaned. "You told me they wouldn't find *any* of them!"

"They probably wouldn't have if you hadn't taunted them. As it is, we know how they're detecting them, and they're unlikely to have enough chemicals to spray every inch of the complex. If they have more chemicals brought in from the surface, they open the way for us to send in a fresh batch of bugs."

"What about the bugs and transmitter in the ventilation tunnel?"

I didn't say anything about a transmitter. How did he know? "The transmitter at the bottom of the shaft is shielded. It switches itself off if it detects a location beacon; then resets itself a few minutes later. If the beacon is still sending out a pinging signal, the transmitter deactivates again. It's operative for a millisecond. Even if the beacon were right on top of the transmitter, it wouldn't be long enough for the beacon to locate it."

"And, in the tunnel..." Forrest prompted.

"The bugs in the tunnel won't need light. I left them a supply of sugar solution to feed on. As their power supply runs low, they'll fly back through the rockfall so they can feed. The system is good for at least another two years."

Forrest was frantic. "I don't have two fucking years you prick! I need another payload bug! What about the baby? Can we use it to our advantage?"

Working together, half an hour later the tunnel had been sealed, and the lights turned off. In another hour, Wein and Gary had taken control of the bugs, and had flown them to the electronics lab. They now had another 124 more bugs to work with.

Richard walked into the ICU. “Sam, Dad is waiting for you in your office. I need to be alone with my wife.”

Sam stood, nodded and left.

For a long time, Richard stood and stared at Donna. She looked so frail and fragile – no spark of life. Tears welled in his eyes. He wiped at them with the back of his hand. Slowly he walked to the side of her bed and pulled the chair closer. He sighed deeply and held her hand against his face. He leaned forward and put his lips close to her ear. “Donna, I never felt love before you - not real love, and now... this hurts sweetheart.”

Although Richard wasn't willing to accept it, this could be the end.

Sam walked into his office. Gary and Sir Richard were there, waiting. “Richard said you wanted to talk to me.”

Gary handed Sir Richard the steel box he'd been balancing on his knee. Sir Richard placed it on Sam's desk, resting his hand over the top of it. Sam glanced at the box and back at Sir Richard. Sir Richard's tone was dry and absolute.

“Sam, you know what this is. You're going to give this to Donna. What is said in this room goes with you to your grave. Understood?”

Sam swallowed hard. He glanced at the box and then back at Sir Richard. “Yes. It's the virus, but this is not what Donna wanted. She was very specific with her wishes. We don't know how this could harm her baby. I'm not going to....”

Sir Richard tightened his jaw. “Yes, you are, Sam! Whether you like it, or not, Richard is her husband, and this is his baby. We've discussed this. It was his decision and mine. Richard knows this is not what Donna wants, but if the virus works,

he'll still have his wife and child. He knows she may hate him, but he's willing to live with the consequences."

"Besides, Sam. I'm not willing to let Donna go either and neither are you," Gary added. "Are you?"

Sam's eyes glossed. He shook his head and stood. "No...."

They watched Richard through the glass.

"Donna, I know this is not what you want. You might even hate me, but I'll take your hate if that's all you have to give."

Richard's voice broke; he swallowed hard. "I also know, when you wake up that there's a chance you might not even remember me. I can live with that too, as long as I know there's a chance, but you have to help me sweetheart. I love you Donna, more than I ever dreamed I was capable of loving anyone. You have to fight for us. You have to fight for our baby. I need you Donna." Richard held the back of her hand to his lips.

Sam swallowed the lump in his throat. "Time is running out."

Sir Richard tapped on the glass. Richard looked up and nodded. Sir Richard, Gary and Sam entered the room.

"I'm *not* leaving!" Richard stated.

Sam nodded. He wedged the cap of the hypodermic syringe between his teeth and slowly injected the virus, into the IV shunt taped to the top of Donna's hand. He kept his eyes glued on the monitor screen. Nothing happened. He glanced at Gary and sighed. "We probably won't know anything, until morning, but if this is going to work, we should start to see some results by then." Sam reached in his pocket and handed Richard the DVD.

Richard looked at it confused. "What is this?"

"I'm guessing Donna's last will and testament." Sam locked his eyes on Richard's. "I can't tell you what to do, but I feel you owe her that. Don't you?"

"Donna is not going to die!" Gary insisted. "This *will* work!"

“Yeah - well, we don’t know that for sure - do we?”

“Look what her other treatment did for Melissa and Alan!”

“Gary, we’re not dealing with the same thing here, Mate. Donna is dead. Every cell in her brain has been destroyed. We’ve already gone against one of her wishes – the baby.”

Sir Richard held up a hand. “This isn’t helping.” He looked at Richard. “I think we should watch it.”

“You can watch it in my office,” Sam interrupted. “I’ll stay with her. If there are *any* changes, I’ll let you know.”

Richard looked down at the jewelled case, and toyed with it as he read the familiar writing. ‘*Just in Case.*’ it read.

John Liu paced the floor of Forrest’s hospital room. He was stunned. Minutes after he’d told Forrest the bugs would remain functional for at least two years, he’d lost contact with all of them. He’d watched as Sir Richard’s team brought plastic sheeting to the rockfall and proceeded to seal off the tunnel. This didn’t bother him. The bugs were capable of gnawing their way through a plastic sheet, but he hadn’t anticipated what happened next.

They created a second barrier, inches apart from the first one and filled the gap between the two sheets with fire extinguisher foam. Liu’s bugs couldn’t cope with the foam filled gap. It destroyed their circuitry, rendering them immobile.

This *did* bother him, but he reasoned that the bugs inside the barrier would look for another fuel source within the complex. There would always be food in the kitchen, even if it was in the bin. It was when they’d created a second foam filled barrier at the other end of the tunnel that Liu realised he’d been beaten. There was no way the bugs in the gap could refuel, and those inside the complex wouldn’t be able to transmit across the gap. Once the lights in the tunnel were switched off this battle was lost.

Forrest should be dead by now, but he'd kept hanging on to life. Liu awaited his uncle's instructions, but they hadn't come. Had he been abandoned – set up and framed to take the fall?

Maybe it was time for plan B – but Liu didn't have one.

Richard didn't want to leave Donna, but if this was the end, he felt obligated to honour at least one of her last wishes. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "If you must go, don't leave while I'm gone," he whispered.

Sam waited until they'd left. He pulled a chair next to Donna's bed and took the envelope from his pocket. He stared at it. His eyes filled with tears. "I'm not sure I want to know what's in this. I'd rather be destroying it." He unfolded the letter and started to read. She'd penned it with her own hand. To him, a symbol of what he meant to her.

'Sam,

This is hard to put into words, and if it seems a little jumbled, please forgive my feeble attempt at baring my soul. I have strong feelings for Richard. I won't deny that, but I fell for you, too. The minute I looked into those dancing aqua eyes, you connected with a part of me that had died – my soul. I didn't want to love you. In fact, I tried very hard not to love you, or Richard.

After Jared, I was numb. I didn't care anymore, and because of that I learned to be selfish. To use whatever kept the pain at bay, sex, mainly – raw animalistic magnetism. I took what I needed from you, and from Richard, and gave little in return. I pushed both of you away. Now, I feel guilty for not being honest with either of you, or myself.

I love you, Sam. I wish I'd had the courage to tell you that to your face, instead of like this. It's not the same thing I felt for Jared, but you were right. I could have learned to love you easier than I could ever learn to love Richard. While I told you, 'no strings attached', I guess I was wrapping you up, in a cocoon. That was unfair of me, but like I said, I was selfish.

When I stopped being selfish, it was too late. I found out about Rich, and he became the center of my universe.

I can't explain the bond I have with this unborn child. It's more than a mother's love. It's like he's part of my soul. I can't hear his, but I know he hears my thoughts. He's going to be very special, Sam, and that's why it's so very important that he be born. Richard knows how I feel. We talked, but he doesn't agree with me. He doesn't have the connection with Rich that I do. It's the same connection I have with Beth, Jared's daughter – my daughter. Again, I won't try to explain it. I just know it's there.

I hid the pain, but sometimes, it hurts so badly that I can't breathe. Loving two people is like being caught, between Heaven and a star. I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry you heard me say my wedding vows. I didn't mean them. It took every ounce of courage I had to say yes.

You gave me the courage to do what I had to do. Now I hope I can do the same, for you. You have to let me go, Sam. You have to let me go, and save this baby. He's all that matters, now.

Mama was right. Love is the only real truth, and I'm glad I knew yours, if only for a brief time. Don't give up! You may never find someone who loved you more than me, but maybe you'll find someone who'll try. Please forgive me, for not being honest with you.

Always, Donna.'

Sam propped on one elbow, his hand resting on his forehead as he scanned through the letter again; parts of it had run. He imagined Donna, her tears streaming from her eyes onto the page. It broke his heart. She was willing to live in misery to protect him, and the ones she loved. He carefully folded the letter, put it back in his pocket and looked at her. "Sweetheart, please don't do this to me. The only way I want to see forever is through your eyes. You *are* my Heaven and my stars, Donna. I love you." He held her hand against his cheek and cried silent tears.

Richard sat in the chair behind Sam's desk and put the DVD in his computer. He closed his eyes briefly and prepared for the worst. Gary and Sir Richard gathered round. After a few seconds of static, Donna's image came on the screen and she began to speak.

'Well, well, well if it isn't the Three Stooges together again for one final curtain call.'

Despite the morbid mood, Gary covered his mouth and chuckled. Richard and Sir Richard looked at him in confusion. They didn't get the joke.

'Right about now... I'll bet Richard and his father are scratching their heads, trying to figure out what I meant by The Three Stooges. Since there's a strong chance I won't be around to do it; Gary, please explain it to them, someday.'

Donna sighed. 'I've done my usual, started the show with a laugh, like a good entertainer, but now it's time to get serious. I never have been one to beat around the bush, and I'm not going to start now. I cannot and will not do what you're asking me to do. I can't deliberately deceive Forrest into thinking we have given him the cure when I know in my heart, it's going to kill him in the end. I know you don't see it this way but to me, it is murder, plain and simple, and I won't be a part of it.'

'I don't know what has brought us to where we are now, or what may or may not have happened to me. Let's just assume, for the sake of argument that I'm dead, and what you do to Forrest now well, I guess there's not a lot I can do about it, any more than I can control what you do or don't do with the virus. But please consider this, if you give him the cure only to kill him; he still wins because he has brought you down to his level...'

Silent tears slid down Richard's face. Sir Richard swallowed hard and fought bitter tears.

'...and there's no going back after that. There can be no greater good in deceit and no truth in lies. The Order has to be challenged. Someone has to make a stand, and I've chosen to

be the one by refusing to produce the killer drug. I can't destroy what I vowed to protect, and I'm asking you to please, please, reconsider.'

'Sir Richard, one man can make a difference. Be that one man. The World can find peace with itself if someone will just try. It doesn't need an Order where people like Forrest can so easily gain the upper hand.'

'Richard... you're my husband, and whatever you do with me, my life is entirely in your hands. I love you and I trust you to do what is right... even if that means you have to let me go, to save the baby. You know my views on that.'

'Finally... Gary what can I say? You have always been there, always looked after my best interests, even when I didn't have the brains to do it for myself. Don't weep for me. You were the brother I never had. I will always be with you. I love you. I love you all. Take care of each other and go on with your life. I'll tag along and guide you to the end of the journey.'

Donna's eyes filled with tears. She kissed her fingers and pressed them to the camera lens. A few seconds later the screen went blank and filled with static.

Richard put his head in his hands and groaned.

"It's going to be all right Richard you'll see," Gary assured him.

To a man about to lose everything he ever dreamed of having, Gary's words were falling on deaf ears. Finally, Richard raised his head and got up. He turned to Sir Richard. "I have to get back to my family. You have to talk to Grandma. She needs to know."

Sir Richard wiped his eyes and nodded. "I'll take care of that now."

Sir Richard pressed the door panel to Lady Triplet's quarters. The doors slid open. Lela, one of Sir Richard's upstairs maids from Triplet Hall that he'd assigned to look after Lady Triplet greeted him with a smile. "Good evening, Sir Richard."

“Hello, Lela. Is Mum still up?”

“Yes, Sir. She’s in the parlour, working on her cross-stitch sampler, for Master Richard and his wife. Shall I announce you and make some fresh tea?”

Sir Richard swallowed hard and softly smiled. “Yes, to the tea, but I’ll show myself in.” He kissed Lady Triplet’s cheek.

Lady Triplet put her sampler aside and studied his eyes. “What is it, Richard? How are Donna and the baby?”

Sir Richard crouched in front of her. “I have bad news, Mum.”

Lady Triplet’s eyes turned to two eclipsed moons.

Chapter 109

Even in Forrest's weakened state; Liu was still hesitant about telling him that they were no longer controlling the bugs in the complex. Of the 152 he had used, the only ones left were the sixteen in the relay chain to the shaft. He had set them to return 'home'. They would do this automatically once they were exposed to sunlight. Since they were invisible, there was no danger of them being intercepted. Liu's cell phone vibrated. He read the text message. *'It's time.'*

Eli watched and waited. Through his Bluetooth link to Liu's laptop, he watched Liu hack into the hospital's computer system. He set the cameras in the room to play a thirty second pre-recorded loop that he'd taken earlier, of Forrest alone in his room sleeping. He slipped on a pair of latex gloves and produced an insulin syringe, filled with a clear liquid, from his pocket. He grinned as he approached the sleeping man. "I've been waiting for this moment for a long time, you sick bastard."

Just as he took the cap off the syringe, the speaker above Forrest's bed hissed. "Mr. Liu, we need to see you at the nurse's station. There's a problem with Mr. Forrest's medical records."

"What kind of problem?"

"We have conflicting information, concerning the DNR order on Mr. Forrest's chart."

"I'll be right there. Shit! Now what?" Liu took off his gloves, recapped the syringe and left the room. Ten minutes later he came back, frustrated from the interruption. His uncle was waiting for the call that the job had been done, and now Liu had to start over. He re-donned his gloves, restarted the camera feed loop and cautiously approached Forrest again.

The red light on the camera behind Liu flashed and started recording, again; Liu didn't notice.

Remembering how Forrest had nearly strangled him before, Liu kept a close watch on Forrest's movement. Forrest didn't flinch. With a grin of satisfaction, Liu quickly finished the job. "*End of the line Toothless Tiger,*" he hissed, picked up his rubbish and stepped out onto the balcony.

A few seconds later, the alarm on Forrest's respirator went off. His EKG went ballistic. Forrest's body gave a couple of strong jerks and stilled.

Liu glanced at his watch, waited a few seconds and turned. Seemingly frantic, Liu rushed in the room and watched as the doctor checked Forrest. "It's over," he sighed. "I'm calling it. Time of death 11:05 pm."

The doctor walked over to Liu. "Would you like a moment alone with him?"

"Yes, I would," Liu said, appearing to be upset.

The doctor motioned for the nurse and they left, closing the door behind them.

Liu pulled Forrest's briefcase out and quickly scanned through the documents in it, hoping to find a copy of Forrest's will. It wasn't there. He was pleased to see several copies of Forrest's signature and a document bearing Wilson's signature. Perhaps he wouldn't need the will, after all. He was also pleased to see that Forrest's pen was tucked in one of the upper pockets. "Well '*Tai-Pan*⁶," he said, mocking Forrest. "I had hoped to watch you suffer longer, but that was not to be. It may take *Meng Po*⁷ some time to decide which of the *18 chambers*⁸ to put you in first."

Liu picked up Forrest's briefcase and walked out the door. He stopped by the nurse's station and let them know they could pick up Forrest's body. He stepped out of the hospital and hailed a taxi. "Take me to the Vermont Hotel," he said and crawled in the back. With a satisfied smile, he opened his cell phone and pressed a speed number. "It's done."

Richard went back to Donna's room. Sam was still sitting there as promised. He'd concealed the letter and with difficulty,

regained his composure. After having read her letter, it was going to be more difficult for him to keep his feelings hid. He'd been right. Donna was in love with him; she'd admitted it. If the virus worked, Sam now had something to hope for.

"Anything?" Richard asked.

"No." Sam stood.

"Has Sheila been in, since I left?"

"She came in and checked on her about five minutes ago. You know if she pulls through this, Sheila is going to want some kind of explanation. What are we going to tell her?"

Richard frowned. "Sam, if my wife and baby are OK, I couldn't care less, what she's told. I'll let my Dad worry about that." Sam slowly stood and turned. Richard held out his hand. "Thank you, Sam, for saving their lives."

Sam glanced at Richard's hand and studied his eyes. "I haven't saved them, yet, Richard. Donna is still brain dead."

"I know, but it was your quick thinking that made giving her the virus possible. If you hadn't had a hunch about the neurotoxin and hadn't known what to do, Donna would have died. So, for that, thank you."

Sam swallowed the lump in his throat and shook Richard's hand. "I hope you realise, just how lucky you are."

Richard grinned. "I do Sam."

Sam snorted and left. He met Lady Triplet as she was leaving the waiting area. "Here, let me help you," he said, reaching for her arm.

Lady Triplet jerked her arm away and glared at him. Sam's eyebrows shot up; he threw up his hands. "Fine – suit yourself. It's your broken bones. I was just trying to help."

Lady Triplet leaned forward on her cane. "You've helped enough already, young man. Stay away from my grandson's wife!" she forced through clenched teeth. "Donna does not need dross like you. She has Ricky. She has his baby, and she has the Triplet fortunes. Heed my words – leave her alone!"

Sam shook his head. Sheila stepped into view. "Looks like Lady Triplet stamped 'unapproved' on your forehead, as well."

Sam grinned. "At least it's a better place than where I stamped her," he said, patting his backside. He put his arm across Sheila's shoulders. "Come on. Let's give the neighbours something to talk about. Have a drink with me in my quarters."

Sheila smirked at him. "Just a drink?"

"Yes, Sheila," Sam chuckled. "Just a drink. I'm off the market – remember?"

A soft tap on the door and the click of Lady Triplet's cane roused Richard. He slowly lifted his head off the bed and grinned. "Hello Grandma. I was wondering when you'd get here." Richard stood and gave her his chair.

"Your father just told me. I'm a little hurt that you didn't let me know sooner. How is she, Ricky?"

"The same. There's been no change." He pulled up another chair and held Donna's hand again.

Lady Triplet softly touched Donna's face and faked a smile. "She is *so* much like her mother. She's got the same sweet smile and determination." *More so than I'd hoped.* She tenderly patted Richard's hand. "You don't worry, Son, your new wife and baby will be just fine. It's just going to take a lot of love and a lot more patience. Grandma is not going to let anything or anyone take them away from you."

Richard smiled and put his hand over Lady Triplet's. "I know Grandma."

"Now, if you won't go back to your quarters, lay your head down on the bed and rest. I'll see to our Donna. If she so much as twitches, I'll let you know."

Gary sat in the cafeteria. Kindle in one hand, a cup of hot coffee in the other. He was busy scanning over Donna's notes on the virus while he finished his crumpets with cream cheese and blueberry conserve. Six hours had passed, and there had been no change in Donna's condition. He was beginning to think that maybe they'd been a little too optimistic. According to Donna's calculations and spreadsheet, they should have seen some

results, but they hadn't. Donna still had no brain activity – not even sporadic. Something had gone wrong, but without Donna there to figure it out, the only thing they could do was wait and hope.

The only other person who knew anything about the Dine'é Kay-Yah gene was Jared, but he was not a genetic engineer. Gary wasn't sure Jared understood the gene's functionality. That was another thing weighing heavy on his mind – Jared. Gary had faithfully promised Jared if anything like this should happen that he would let him know. Why couldn't Gary bring himself to make the call? He knew if he did, Jared would be there – one way or the other – by Donna's side to the end. It wouldn't make any difference to Jared what Richard, or Sam, or even Sir Richard had to say, and none of them could stop him. Maybe that was why Gary hadn't kept his promise. Did he fear Jared's rage, or the look of betrayal he would get from him? Whatever the reason, the longer he waited, the worse it was going to be. Gary pushed a hand through his hair and groaned. "Even now, she's got me between a rock and a hard spot. Maybe I should be asking myself what D would want?" Gary's inner voice screamed at him. *You already know the answer to that!* He softly chuckled and shook his head. "Of course I do!"

All night, Richard and Lady Triplet had sat by Donna's bedside. After he'd fallen asleep, holding her hand, Richard decided to go back to his quarters for a quick shower, and a shave. He couldn't understand. Why hadn't they seen a change? Was the virus even working? The Dine'é Kay-Yah healing gene was part of Donna's DNA. She should have healed faster than Alan or Melissa, yet she hadn't. It had healed Donna's surgery. It had healed her gunshot wound. Were they simply asking too much of the virus to bring back the dead?

Daria Lupu had once tried to explain this to Richard - choice and consequence, but until now he'd never understood. If Daria had been right, it was starting to make sense to him. If

he hadn't gone to the States if he hadn't come between Jared and Donna, this might not be happening. Had that been a wrong choice on his part? Would losing Donna be the consequence of that choice? What about the baby? How did it fit into the bigger picture? What led Donna to believe his birth was so important?

Richard sank to the side of the bed. For a long while, he stared at the image of Rich, in Donna's locket. He closed the locket and sighed. "Pet... what do you see that I don't?" He put Donna's jewellery in the bedside table and went back to the infirmary.

"How is she, Dad?"

Sir Richard stood as Richard entered the room. "The same, Son," he sighed.

Richard sat in the chair and took Donna's hand. He bent over and kissed her forehead and then sat in the chair beside her bed. "Has Sam or Sheila been in?"

"They came, not long after you left. Sam ordered some more blood work. He's concerned that she may go into renal failure. If she does..." Sir Richard broke off. He lowered his head and swallowed the lump in his throat. "I'm sorry, Son."

Richard turned cold determined eyes on his father. "I'm not giving up, Dad!"

"I know, Ricky, but time may come when we have to make a decision. She can't communicate with us. For all we know, Donna may be in pain. The question is how long do we wait? Letting go is never easy, Ricky, but sometimes, we have no choice."

"Yeah, well, I'm not ready to make that choice, Dad."

Sir Richard's cell phone rang. "Sir Richard, it's Gary. Has there been any change?"

Sir Richard shook his head and swallowed. "No, there hasn't."

"I need to speak with you. It's about Donna."

Sir Richard glanced at Richard's back. "Meet me in my office." He ended the call. "Ricky, I need to take care of something. I'll be back soon."

Richard nodded and kissed the back of Donna's hand. "I'll be here." Sir Richard patted his shoulder and left.

"Gary, are you sure about this?" Sir Richard incredulously asked.

Gary swallowed hard. "No, Sir, but I think it's the right thing to do."

"You know what this could mean."

"Yes Sir, I do. Believe me. I'm not looking forward to it either. This is one of the hardest decisions I've ever had to make."

"Ricky is not going to agree, and neither is Sam."

Gary sighed. "Under the circumstances, Sir Richard, I don't really care what they think. I'm not doing this for them. I'm doing this for D. I promised I would look out for her best interests, and that's what I'm doing. This is what Donna would want. I don't want to fight you on this, but if I have to... I will."

Sir Richard studied Gary's eyes. "I'm not going to fight you. I think you're right. It is what Donna would want."

"Then let's get this over with."

###

From the Authors

I hope you've enjoyed reading 'A Vested Interest – Immortality Gene'. In this edition we've made a number of changes:

- We toughened up the character of Donna. She's not so weepy as in the earlier editions.
- We tried to give you an insight as to why Donna is so attracted to three men. You'll have to wait until later in the series to find out why men are so attracted to her.
- We made the story fit better with the prequels, 'Blood of the Rainbow' and 'Blood of the Rainbow II'.
- We changed the length of the chapters. In the previous version a chapter represented a day in the storyline. Now they can be read during a fifteen minute coffee break for the average reader.
- It's longer, but still free!

If you preferred the old version, it's still available as part of the 'A Vested Interest – Omnibus Edition' containing the first three original books.

The A Vested Interest Series

Book One - [A Vested Interest - Immortality Gene](#) (this book) The story of how Donna leaves the USA to join Sir Richard's team in the UK where she uses her skills to greatly extend human lifespan. Step one in Sir Richard's long term plan.

Book Two - [Dark Secrets](#). The Triplet family has a secret, hidden from the world since 1099.

Book Three - [No Secrets](#). Things seem to be going well for Sam but he has a secret. John Liu has a secret also. Sir Richard? He had a secret lover who held secrets from him.

Book Four - [Stones, Stars, and Solutions](#). The Triplet family have had a strange document in their possession since the year 1099. It was written in thirteen different languages from all over the world at a time when – well it's just impossible for them to know of each other.

Book Five - [Leap of Faith](#). A passageway appears in the complex with a doorway to an unknown place. It takes a leap of faith to find where.

Book Six - [Regret and Retribution](#). Every choice leads to an outcome, but what if the wrong choice is made?

Book Seven - [Consequences](#). Make the wrong choice and there are consequences. How are the Triplets to know which choice is the wrong one?

Book Eight - [Ashes to Ashes](#). After the wrong person was allowed into the complex, death strikes. Have the Triplets unleashed a devil?

Book Nine - [Dust to Dust](#) (Out 2013)

A prequel series to 'A Vested Interest' by Shelia Chapman.

[Blood of the Rainbow – Book 1](#), telling the story of Sara, Jared Thundercloud's first wife.

Blood of the Rainbow II - [Roses and Regret](#) (this book)

Blood of the Rainbow III - [Choice and Change](#). The second instalment of the story of Donna and Jarred.

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Thanks – any (or all?) of these would really help.

Oh! Don't worry. The story continues but will Donna be part of it?

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The Website

Find out more about the books and read previews at:

<http://www.avestedinterest.info>

There is a username and password for a protected area there:

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Password: - swhp542822

The last bit.

Finally, when you leave the very last page, Amazon will give you the opportunity to rate the book and share your thoughts through a feed button to your Facebook and Twitter pages. If you think your friends would like it, please do so. Any author will tell you that their greatest problem is obscurity and unfortunately, not too many people are aware we are authors.

John and Shelia Chapman

Next in the Saga:

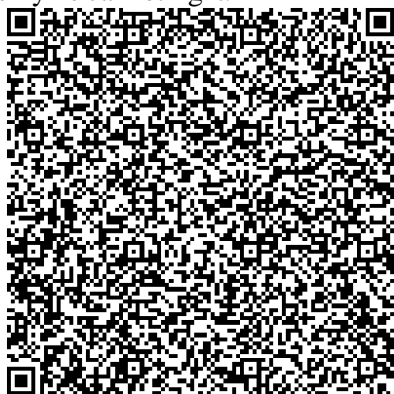
A Vested Interest

Dark Secrets

Dr. Donna Rigden is clinically dead. Two letters and two secrets steered her future, now one is missing. Who took it and why? Who blackmailed her into marrying Richard Triplet when she was still in love with Jared Thundercloud, and more attracted to Dr. Sam Kaliea?

The killer strikes again. Using a more technologically advanced form of the nanobug, John Liu injects Donna and her unborn child with nanonytes. To make matters worse, he also attacks her best friend, her best friend's mother and even the infamous Lady Triplet.

As the Triplets struggle to overcome this new threat, they uncover the dark secret that has remained hidden for nearly a thousand years, and Donna is ripped from Richard's arms by an enemy he cannot fight.



Some terms you may not be familiar with

¹ G-CST Glycine System T protein

² VEGF Vascular endothelial growth factor – a substance where the normal function is to create new blood vessels. If a cancer can produce this then it can grow.

³ CTZ5 Cytotranzanine 5: A pentahydrate of Cytotranzanine which locates lesions in damaged DNA, marks the base pairs for restriction and recombination to enhance and increase stem cell production and localisation. In layman's terms it makes it easy for stem cells to find cells to duplicate and replace.

⁴ Arachnoid mater - A membrane surrounding the brain and spinal cord.

⁵ STAT – A medical term short for statim, the Latin word for immediately.

⁶ Tai-Pan: The English equivalent means big shot.

⁷ Meng Po: According to Chinese tradition, an old lady; Meng Po is tasked with insuring that souls who have been punished do not remember their time in hell.

⁸ 18 Chambers: According to Taoist tradition, there are 18 levels of hell in which wrong doers are punished. In the case of the story, the character Forrest would have qualified for all 18 levels.

