

The God Slayers

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Dedication: In memory of my brother Michael, taken long before I was ready for you to go. You were and always will be my hero. *A star burns bright burns out before its time.*

GMO: Noun: 1. **Genetically modified organism:** an organism or microorganism whose genetic material had been altered by means of genetic engineering.

Webster's Dictionary.

Science without conscience is but the ruin of the soul.

Rabelais: Rabelais: To the Reader.

It is a further and very worrying step down the wrong road for humanity.

John Smeaton, National Director

Society for the Protection of Unborn Children.

Chapter One

James Emerson Cameron was a geneticist straight out of Harvard Medical School and not likely to get a job in any hospital. In fact, he was lucky to graduate, his ethics questionable, his methods illegal and his research beyond the morals of his times. Yet, he was unquestionably brilliant. Tall slender with good shoulders and trim waist from his sculling days, he put the stereotype of an egg-head nerd to shame. With clear blue eyes, black hair so dark it shone blue and a dimpled chin, he presented a Calvin Klein face to the world. He simply could not understand the ethics prohibiting genetic modification on humans.

Why, he argued, not correct the faults in a deformed, retarded or diseased fetus before it was born and became a drain on society's declining resources?

His views were not only unpopular, radical and unethical but illegal. Still, he persisted getting kicked out of one research lab after another until in desperation he went to the black market underground. There, he was approached by some dark secret organization that promised him the world---his own lab, his choice of assistants, equipment up to and including a Cray super-computer and all the time and money he needed.

One catch, he had to live at the lab and it was in a desolate, unpopular location. He asked where and was told the west. Somewhere between the Dakotas and the Four Corners area. He said he didn't care as long as it wasn't at Area 51. They did not find that amusing.

He supervised the building of the facility and was given state-of-the-art everything. The only thing they demanded was that it had to be built on government land – hidden in the black budget but officially known as the Wind River Indian Health Clinic/Hospital on BLM land. He smiled when he heard that, thoughts and ideas swirling through his head on fetal alcohol syndrome and Indian babies. A population no one would care about or miss.

“Perfect,” he told the shadowy people who accommodated him. When told what modifications they wanted him to try, he was delighted that they were on the same page. He left for his new home on a private jet some three days after meeting with his new bosses.

The clinic they built was beautiful but the real prize were the labs and complex underground. There, he had his apartments and everything a single man could want yet he was more into the research than Xbox, movies, surround-sound and chicks. His bosses offered to fly in a \$1000 hooker when he wanted one but he shrugged that off in favor of the eagerness to get to work.

The natives were suspicious because he was white, rich and from the government even when they were offered free healthcare. The population on the reservation was small, insular and poverty-stricken. There were no casinos nearby and the only jobs available was a three-hour trek to the pine forest where the giant Weyerhaeuser logged and reforested.

There were a few abandoned gold and turquoise mines but none had yielded more than a few hundred dollars in the last 25 years. Set in a deep ravine at the foot of the Snoqualmie Hills was such a turquoise mine. Near it was a neat doublewide set on cinder blocks dug into a hole in the ground. The house had a basement/storm shelter and was the home of the old man who still worked in the shallow caves prospecting.

He had raised 10 children and five grandchildren – only one of which was still alive. A granddaughter who had migrated east to attend a prestigious school of Law just outside Washington to become a lawyer. She went to work for the government – the FBI. A stunning redhead with dark brown eyes, no one knew she was three-quarters Sioux or that she had been born and raised on the tiny reservation. Her hair was not the true red of a Celt but a deep mahogany that the Indians called oxblood. She was tall too, coming in at nearly 5'10”.

The day she returned home to her grandfather's was a day of joy. She drove her old Jeep up the horse track, tooted her horn and waited patiently for her Abuelo to come to the door. Instead, he approached silently from the mine carrying his backpack and pickax.

“I'll make coffee,” was all he said as he took her bags into her protests. She looked tired but then, she would be. The nearest airport was 200 miles away and she must have driven her car in from Washington. He brought her things into her old bedroom, untouched but clean since the day she had left six years earlier. She flopped on the double bed and he quietly closed the door behind him.

In the morning over the simple breakfast of fried dough, eggs, and coffee, she told him why she was there. She was, she said, two months pregnant by an important and wealthy married

man. He wanted her to have an abortion and she did not. She knew he was capable of forcing her so she ran to the one place she knew she would be safe.

“Will he come after you, Rachel?” Her grandfather asked calling her by her white name.

“No one knows I came from here, Grandfather. I started fresh from college. All my records start there, not from back here. If he wants to, though he could track me down but he doesn’t care that much as long as I disappear.”

“A new clinic opened out by the town. Free healthcare,” he said.

She laughed shakily. “Good. My healthcare stopped when I resigned from the FBI.” She hated lying to her grandfather yet he knew she was holding something back.

On Monday morning, two weeks after the clinic opened, she was there for her first prenatal checkup. She liked the nurses but the tall handsome doctor gave her an unsettled feeling. He was surprised when he read her medical history, commenting that she did not look Native American with her auburn hair and brown eyes.

“My parents were Renée and Jason Strongbow,” she returned. “They died in a multicar pileup on the Delaware Watershed Turnpike.”

“Do you have a high school diploma?”

“I went to college,” she returned dryly.

“Ever have your IQ taken?”

“Yes. It was 156.” He was not surprised, she seemed bright, intelligent and healthy. Just tired. He prescribed prenatal vitamins and a high-protein diet. No alcohol.

“I don’t drink,” she returned flatly, remembering the fetal alcohol syndrome children on the Res.

“Good. There are too many children here that their mothers should have heeded that warning,” he returned.

“Poverty, booze make common bedfellows,” she said putting her clothes back on. “Are you married?”

“No.” He was amused at her brashness.

“What brings a good-looking doctor like you out to the back-ass of nowhere?”

“You always so blunt?”

“I find anything else a waste of time,” she shrugged.

“No. Haven’t time for relationships. You have a job?”

“No. Why would I come for free health care if I had money?”

“Can you type?”

Now it was her turn to be amused. “Not on a typewriter. I can pound the keyboard of a computer 100+ words a minute. You offering me a job?”

“Yes. Doesn’t pay much but the healthcare is great. And cheap.”

“Maternity benefits?”

“Will the father be paying his share?”

“Bastard,” she spat. “Not likely. He’s married and wanted me to abort him.”

“Him? You know the sex already?”

“My spirit ancestor told me,” she grinned and left him standing there nonplussed.

She told her grandfather she was hired and would pay half the expenses. He laughed saying that the air and water were free but if she wanted to waste her money on gas for the generator and hot water to go ahead. The house was sans electricity, water was spring fed by gravity to the house and he used coal lanterns at night, battery-operated radio. No Wi-Fi, no TV no electric lights.

“I forgot how close and clear the stars are,” she marveled sitting on the porch with him and staring at the vast expanse of celestial sky. “In Washington, you hardly ever get to see the sky.”

He took her hand. “It is good you have come home, redheaded child. Orrin has spoken of you.”

“Yeah? What did the Great Spirit say? I’m an idiot?” She stood up and strode off down the drive that was little more than a horse trail. The old man watched as her body began the subtle changes that marked the beginnings of her pregnancy.

They settled into a routine, she worked five days a week at the clinic and was an efficient and perfect employee. She was amazed at the amount of work the physician did and eventually because she was there, others began to use the clinic. Her baby bump grew until it began to interfere when she drove or bent over. That was when she started her once weekly trips off the res to the largest town staying away for one day before returning home to no comments or explanations.

She received regular care from the doctors including vitamin injections that left her tired and achy for a day afterward but the fetus continued his growth on schedule, was healthy and happy.

Her baby was born, a beautiful boy with crystal-clear ice blue eyes with black centers, dark bronze skin and mahogany hair even deeper than her own. She called him her Firebird, after the Native American legend. When he opened his eyes to stare at the new world, the doctor who delivered him, his mother and great-grandfather, it was as if an adult looked out of those eyes. She named him Lakan which meant nothing in the Lakota language but she liked the sound of it. Her grandfather gave him his spirit name which he would keep hidden until he was old enough to be initiated into it.

The clinic prospered and Cameron treated his patients. If the incidence of fetal miscarriages and birth defects went down, the committee that oversaw such things did not notice but put it down to better healthcare.

Children began to disappear when the boy Lakan turned three. He was a quiet child, always at his great-grandfather’s side or underfoot with his mother at the clinic.

It wasn’t until she saw him reading the computer files over the edge of her desk that she realized the boy was... gifted.

“Laky,” she said. “What are you doing?”

“Mama, these numbers are wrong,” he spoke with a lisp, his two front teeth just coming in. He was going to be tall like her and his father had been 6’2” yet he gave the impression of a small child.

“Wrong how?” She was curious, most children that age could just begin to pick up words like ‘read’, ‘cat and dog’.

“There are more account numbers than patient numbers,” he answered. “For services these other accounts provided but are not listed under the appropriate names.”

She gasped to hear such words coming from her three-year-old. “Lakan, can you read this?” She scrolled the site to Wikipedia on law cases picking a particularly convoluted case. He read it with ease and further astonished her with its simple meaning that the litigant had violated his own nondisclosure contract and therefore voided the buyout offer.

He looked at his mom. “Are you afraid of what he did to me?”

“He? Who is he? What did he do?” She snapped, horrified. He told her, showed her the secret files in the lab and the basement.

Row after row of children hooked up to artificial wombs and kept in coma-like conditions while the doctor and his assistants performed genetic manipulation on them only to have the children die or suffer irreversible brain damage. Those fetuses he experimented on pre-birth survived but damage from the alcohol their mothers had ingested and twisted their brains too much to be useful.

“Is that what he did to you? All those vitamin injections he gave me?” She was aghast. “We have to get out of here!”

She scooped up the three-year-old and ran for her grandfather’s not listening as the boy tried to tell her that there were cameras recording them and he did not yet know how to wipe them clean. On the long drive home, she met a car on the lonely road and knew instinctively that the black Hummer with tinted windows meant them harm. She began a desperate race across the Badlands of ravines, rocky paths and trails craning her neck behind to watch as the Hummer followed.

The boy was strapped into a car seat and keening with fright, his hands holding his bottle with his favorite drink. Cherry Kool-Aid. After all, he was only three years old.

She knew how to drive, she had taken the defensive driving course at the FBI Academy and still had both the skills and her issued Glock. Locked in the glove box and inaccessible.

Hitting a pothole, she felt the steering rod go and suddenly the car bucked like an unruly horse. In slow motion, she felt the whole 2000 pounds of steel go over and over on a roll. Too many times to count banging her head on the crushed roof, slamming her head into the side wall as glass broke, and then back onto the roof. It was the pointed rock through the open window slamming into her head that killed her.

When the Jeep came to a rest a hundred feet down the ravine of the dirt road, it resembled a piece of modern art and not a four-wheel-drive vehicle. No airbags had deployed on the driver’s or passenger’s side but had in the rear cushioning the side doors. The tough little child’s car seat had maintained its integrity and protected the child from most of the damage. It did not prevent whiplash or the violent shaking of his head from side to side causing his brain to jam forward and back. Swelling was immediate and catastrophic. Vital functions begin to shut down and the boy began to die.

The watchers from the road waited and when no one exited the vehicle, they carefully descended the slope to peer inside. They saw the former FBI agent, her head a battered mass of flesh, bone, and blood. Nothing was recognizable, her eyes, her entire face was gone.

“The kid?”

“Looks bad.” The second man dressed in black jeans, dark shirt and jacket reached in and plucked the kid out. “His pulse is barely there. Eyes pinpoint and nonreactive.”

“Bring him anyway. The doctor wants him regardless. Dead or alive.”

They cradled the boy and carried him back up the traverse, laying him on the back seat. One held him on the chest with a huge hand while the other drove. On the way back, the driver radioed in an accident report with fatalities to the nearest police station – the Tribal Police in nearby Trigger’s Bay.

When they reached the clinic, Cameron met them at the entrance to the lab. “Kid’s dead or near,” they reported. “The woman died on impact.”

“Give him to me,” he ordered and they handed over the gravely injured child. “Go back on patrol. No sense you not being there to do your jobs.”

The two BLM agents left without another word. He brought the boy into the lab and treated him noting the dismal vitals and decreasing signs of brain function. Pouring massive

steroids into the child's IV, he dropped the temp in the room and placed the boy in a sterile ice-filled container in the surgery.

Scrubbing up, he entered the surgery room to perform a craniotomy to relieve the pressure on the boy's brain. Then, he waited.

One day turned into a week. The boy despite the odds and the medical impossibility began to live. First, the EEG blinked and showed that indeed his brain was no longer flat line but dreaming. In six months, he opened his eyes.

Chapter Two

I remembered to the day when I was born. In fact, I remembered before I was born. While I was still just a tiny mass of cells in utero growing a brain, I had the sense of my own awareness. Once I developed ears, eyes, and a nose, I heard things. Like my mother talking to me and naming me. She wanted to call me Jesse after an early crush from grade school but I put the suggestion in her head of my own choice. Lakan. It meant World Changer in the old language, the language before the great apes stood up and walked on their hind feet.

I remembered the trauma of birth, seeing my great-grandfather's wise old brown eyes and my mother's sweet face, the watchful expectant look on the doctor. Instantly, I knew he was not to be trusted.

I knew things but my infant body and undeveloped tongue, mind, and the sensory system could not tell of those things. I had to grow, to catch up before I could and by the time I was ready to reveal them to my mother, it was too late. I remembered the accident and her murder. I felt it when the bright candle of her light went out. I felt my own brain take on such injuries that I knew I was dying.

Yet – the GMO that Cameron had injected into my mother during her pregnancy had changed me and kicked in moments from that death. Cells underwent a radical shift into a sort of suspended stasis while others began to repair the most critical injuries staving off cessation of the major functions. My brain did not remember the pain or the why, only that it must not reveal those changes.

When I opened my eyes six months later, I saw the world through a dull perception. My reactions and emotions were stunted. Cameron tested me extensively and pronounced me developmentally delayed. Brain-damaged. Released me back to my grandfather but kept tabs on me with monthly checkups at his clinic. It was easy to fool him for in truth, my brain felt dull and lagging behind. My grandpop did not care, he took me in and cared for me as if I were an orphan foal. He bottle-fed me until I learned how to eat again. Carried me with him everywhere until I learned how to walk and do those things I had taken for granted. He never judged me and was always patient, praising me when I had done something right and using a word or two that meant more to me than any effusive reward.

He celebrated my birthday as milestones giving me not gifts but responsibilities. By the time I was five, I took care of my own horse and his, the two Heeler dogs, chickens and a small herd of sheep he raised for meat. He believed in giving me responsibilities, giving me a sense of self-worth and accomplishment.

He used to take me to the mine until I got lost once in the dark stope and scared both of us. Me into a quivering mass and he to the point of frantic. He called the Elders and they organized a search delving deep into the old mine and found me curled up in a fetal ball in a shaft long forgotten and only feet away from deep water. No one knew how I'd gotten there, myself included. After that, I explored until I knew every inch of the tunnels.

When I turned seven, I grew tired of lighting the kerosene lamps and using the wood fireplace to heat and cook. Using parts from his junk pile, I built solar panels on the roof and rigged it to provide electricity powered by both sun and wind. I also hitched a wind turbine to the spring and the wind-pumped water with full pressure into the house for the first time in 25 years. In fact, the first time since the house had been laid there.

“How did you figure all this out?” Grandpop asked scratching his head. He handed me a bottle of red water, my favorite---cherry Kool-Aid. He wore his hair short and under an old straw hat he’d found on the side of the road. He was taller than my mom but bent over through the years. I thought he told me he was in his 80s.

“I read about it somewhere,” I said in my slow halting speech. Since the accident, I was prone to lapses in concentration and comprehension, slow to talk, act and react.

“Maybe I should’ve homeschooled you, Lake. I don’t think your mother would have wanted you to grow up ignorant or illiterate.”

“No, she wouldn’t,” I said cocking my head as I listened to her agree. “She says to teach me the old ways, too. Like you tried to teach her.”

“You see her spirit, boy?”

“Is it her spirit? She looks real. Solid. Huh.” I tried to touch her and my hands encountered only the briefest of sensations. Sort of like a chilly surface brush. “Mom says hello, Grandpop,” I repeated. I took a drink and my lips stained from the cherry flavor. Grandpop smiled.

“Hello, Rachel. I hope your spirit is happy,” he replied.

“No, Grandpop. She wants the men who murdered her to be punished.”

“Do you know who did it, Lakan? The police said it was an accident. She was driving too fast.”

“I was there, Grandpop. There was a big black beast chasing us.”

He looked at me funny. Sometimes, the words I wanted did not come out like I planned. They made perfect sense in my head but once they left my mouth – they were so inane.

“Who?”

“That doctor mom worked for,” I answered quietly.

“Doctor Cameron?” He looked skeptical.

“I can prove it.”

“How?”

“There’s a secret lab beneath the clinic and access below by old mine shafts where he keeps the bodies.”

“Bodies?” Now I was scaring him, my stoic brave great-grandfather.

“All those children that disappeared? He took them.” I could see he did not believe me and I told him that I would show him.

Grabbing my backpack, I loaded it with water bottles, flashlights, extra batteries and hard hats with lamps. Strode to the door and held it open. “You coming?”

As mines go, this one had produced a spectacular amount of quartz with very little gold to show for it but had been loaded with turquoise which in itself was rare to find so far north from the Navajo and Hopi lands where it was more common.

This turquoise was deep blue shot through with strands of pink making it a rare and costly gemstone much in demand. Mined to the last speck in the late 1890s, no one had brought out more than a few karats in the last 50 years. Called the Opal Heart Mine, it had officially been closed and abandoned before the US government had deeded the land to the Wind River

Reservation and my great-great-grandfather had purchased it with his first and last \$100. It had been in the family since and still was even though Gramps had mortgaged it to put my mother on the way to law school.

We approached the old buffalo wallow that time and the weather had turned into a ravine coming down from the range. If I looked up, I could see the tops of the mountains where late spring snow still capped the highest peaks. It was chilly here in the high desert and I wished I had brought my jacket as I shivered. Standing in front of the man-sized hole covered with chaparral brush and small piñon trees, my grandfather handed me my jacket from out of his pack.

Gratefully, I pulled it on as he reached inside the dark hole for his coal lanterns. Using a long self-striking match, he lit the wick and trimmed it. Light flared and illuminated a scant 5 feet into the stygian black. I always liked that word stygian. Precocious of me to use it but then, I read. A lot.

Grandpop took the lead obeying my directions until we came to a dead end that he had never bothered to look beyond. The cave angled back on itself and because of the angle, it presented an illusion of a flat wall when instead, another four tunnels branched off. Three went nowhere except in circles coming back on themselves but the fourth led down into caverns that were the epitome of the Greek version of hell, complete with a stalagmite that could have been a portrait of Hades. Another looked like Poseidon raising his trident.

“The gods are buried here,” Grandpop whispered and I did not have to tell him to be quiet as even his whisper echoed in the room.

Beneath a frozen waterfall of stone was a vertical crack just wide enough for us to fit into but we had to remove the backpacks and drag them behind us. The headlights glowed on walls of smooth rock, almost as if it had parted for us like the Red Sea had for Moses. The hiss of the coal lantern and my Grandpop’s easy breaths were the only things I could hear.

One minute we were entombed in the Earth’s crease, the next we were in a chamber carved and blasted by man. The walls were worked smooth, the floor concreted and machinery hummed with electricity providing power and lights. Electricity kept the huge freezers running and they preserved the remains of my kindred brothers and sisters.

Grandpop looked at each glass-fronted coffin and recited each child’s name. There weren’t many – perhaps six or seven but he knew every one of them. What was even weirder, there was an empty one with my name on it.

Chapter Three

“Lakan, are there cameras down here?” His voice was sharp and worried. I reassured him.

“Don’t worry, Grandpop. I’ve been coming down here for two years and no one’s ever caught me.”

“Two years!”

“Since I was 10. That’s when they called me and told me where to find them,” I explained.

“Them? Their spirits?”

“Yes. I suppose. I thought they were the real person, though.” I laughed shakily. “Sometimes, they seem more real than me.”

“In the spirit world, they are more real than you,” he replied. “We need to leave this place and tell the Tribal Police what you have found.”

“And the FBI,” I agreed. “I can take pictures.”

“You have a camera?”

I rolled my eyes. “Grandpop, I have a smartphone. It does everything.”

“And where did you get that?” He asked sharply.

“I ordered it off eBay.” Then, I had to explain prepaid credit cards, the Internet and ordering everything through the library, picking up mail at my PO Box. All of which I had done under his nose. As for money, I had transferred part of my mother’s life insurance into a bankless account in my Internet name.

“The white doctor thinks you are stupid, Lakan. He thinks you are brain-damaged.”

“That’s what I want him to think, Grandfather. I have no intention of going back and becoming one of his guinea pigs. I’m not going to wind up down here in this...plastic coffin.”

“We should leave.” I nodded and retraced our steps back towards his mine and familiar territory. We emerged into a soft twilight; we had been down in the earth longer than I had expected and as we approached the house, we saw the headlights of a big SUV shining on the front porch.

Standing in front of the high beams were two of the doctor’s henchmen, big men that guarded his home and patrolled the clinic grounds.

They were staring up at the solar panel array on the roof. Both men looked like ex-military with buzz cuts, dark jeans, shirts, and jean jackets. Neither wore cowboy boots which set them apart from 99% of the men around us. Both were 6 feet, well-muscled without being bulky and very fit. Dark-haired, brown eyed and armed with semiautomatic pistols that they kept concealed in shoulder holsters. I had seen them before; Dr. Cameron had sent them to pick me up for my monthly checkups. I did not like or trust them any more than I did the doctor. They treated me as if I were a stupid dog, calling me slow and retarded. Of course, I fostered that perception of me.

“Mr. Strongbow,” the younger one with dark brown eyes under an LA Raiders cap greeted. “Out late prospecting?” He didn’t wait for a reply but pointed to the roof. “Nice solar array there. You have somebody come in from the big city to do that?”

Grandpop nodded. “Solar Solutions out of California.”

“That must’ve cost a pretty penny. Didn’t know you were so flush. Come up on a big mother lode?”

“Why? You want to buy in?” My grandfather asked. “For your information, I used my granddaughter’s life insurance. The boy needs light and stimulation for his brain.”

“Isn’t any TV or Wi-Fi out here,” the man laughed. “Besides he’s...slow. What can he learn?” He stared at me and I let drool dribble out of my mouth as I stumbled forward to grab for his baseball cap. He stepped back as if I were contagious and muttered ‘retard’ under his breath.

“What do you want?” Grandpop asked, foregoing his usual good manners. “It isn’t the day or the time for the boy’s checkup.”

“Dr. Cameron would like to see both of you at the clinic tomorrow morning. We thought we’d save you a trip into town, you could spend the night in the clinic hospice rooms.”

“I can drive myself and the boy in,” Grandpop said gruffly.

“Nope. Your truck has a flat tire and no spare.”

Grandpop stared and went to look – his old F-150 sat on its rims, all four tires flat with a thorn in each one. The only thorns around were down in the gully where you’d have to be on a donkey to ride through it.

Grandpop’s lips thinned and I could see him thinking about resisting but his old Colt .45 single action was in his backpack and not easily accessible. I shuffled over to the big black

Denali and opened the door, climbing into the driver's seat where I fumbled with the keys, turning it on and grinding the starter before Redcap could stop me.

With a curse, he reached in and hauled me out by the shirt front. I batted at his face with my hands and tried to bite him. He tossed me into the backseat, grabbed both my hands and seat belted me in making the lap belt unnecessarily tight. His face was close to mine and I wailed in his ears striking at him with my head but he was too quick jerking it out of the way before I could connect.

"Tell him to quit or I'll hurt him," he ordered Grandpop.

"Lakan, stop." I subsided making only small whimpering noises until I pissed my jeans. The smell made him rear back in disgust.

"Pee-pee, Grandpa," I mumbled, tears running down my face.

"Don't you touch my boy!" My grandfather roared and charged the men.

"Ganpa! No!" I yelled and kicked the back of the seat. My grandfather stopped, his nostrils flaring like a winded horse and the other men grabbed him by the arm. "Calm down, grandpa. The boy's not hurt. Get in the car and we'll take a nice quiet trip to town."

Grandpa slid into the back seat with me, tossing his backpack onto the floor space between us. Mine, I'd left outside the SUV and the driver threw it into the back. I gave Grandpop a worried look – if either of them went through it, they would find items that did not belong in a retard's pack.

I put my hand on my grandfather's knee and used sign to tell him not to worry, that I would not let them hurt either of us. I spoke in Lakota; a language I knew they did not understand.

The two men got into the front, seat belted themselves and locked the doors. Starting the engine, they reversed and drove slowly down our long driveway that was part road and dirt trail. The suspension was tough and we rocked side to side on the ruts and rocks.

It was a two-hour ride into town and once there, we drove slowly down the only paved street in the whole village directly towards the clinic which sat on the very edge of town. It was a modern building built of prefabricated walls, designed to be solid in a thunderstorm, hurricane, and tornadoes of which we had all three. Built of cinder block and steel, it looked like any typical small-town hospital and this one was no more than a five-bed facility. It serviced the entire Wind River Reservation and was the only hospital for 200 miles. For anything serious, patients were driven to Bismarck or airlifted further. Dr. Cameron was the only MD on staff, for surgeries he called in another doctor who flew in once a week to perform those.

Both men exited the vehicle leaving us behind. To my surprise, the doctor was waiting for us at the front doors and the first inklings of panic hit my belly. I gripped Grandpa's thigh with a cold hand and he whispered to me in Siouan. "Do you think they saw us?"

"I don't know, Grandpa but I'm not staying to find out." I unhooked the seatbelt, grabbed our packs and reached for the door handle.

"What? You going to outrun them?" He laughed. "Or change into an owl and fly away?"

I grinned. "Better. Almost." I stepped out of the SUV and held his hand as the curious trio approached us from the other side of the black Denali. The white government must have gotten one hell of a discount from Cadillac. Every one of these agents drove one.

"Mr. Strongbow?" Cameron asked beginning to become alarmed. "What's going on?"

"You tell me," he countered. I slipped into the mindset I needed and opened the veil between worlds, saw my mother standing there and she said to hurry or they would be able to follow. Grandpop did not waste time asking questions but followed mom through the yellow-

tinted place. We walked through yellow sand and the sky was a pale amber, there were no clouds, no sun, and no mountains in the distance. No bugs disturbed the silent air which had a scent like cedar to it.

“Where are we? The spirit world? Rachel –.” Grandpa’s voice was heavy with emotion and I could see he wanted to touch her.

“No, Grandfather. You can’t. If you touch her, you will bind her spirit in this place where she can never leave it.”

“Isn’t she here now?”

“She is here as a visitor as we are here. Neither living nor dead can bide here,” I answered.

“What is this place?”

“The space between. When the doctor changed my DNA, he left me open to places like this. I’ve just now learned how to come through and back.”

“Where are we going?” He asked.

“I’m following mom,” I said shrugging. “She will take us to safety.”

We followed her and he asked a great many questions but she had no answers other than she was our guide in this place. We walked for what seemed like many hours; my legs grew tired and even Grandpa took on a weary countenance. He was, after all in his late 80s.

“What’s it like, Rachel? Are you happy? Is it everything it’s supposed to be?”

She smiled. “I can’t tell you, Granddad. You have to die to experience it.”

“My time will come soon enough, I think,” he whispered and I looked alarmed.

“No, Grandpa. You can’t leave me alone!”

He rubbed my head. “You are never alone, Lakan. Your spirit ancestors are always around you.”

There was no way to tell time in the yellow realm and the few times I had both a watch and a phone, neither worked within.

Mom stopped at a place that didn’t look any different than the last place we’d stopped or the place where we’d entered. “Here is where you exit,” she smiled and blew me a kiss. She sent one to Grandpa and I felt a soft whisper of cool air touch my cheek. I took his hand and opened the veil so both of us could step through. We emerged from the house and the first thing I noticed was that all the lights were on and the front door was wide open. There was never a need to lock it, no one had ever broken into a home on the res and Grandpa lived too far out for most to make the trip in. He had nothing worth stealing. Besides, most of the people knew Grandpop would give them anything if they needed it and asked.

“Did they search the house?” He rushed forward and I stopped him, listening to the vibrations on the air. It told me that whoever had been here was long gone.

“Saddle up the horses, Grandpa. We need to ride into the mountains and hide,” I said before running inside. Grandpop didn’t argue. Most of my valuables I kept in my backpack but my mini laptop had been lying under my bed next to the high-tech Wi-Fi hotspot device I had made from scraps of electronics. That alone was worth a small fortune because of its radical new design. It could hitchhike on Earth Guard and I used it to surf the net as well as give me access to the satellite’s programming. It was one step away from hacking the NSA. Both devices were gone and I didn’t waste time looking for anything else. By the time I had packed a change of clothes, food, weapons and ammo, he had both horses saddled and had turned the stock loose. The dogs milled around our feet, upset because they sensed our agitation.

We were mounting just as I looked down the trail to the entrance of the road off the highway leading to our place. “They’re coming back.” Swiftly, we mounted and trotted the horses off into the soft welcoming darkness.

Chapter Four

The phone rang in Cameron’s office, the one phone he never used because whoever was on the other line was the only person he was... leery of pissing off. He did not know the man’s name, he only knew that he was the one in charge of his lab, the money and the ultimate owner of his research. He didn’t know the man’s identity but had been told to call him Mr. Chase. Cameron picked up the phone with trepidation.

“Hello?”

“Dr. Cameron. I hear you’ve had some problems,” the unctuous voice stated. “Do you know how much money we have funded your little project with these last ten years?”

Cameron said, “Millions, I imagine.”

“Try 227 million and counting, doctor. And what have we to show for it? Nothing but dead Indian babies.”

“I do have something,” Cameron offered and there was an uncomfortable silence on the other end. The doctor rushed to fill it. “One of my early subjects showed promise but was involved in a car accident in which his mother was killed –.”

“Ah yes, the inquisitive Agent Strong. Rachel Strong. I thought her son was a...vegetable.”

“Not quite,” Cameron said dryly. “But definitely brain-damaged. Yet, we have evidence he found the lab and I have his laptop.”

“His computer? He’s able to use a computer?”

“Not only use it but it’s encrypted and I can’t get in it. I did open it up and the thing is structured like you would not believe. Also, I found a Wi-Fi device that’s homemade and simply unbelievable. It looks like it came out of a Silicon Valley R&D lab.”

“The grandfather?”

“Great-grandfather. No, he doesn’t even have a landline and they barely had the modern conveniences until last year. Now, the house uses solar energy and wind power for the well. Someone is mechanically and electronically gifted. No one else lives in the house but the boy and the great-grandfather.” The doctor hesitated, knowing what he said next would make him sound as crazy as a fruitcake. “There’s a problem. I found the boy’s image on the security tapes in the lab. He brought his grandfather down into the cryo-lab where the bodies are stored yet neither of them went through the complex’s elevators or corridors. No doors were accessed or opened. They appear and then disappear. I sent two men to bring them back in and there wasn’t a problem until they stopped at the clinic doors.”

“What kind of problem?” Mr. Chase asked softly and that frightened Cameron more than if he’d yelled. “And?” He prompted.

“The both of them just disappeared right in front of my eyes. I caught it on the hospital CCTV. I think you should see it, Mr. Chase.”

“Send it to me.”

Cameron uploaded the feed directly to the spook's phone and both watched as the slender twelve-year-old moved gracefully and quickly in the SUV to exit with his grandfather. He spoke and his face was bright, intelligent and curiously adult, not the image of a drooling mentally

challenged fetal alcohol child. But it was the way he disappeared that shocked the scientist most. The boy stared hard with an intense focus, leaned forward as if he were opening a door and stepped through as parts of him simply vanished in a shimmer of yellow light. By the time security reached the area nothing remained but scuff marks and the two bewildered agents.

“Interesting,” Mr. Chase commented. “Have you sent anyone out to the home?”

“Yes. A team of your men. They found his laptop and Wi-Fi device as I told you.”

Mr. Chase hesitated. “I will be flying out there, doctor. In light of this development, the Director has decided to close the facilities and move you to a more secure location.”

“Close the lab? But I’ve succeeded in producing a prototype!”

“Yes and you’ve lost him. I want all your data on the projects sent to me. I will be there in—.” Mr. Chase looked at his watch, an inexpensive Timex. “Seven hours.” He did not say goodbye just the phone went dead and the computer dark.

Cameron backed up everything on a flash drive and burned the rest. He had no need to inform the regular clinic personnel, they would most likely keep the legitimate hospital up and running as a cover for the lab. When he was certain all traces of the project were destroyed and the only thing left were the bodies, he triggered the electronic sequence that activated the C-4 buried in the walls and floor. As he left the underground labs for the last time, he did not spare ten years of disappointments and research a second glance.

Cameron was in the agent’s SUV when he felt the subtle ground tremor as the detonation occurred. He knew it was powerful enough to blow the lab to oblivion yet would only be felt as a mild burp in the hospital above. Not that he cared but the powers that be would pass it off as a natural gas explosion deep underground to stifle any curiosity.

“There’s nothing left at the house,” Aiken said. He was the agent the boy had seen wearing the LA Raiders hat, the other was named Ferron. Both were ex-military, CIA and on loan to Cameron for dirty work.

“Your definition of nothing and mine may not be the same, Aiken,” Cameron said shortly. He was quiet the entire two-hour ride back out to the house.

As they arrived, the sun was just coming up and as it stole over the plateau where the house was nestled in a fold of trees and meadow, it lit the area with a golden glow as if the whole scene was painted in molten metal. Sheep with lambs were grazing on the front lawn and chickens were just beginning to come down from their roosts.

Aiken stopped at the front door which he had left open but was now closed. “They came back here, and let the animals loose. I thought you said nothing was left in the house.”

Cameron said, “Something was valuable enough for them to risk returning.”

Aiken exited the driver side and went inside. He came back after only a few minutes to explain, “Clothes are gone. Some food, ammo but we took his rifles and handguns. All they might have are knives. Nothing else is gone.”

Ferron returned from the barn. “Horses are gone, saddles and gear. I found some tracks.”

Cameron snorted. “You think you can track an Indian? Be my guest. But don’t bother. What the little sneak doesn’t realize is that I planted a GPS chip in every one of my…subjects. Including the boy and wherever he goes, I can find him.”

“Then what are we doing here?” Aiken asked.

“Waiting for the cavalry to arrive. We can set up in the house until Mr. Chase gets here.” Cameron stared, picked up his briefcase in which he’d placed his laptop and went inside the house.

The front door opened into a great room, a living, dining, and kitchen all in one. To the left was the master bedroom and bath done in soothing earth colors and southwestern theme. Neat as a pin and without the usual bachelor clutter. There were no photos anywhere but prints and oil paintings done by local artists of landscapes and horses.

To the right was a short hallway leading to two smaller bedrooms. The boy's room was the typical mess of a pre-teen with colorful posters of Star Wars and superheroes. There were eagle feathers and dream catchers on the walls and hanging from the bedposts. The other bedroom had been Agent Strong's and was left the same as when she had last used it except for the corner where her desk had been.

There, the boy had made it his own, his laptop had rested there and the desk held his mementos---feathers, curiously shaped rocks and smooth chunks of carved wood, fossils and his mother's collection of hair combs.

As before, there were no photos on the walls or in the room. Cameron did not comment but set his laptop down on the desk, pulled up the wooden chair and hooked the power cords into the socket. He had his own remote Wi-Fi hotspot and it uplinked immediately to the nearest satellite. In seconds, an image appeared on Google Earth of a moving icon of an Indian chief in eagle headdress. Aiken, looking over the doctor's shoulder snorted.

"You know where this is?" Cameron asked and the agent studied the topographical map. He traced the contour lines of the mountain.

"We're here." He pointed to a flat spot that denoted the plateau and the image widened as the satellite view enlarged. It showed the flat gray of the roof and the black SUV parked in the yard.

"Real-time images? I'm impressed," Ferron said. "That's not far from here mileage wise but considering the terrain and the elevation, it'll be a real bitch to track him down. Can you get a helicopter?"

"Yes, but that would attract more attention than Mr. Chase wants. I assume both of you can ride?" At their nods, he continued. "I'll have horses and another team here by morning. Till then, let the rabbits run."

Chapter Five

Grandpop knew these mountains, hills, valleys and trails like it was his own backyard which it was. He had been born and raised on this land exploring every inch of it for almost eighty years.

The further in we rode, the more he retreated into the mindset of the Old Ones. He stopped speaking English and spoke only in Sioux and as he did so, he became a teacher rather than a runner.

"See the tracks the horses make, Lakan?" he asked. "If we stop and cover their feet with rags, they will leave next to nothing that a white man can see. Also, follow where I go, I pick out places where my horse does not press as deeply and leave a tell-tale track. Watch the birds and the squirrels, they will tell you if anyone is near. They have special calls to warn each other of men, another for hawks or bears." We listened and I heard them laughing as the dogs tried to chase them. They barked at their jeering from high above on the tree trunks.

"Quiet," Grandpop said and both Heelers hushed. They were named Zig and Zag by my mom because they were always zigging and zagging endlessly as puppies. The horses were called Tango and Cash after some movie my grandfather had liked. I rode the one called Tango.

We had ridden all night between a fast walk and a steady trot and by dawn, I was ready to call it quits. My butt was rubbed raw, my legs ached and I was so tired that the last two hours I had been yawning wide enough to near crack my jaws.

We had climbed the first ridge, descended into a narrow valley and were climbing what Grandpop called Sheep Meadow Peak which lay west of the mountain called White Tooth. It was over 14,000 feet high and still carried patches of snow on its North face.

The predominant trees growing this far up were pines and firs, the footing underneath a carpet of needles that muffled the horses' hooves. Granite shot with quartz surrounded us. One side of the slope was scree and treacherous footing yet that was where Grandpop led us.

For every step over, we slid one down and the horses struggled. Once we finally made it across, I looked back and our passage was clearly marked as darker rocks turned over by their hooves through it. Yet, I knew the sun would lighten them in hours hiding our escape trail. Once across on the other side, we emerged in a meadow below the huge white finger of rock that gave the peak its name. We rode over the crest. I gaped.

Mile after mile after mile of mountains, valleys and land entirely covered with evergreens stretched before me. Millions of acres of wilderness, some of which men had not stepped foot on in over a century. No logging had been done here, no commercialization of any kind.

I couldn't even see a glint of silver or blue to mark the presence of a river. It was a wilderness and I thought that no one could find us in all that even with helicopters.

Grandpop smiled. "This is my true home and yours, Lakan. The land of our ancestors. It will protect and harbor us, give us food and shelter."

"It's so...big," I said at a loss for words.

"There are places down there that no one has ever stepped foot on, boy. You ready? We can camp in a draw about halfway down. Up here, we are too exposed." I swallowed and rubbed my butt. "Sore?" he asked with a small smile.

"Yeah."

"You don't have much meat back there. If you get off and walk awhile, it will help. Grab the horse's tail and let him pull you."

I slipped out of the saddle without groaning although I wanted to complain but I knew Grandpop would be disappointed if I gave in to it so I bit my lips as my feet hit the ground with a jar. Everything seized up.

My first few steps were awkward and painful but after a few yards, it felt good to stretch my muscles and walk.

The little bay gelding followed Gramps' horse eagerly as I held onto his tail. Mostly downhill, it was merely a question of keeping my balance rather than exerting my muscles having to climb.

I walked for a half hour until I was gloriously warm and loose, admiring not the view because all I saw was the butt cheeks of the bay horse.

Without warning, the gelding stopped and I nearly ran into him. Peering around, I saw the sides of a rocky outcrop covered with trees and scrubby brush, mountain laurels and a sort of rhododendron heavy with flowers.

Bees were just starting to drone as they fluttered from petal to petal, the sound of wildlife created a background noise that told me we were an accepted part of the surroundings.

Grandpop told me to mount and as I put my foot in the stirrup, every muscle cried out in rebellion. The minute my butt hit the saddle, I cringed. He grinned at me and pointed to the rock wall.

“In there.”

“Huh?”

“Look with your senses, Lakan, not just your eyes,” he said cryptically. I rolled mine at his ancient Indian wisdom.

I stared, watching the bees and saw them disappear against the rock wall. Intrigued, I kicked the gelding forward and found to my delight that there was a fold of the outcrop concealing a narrow opening. Steering the bay horse inside, I followed the sandy wash for a short distance.

It opened up into a small meadow surrounded by hanging cliff walls. A small stream meandered through the center and disappeared into a crack in one wall.

Before my wondering eyes was a hidden valley, what Western writers had called a ‘hanging valley’. The grass was knee high and tasseled out, the seed heads blowing in a gentle breeze that smelled of fall. I saw sign of wild horses but the manure piles were old.

Grandpop led me over to an area under a particularly large overhang and there, I saw the remains of a campsite. He dismounted, unsaddled and told me to do the same.

Taking his rifle, an old .22, he walked back towards the hidden entrance. I knew he was going to remove all traces of our passage.

He did not tell me to do anything but I knew what needed to be done. By the time he returned, I had unpacked our gear and set up camp, made a small fire from which the smell of roasting coffee greeted him. Firewood wasn't tough to find; a blowdown had brought over a hundred trees to the forest floor down at the far end of the meadow. I saw squirrels, deer and sign of other game animals.

The creek had fish but they were minnow sized. There was a small pond near the middle of the field and I could see the ripples as fish broke the surface. We would not go hungry. I handed Gramps a cup of bitter dark coffee and he drank cautiously.

“Come on,” he said and I followed him. The Blue Heelers trod on our heels as we wove our way through the deep grass. The horses had found a spot under some trees and were grazing heartily.

In the trees, I could see a curious doe looking at us but Gramps ignored her to head straight for the east wall where I watched the sun climb over the cliff face. I caught a smell I knew well. Sulphur. My eyes widened and I hurried forward to find a series of shallow pools from which rose steam and bubbles. Hot springs.

“The ones to the east are cooler and get progressively hotter,” he explained. “The last one is hot enough to boil an egg.”

I stripped in record time and picked a middle one, easing my body in an inch at a time. He laughed at me. “Just go for it, Lakan. It just prolongs the agony.”

I screeched when it hit my nuts but it felt good too. The feeling of my tired and achy muscles just disappeared. I leaned back in the hole that was as deep as my waist and big enough for me and the two dogs. They of course, took one sniff and ran.

I spent a couple of hours in the natural spa and fell asleep, waking when the dogs licked my face. They had been hunting, I spotted blood on Zig's muzzle and guessed he'd caught a rabbit. Or Gramps had and fed them the parts I wouldn't eat. My mouth drooled, I loved rabbit stew almost as much as lamb.

Dressing took forever because I was wet and limp so I just bundled my clothes together and walked back naked. There wasn't anyone around to see me and I could care less, modesty wasn't part of my hang-ups yet.

Grandpop had made rabbit stew and he handed me a towel and a bowl. I ate first and then dried myself off, pulling on a t-shirt, boxers, and jeans after eating. Funny how everything tasted so much better when you camped out. I took three enormous bites, remembered yawning and the feeling of the bowl slipping through my fingers. I fell asleep as if someone had pulled my plug and didn't wake up until the moon was high in the night sky and the stars as bright as searchlights.

The fire crackled nearby and Grandpop was sitting with his back to it working the blade of his grandfather's knife on a whetstone. It winked in the firelight.

"Go to sleep, Lakan." His voice was mellow and kind. I rolled over in my sleeping bag and took his advice.

Chapter Six

The gathering group of men, machines, horses and equipment more resembled a military expedition than the supposed cover of a hunting party.

They met Mr. Chase at the small airport some two hours outside of the reservation. He had arrived in an impressive Lear jet that looked out of place on the small runway next to Piper Cubs and Beechcraft yet it brought no raised eyebrows as corporate jets landed there all the time on company retreats and millionaire estates in the Backwoods

The drive out to pick up horses and men took them only to the helicopter pad where they boarded a black and white helio that dropped them off a half hour later and a hundred miles away at a ranch funded as a training facility for covert ops. Four hours brought them to the small house on the plateau and they set up camp.

Mr. Chase looked every bit as intimidating in person as he had sounded on the phone. He was six foot three inches with long hair pulled back in a ponytail, cold brown eyes and scars buried in the wrinkles of his face. He wore blue jeans, flat soled Ropers, flannel shirt, down vest and Carhartt jacket with a worn Stetson in Silver belly. All of it used and not Rexall new. Or dime store cowboy. On his hip, he wore a Glock .40 in a custom made holster and in his luggage was a handsome rifle scabbard of worked saddle leather, the straps worn from use. The rifle was not the typical hunting gun; this one was larger barreled and held CO2 cartridges underneath the trigger.

Aiken said, "Trank gun?"

Chase looked at him with cold dead eyes. "I don't believe we want the child dead or injured do we, Sergeant Aiken?"

"No, sir."

"Don't you have something you need to do, Sergeant?"

Aiken swallowed and nodded, leaving Chase to commandeer the master bedroom and transform it into an Op-Center. He installed an upload link directly to the satellite and opened his laptop with a secure connection to the mainframe computers at Langley where he reported to his boss.

Her image appeared on his screen. Gray hair cut short and styled, black granny glasses perched on her nose, a severe frown that was at odds with the designer suit and pearl necklace. She was thirty pounds' overweight, the image of a typical Washington matron but she held a position of power that belied her appearance. Head of one of Washington's most covert agencies, she answered only to the director of the NSA and the President. And only if the NSA Director told her to inform the President. Right now, she was overseeing 57 covert black ops that were

classified ULTRA, 29 deemed SUPRA and 15 that only a handful of which had clearance. It was this group into which Dr. Cameron's research fell.

"Dir. Hamilton," Chase greeted and she brayed her signature laugh. Her voice was jarring and screeching.

"Chase. Did you capture the asset?"

"No. We've just arrived on site and I have Cameron's GPS program. The icon is stationary, at an elevation of 12,350 feet northwest of here. We will be heading out in an hour to track them."

"Them? I was under the impression that the boy was retarded."

"He lives with his grandfather and it seems he fooled both the doctor and the testing equipment," Chase answered.

"Keep me informed daily. Do you want access to the facility in DC or one of those closer to the reservation?"

"DC. I want control close to where I am."

"I'll see to it," she logged off without saying goodbye, her manner as rude as ever and for which she was known.

The men were ready to leave by the time Chase exited the house; they had the horses saddled and packed. He studied the medium-size range bred animals and picked out the largest, a chestnut gelding. Strapping the scabbard on the off side of the horse, he mounted in one easy movement. He carried a backpack that he hung off the horn. In it, he carried the handheld GPS tracker, a portable 2-inch one that was as powerful as a mainframe and connected via satellite to the mainframe back in Washington and a satellite phone. He designated two of the men to remain behind at the house and the protocol for updates and reinforcements if necessary. With that said and done, he moved off with ease of a man who knew how to ride. They headed up the plateau for the tree lines, following a faint trail and scattering the sheep and chickens still wandering loose.

One of the men left behind went to the barn, gathered up feed and enticed the animals back into their pens. He fed and watered to the amusement of his partner.

"What?" He said defensively. "I grew up on a farm. Besides, who wants to step in chicken shit?"

"You think they'll find him?" The other man named Parks asked.

Meaders shrugged. "There is a lot of acreage out there, all of it in their backyard. We're just visitors here. Even with GPS, it's not so easy to travel here. People get lost in here every year and are never found in this preserve. Planes go down and they never find the wreckage. They're still looking for DB Cooper."

"Maybe they'll find him too." He walked the perimeter not expecting to see anyone this remotely removed from town and the only thing he did see were some coyotes slinking through the brush below the sheep corrals.

For the first few hours out, the group followed a narrow trail up into the forest and as it petered out, it was Aiken that took over finding sign where the others saw nothing. Chase pulled out the tracker and pointed up and to the right. They stared at a sheer wall of rock that would've challenged a mountain goat.

"They went over that?" Andrews was aghast and Chase said yes.

"Or around it. They headed up and so can we." Aiken scouted around and found a faint trail shaking his head as a thought of a small boy and an old great-grandfather riding in the dark

of night on what was a hairy trail during the daylight hours. That the two had attempted it at night reinforced the desperation of the pair.

“Will we go on until we find them or stop and make camp?” He asked Chase.

“We’ll set up a base camp if we don’t find them by noon tomorrow. But I don’t expect them to be hard to locate, they don’t know he’s micro-chipped. They’ll only have run as far as a day’s ride, and stop where they’re comfortable.”

He looked around at the vista of rocky cliffs, deep forest and small open areas on the slopes of the mountain. They were following deer trails because the animals used the easiest and most economical paths to maneuver the terrain. They spooked deer and other wildlife and one of the men swore he spotted a cougar to which Chase nodded. “They’re showing up everywhere, they are the top predator in these woods. You have to look out for bear, too.”

“I’d rather not,” the man said frankly. “I’ve hunted bear before and we don’t have a rifle powerful enough to take one down.”

“I have bear repellent spray – industrial grade mace. It’ll knock a bear on its ass and Murphy will gut it with his K-bar,” Chase shrugged. “He’s crazy enough to do it. According to my calculations, the boy is no more than a few hours away. Maybe 10 more miles.”

“Ten miles in this terrain could be days,” Aiken argued. “Especially if you don’t know the best route. I can plan one by the map but unless you’re looking at it – well, maps ain’t always the truth of what’s out there.”

“Should I call in a chopper?”

He hesitated. “I don’t think so. Mountain searches are tricky and they’d hear us coming long before we’d spot them.”

Chase stared at the tracker and cursed as the blinking icon simply vanished. He turned it on and off, swept it in four directions yet saw nothing.

“Stopped working?” One of the men asked.

“Or he went underground,” Chase returned. “Are there any mines on the maps?”

Aiken rolled his eyes. “This is Colorado, Mr. Chase. There are abandoned mines everywhere. Some are recorded but most are not.”

“What’s north-west of here?” Aiken checked and found two, both owned by the Anaconda Mining Company and closed up since the 1940s. Another three were of equal size but further south towards the town Ouray, population six. Both had warnings of toxic gas and not to enter.

Two hours of hard riding brought them to the face of one cave and from the sight of a dead sheep lying in front of the entrance, they knew it was not a safe place to enter. Aiken could find no tracks entering the shaft and also spotted signs that it was flooded.

A small mountain of tailings layoff to the steep side of the slope and nothing grew on the arsenic and cyanide poisoned rock slide. The air was heavy with a thick chemical smell that lingered in the back of one’s throat triggering a gag reaction.

“Let’s get out of here,” Chase ordered. “He’s not here.”

Andrews asked, “any more movement on the GPS tracker?”

Chase looked but the signal had not reappeared and it was more than obvious that they could not be here. He gestured and the men kept following a well-defined old road leading downhill. The further they traveled on it, the more signs of occupation they encountered. Old rusted sluice parts, mining cars, and wooden timbers were scattered on both sides of the road. Warning signs promised trespassers would be shot and sported bullet holes. At the end of the

road was a dilapidated chain-link fence, the gates hanging open and pulled apart as if by a vehicle. A lone sign hung from the center, **ANACONDA MINING**. It too was bullet-pocked.

“According to the map, there’s a small town near here called D’état,” Aiken stated. “Population 530. I doubt that’s where they’re headed, from what I’ve seen I think they went deep into the wilderness. Where they can lose us.”

“I think you’re right, Sergeant,” Chase admitted. “We’ll go here.” He pointed to a spot about a mile further out that was a flat area with cliffs on the west side of a small valley between two ridges. It would provide shelter, had water and was a good place to camp. High enough so that they could signal a chopper yet far enough away from the last reported position so that their quarry could not hear it approaching.

It was closer to three hours before the group reached it and wearily, they dismounted to set up camp.

Chapter Seven

It was Grandpop who woke first or he’d stayed awake all night. He had made coffee, biscuits, and fed the dogs and the horses the last of the grain we brought. I rolled over and rubbed my weary eyes, digging the gunk out of the corners. He was watching the sunrise and singing a soft chant under his breath. I was surprised, he was speaking Iroquois and I automatically translated.

*House made of Dawn
house made of evening light
Screaming the night away
With his great wing feathers
Swooping the darkness off;
I hear the Eagle bird
Pulling the blanket back
Off from the eastern sky.
Invitation Song. (Iroquois)*

He had never sung the morning in before and it worried me. “Grandpa?” I asked sitting up. I did not remember getting into my sleeping bag; he must have put me there. He looked tired. Frail, his color more washed out than I remembered. “Grandpa, are you okay?” I ran through my list of warning signs and did not like the conclusion to which they pointed. I got up and hovered anxiously over him.

“Grandpa?”

“You will be fine, Lakan,” he said quietly. “No matter what happens, you will be okay.”

“Grandpop, don’t talk like that,” I said in near hysteria. “I can’t do this without you.”

He smiled and said, “you can, Lakan. You will.”

I cried and bolted upright, my body still inside my sleeping bag. Disorientated, I stared around and Grandpa was sitting calmly by the fire, a soft smile on his face. “Grandpa?” I said, afraid, my heart thumping in my chest. A spark leaped in the fire pit and he didn’t move. Rising, I went to him and touched his shoulder. Blinking he turned his head to me and stroked my cheek.

“Grandpa,” I said gladly.

“I am close to the Spirit World, Lakan,” he whispered. “Not much longer will I be in this world with you.”

“No!”

“I am not afraid to go, Lakan. I’m only afraid for you. Come on, I caught some fish for breakfast. You need to eat.”

I followed him to a stump near the fire and sitting on two tin plates were baked fish. Trout. He had wrapped them in parchment paper with wild onion and garlic; the aroma made my mouth water.

I had eaten two of the trout before I noticed he had not. He was sitting cross-legged on the grass, his hands resting on his knees, a cup of cool coffee between his legs. His eyes were open but he did not see.

“Grandpa?” I asked and did not get an answer. When I touched him, all I felt was a cool slackness in his muscles and a curious rushing sensation under my fingertips – as if the last wave of his life’s force was retreating from me. His body released one last whisper of air and I knew he was gone.

“Grandpa,” I said helplessly and bawled. My cries echoed off the small valley’s walls and mocked me.

It took me the whole day to prepare him for burial. In accordance with his beliefs and wishes, I dressed him in his ceremonial buckskins which was not an easy task for a slender 12-year-old. It was impossible for me to lift him up onto the burial platform that I built of slender aspen poles and set up 12 feet in the air.

So I used the horses and made a pulley lifting him using his sleeping bag as a harness. Once upon the platform, I unzipped it so that his face was open to the sky. As night fell, I sang the death chant for him and wished his spirit safe journey knowing that mom would be there to greet him. And because I was only 12 years old, I cried the rest of the night, mourning the last member of my family

When morning came, I woke stiff, cold and heartsick. I had spent the whole night sitting underneath his grave and crying my heart out. Now, I had to decide what to do. I could not stay here in this valley and survive the winter on my own. Nor could I go back to the reservation. The tribal Elders would see to my care but the moment I resurfaced, Dr. Cameron would be there to snatch me.

I looked at Zig and Zag, the horses and knew I couldn’t do anything but find them some place and someone who would care for them. I couldn’t leave them up here to starve or be killed by predators.

Once I had made a decision, it was easier to act on it than think about why I had to do what I was doing. Having a set task occupied my brain and kept me from dwelling on my loss. I packed up my gear and Grandpop’s, tying most of it on the extra horse.

It wasn’t until I’d mounted and ridden halfway through the valley towards the far end that I realized the gravity of the situation.

I had to scout around before I found a way out; the trail was hidden in a maze of washes and ravines that interconnected like a maze. I finally tied the horses to a smoke bush and used my footprints to track my path. It was the bees that showed me the trail, I followed them onto a ledge I would’ve sworn wouldn’t hold a lizard but it was wide enough for a careful horse and rider if you didn’t mind getting rubbed by stone. Once I was sure it was the way out and not another dead end, I led the one horse and the other followed. The dogs politely waited for their turns.

It was with an echoed sigh of relief that all of us stepped onto the trail that deer hooves had made and turned back into the woods. I recognized a few peaks, guessed we were close to

Silverton and Dolores. I let the horses pick their own way, gave them their heads and soon we were nearly jog-trotting down a logging road that hadn't been driven on in years.

The trail switched backed, taking advantage of the easy areas of the slope but still, we made a good time. I had a vague sense of urgency pushing me and I didn't stop for lunch but ate sandwiches that Grandpa had taken the time to make and pack in my backpack. Peanut butter and jelly, something I knew would keep longer than rabbit stew or baked fish. Not that there was any left, the dogs had finished off the leftovers.

They ranged ahead of me and to the sides never falling behind so when I heard them barking, I pulled up and kned Tango into the brush and off the trail where we were hidden from view. Presently, I heard voices cajoling the dogs and two hunters in Day-Glo orange vests, caps, and camouflage coveralls stepped into sight. They carried rifles but both were packed in scabbards along with their gear. On their chests in a plastic sleeve were their hunting licenses. Both were from the eastern part of the state, I could see their names and addresses.

"Holy Christ, boy," the man named Klingemann said. "Wasn't for your dogs, we might have shot you thinking you were a bear. What are you doing out here by yourself?" He scanned the empty saddle, the two packs and the .22 long rifle hanging on Grandpa's horse. "You from town? Or do you live around here?"

"I'm headed to the Res," I answered. "My grandfather died." I choked back a sob.

"Aww Jeez, I'm sorry. Can we help? I have my cell phone. Want me to call the Ranger station?"

"No. I'm heading home."

He stared at me. "Son, the only thing in this direction you're heading is a million square miles of trees. The nearest town is back up that way and over the ridge." He pointed to me, in the direction from which I'd come.

"How did you get up here?" I asked.

"Four-wheel-drive, four wheelers and we hiked the last two days. Our guide fell and broke his leg but we've been hunting here for 10 years and know the area. I know this stretch of woods and there ain't nothing this way but wilderness." He paused. "You're welcome to join us. We can give you a ride back in."

"My horses?"

"We can turn them loose; they'll head for the ranch nearest the drop-off point. The Lazy S Bar. That's where we parked our vehicles. It's a two-hour drop off from there to Dolores." I hesitated and then thought I'd be safer in their company than by myself. I asked if either had a cell phone but was told that there was no service out here just GPS on their compass.

I offered the one a ride on Grandpop's horse and Klingemann took me up on it. The other man told me to call him Pete and handed me his coat and pack to tie on my own mount saying he preferred to walk. I showed him how to tail a horse and he was grateful for the help Tango gave him climbing the hill.

We backtracked, or I did and the afternoon passed pleasantly. They told me about their hunting trips, their families, and their jobs. Klingemann owned his own auto repair shop that serviced high-end luxury cars and Pete was a Corrections Officer in a big prison in Denver. Both of them had kids my age but neither was into hiking, camping or hunting with their fathers.

"Excuse me for asking but are you Native American?" Pete asked. "You don't really look it with those blue eyes and red hair but your skin is that color."

"My mom was. I don't know who my father is," I answered.

"What's your name?"

I hesitated torn between telling the truth and endangering myself or lying and causing them to mistrust me. “Lake,” I said finally. “Lake Strong.”

Pete shook my hand. “Nice to meet you, Lake Strong. We don’t get a signal out until we go over the ridge and it’s intermittent at best. We’re a long way from the cell tower.”

“I don’t need a cell tower,” I shrugged. “Just a battery. My phone died and I haven’t figured out how to make a solar battery small enough for it.”

“What are you some kind of computer genius?”

“Something like that,” I muttered. The shadows were growing longer, we had long since passed the place where I had emerged from the hidden valley. In fact, I wasn’t sure where it was except for the faint marks of the horses’ hooves to indicate where we’d emerged from what looked like a small ravine.

They stopped at a small clearing no bigger than a bedroom but it had been used before as a campsite. An old fire ring marked the center near a log lean-to, there was a nearby spring with frogs piping and grass for the horses. I reined in behind Klingemann and we waited for Pete to catch up. Both men told me to dismount while they set up camp yet I tried to help them only to get in their way. Frustrated, I stood aside and let them do their thing. In 10 minutes, they had erected a two-room tent, had coffee brewing and freeze-dried meals cooking.

Ingenious PVC poles opened up to form two cots with sleeping bags rolled inside. You could tell they had done this many times, enough to be rote.

“Throw your bags inside,” Pete smiled. “Go rest. We’ll call you when dinner is ready.”

“I want to help,” I protested.

“Take care of your animals then,” he suggested but I had already unsaddled and turned the pair loose to graze. The dogs were off hunting rabbit and squirrel; they would return when they caught something or were hungry.

I sighed and dragged my packs into the tent picking a corner out of their way. Spreading both sleeping bags on the drop sheet, I lay down on one and pulled the other over me. Just like that, I was out in seconds and didn’t wake until I felt the two dogs crawling under the covers with me. Their glorious warmth encircled me and I rolled over covered in dog fur and goose down.

Chapter Eight

An owl woke me. In our culture, an owl was a harbinger of death although I wasn’t sure if I adhered to the idea – no owl had warned me when Grandpop had passed. It sounded almost as if the bird was sitting on the wall of the tent where I slept. I wanted to go outside and check but I didn’t want to wake the pair.

I needn’t have worried, both men were still up, one tending the fire and the other reading by battery powered lantern.

“What time is it, Pete?” I asked.

“3:15 AM,” he answered. “Hungry? We saved you something.”

My stomach growled on cue and the dogs made a sleepy protest as I sat up eagerly. He handed me a wrapped parcel and I unfolded it carefully to find cold lasagna, green beans, and a chocolate brownie. I dove in with greed not caring that he watched me in open-mouthed admiration.

“I don’t think I’ve since ever seen anyone go at MREs with such reckless abandonment,” he laughed. “You must be starving.”

I heard Klingemann call out and the dogs began barking, leaping out from under me to run for the open tent flap. "Hey!" Klingemann yelled.

There was a funny burp noise and then silence. My hand froze midway to my mouth. I grabbed a knife that came with the meal and swiped at the back wall of the tent as Zig and Zag yelped in distress.

I headed to the tent and that's when I saw Grandfather. Dressed in his ceremonial buckskins of pale fawn tunic embroidered with beads, porcupine quills and sun disc, his hair in eagle feathered braids. He looked awesome. And scary.

He pointed back towards the woods and away from the fire and the fallen body of Klingemann.

"No, *Lakan. Boy Who Thinks.*" He called me by my spirit name so I would know he was serious. "These men who helped you are dead. Flee."

"But Zig and Zag, Tango and Cash!" I protested swallowing the lump in my throat.

"The dogs will find you. Hurry, before they see you."

I ran into the trees, following Grandpop's ghostly form as he led me through thick stands of aspen, warning me of downed trunks and rock piles that might trip an unwary fleeing child. Off to the side, I could see the vague flitting shadows of the Blue Heelers as they flanked me.

We twisted, turned and at one point, I could swear we were headed back in a circle towards the campsite. Only a few branches slapped me, their leaves heavy with dew. In another week, the temperature this high would drop and make for chilly and dangerous traveling.

As I ran, I wondered what had happened to the two men who had taken me in. Most of all, I wanted to go back and do *something*. All my gear and survival stuff was back there, I didn't even have a pocket knife, just the slim blade that came with the MRE meal.

Grandpop's form stepped in front of me and he hunkered down on his knees as if listening. I wanted to hug him but knew better. I did not want to bind his spirit to this world when he deserved to go on.

"You can rest, Lakan," he said. "This spot is one of those where the veil between two worlds touch and are thin. No one can find you here."

I stopped running and caught my breath, the dogs coming close to my side and whining softly. I patted both and touched a bloody furrow on Zag's side. He yelped and licked my hand.

"He's been shot! This is a bullet crease! Someone shot him?" I yelled.

"What do you think killed those two men? Spirit arrows?" he asked.

"What happened back there? Who were those shooters? Are they after me?"

"Those are the men who work for the white doctor, the one who ordered your mother killed and was the cause of your accident, Lakan. He has a thread on you and even now, he reels it in to find you."

"What should I do now, Grandpa?" I called him by the name I had used as a baby, I was that scared.

"*Run,*" he said. "**RUN!**"

I bolted forward and didn't realize that there wasn't ground under my feet until the second stride. Flailing arms in a parody of flight, I fell unable to see anything but I could hear the rushing of fast water.

When I finally hit, it was still a shock---the water was frigid and moving faster than expected. Had I been an adult, I would have broken either my back or legs but because I was only 12 and short, I just barely grazed the bottom. Turbulence made the water frothy and I could not see but my body instinctively went for the brightest light I could see. My scrabbling hands

broke the surface first, and then I popped my head out to stare at the moon as the river carried me downstream.

I wasn't aware of any rivers large enough to carry a body in this area, but then I wasn't too familiar with this part of the San Juans like Grandpop had been. I prayed the dogs hadn't followed me. Heelers were notoriously heavy-boned and poor swimmers. I coughed up water and righted myself onto my back with my feet pointed downstream letting the current carry me.

I was cold. So cold that I was past chattering and knew I would have to get out and dry off before hypothermia killed me. Sleepiness and lethargy took hold of my muscles. I heard Grandpa's voice in my ear.

"Swim, Lakan. Swim for the shore. There's a curve in the river up ahead and it has a sandbar."

I pulled my arms around and paddled feebly making no inroads against the current. Just as I was about to give up, my feet hit the ground that shifted under me and I surged upright wading for the faint pale stretch that denoted the shoreline.

Staggering more than walking, I stumbled ashore using the rocks to pull myself in further. The banks here were gentle but covered in boulders, the trees growing back from the water's edge. I found a narrow game trail and my fingers felt the tracks of elk and deer, raccoons and coyote.

Now my teeth chattered as I began to shiver. Shivers that racked my slender frame so hard that I could barely crawl.

"Make a fire, Lakan," Grandpa whispered in my ear. *"Here."*

He brought me to a sheltered spot between three huge boulders that formed a small cave. Inside it was a tangle of driftwood, leaves, and cattails. With his encouragement and advice, I managed to start a small hot fire the old way with flint and striker stone.

Blowing with tiny breaths which were all I was capable of, I made the fire live. With clumsy, numb fingers I pulled off my sodden clothes and draped them against the rocks to dry. The moisture steamed inside the small cubbyhole and made breathing easier. Gradually the heat penetrated my bones and made me sleepy and complaisant. I wanted to fall into that state, let everything go and almost had when I heard the sounds of something approaching.

I grabbed one of the larger sticks and raised it in a defensive position, lowering it only when I recognized the dogs. They leaped over me in joy, licking my face and whining. Both of them squeezed into the stone hollow and cuddled next to me. Their coats were dry; they had either run themselves so or shook the wet from their fur. With them on guard, I was able to relax enough to fall asleep.

Every few hours, I woke and kept the flames going. A small fire so that it could not be seen or smelled away from my camp. We waited for dawn before moving. Anyway, I had to wait until my clothes and boots were dry.

Once I was able to pull my things back on, I was warmed both physically and mentally. When the sun came up high enough to poke its way into the hole between the rocks, I was both rested, warm and full of confidence.

Of course, all three of us were starving. Between the dogs' bellies growling and my own, we could've scared away a mountain cat.

"You guys didn't bring any pork chops or rabbit, did you?" I asked burying my face in their ruffs. They smelled like wet dog but I was never so happy to see and smell their stink.

"Grandpa? Are you here, are you listening?" I cocked my head and Zig licked me. I checked Zag's wound and it appeared clean and scabbed over.

Rising, I hobbled out onto the rocky beach covered with everything from house-sized boulders down to the fine-grained sand. There were animal footprints all over, obviously, my smell had not chased them off. I saw pine martin, woodchuck, chipmunk, rabbit and foxes along with whitetail, raccoon, and weasel. The weasel had caught a good-sized trout and left nothing but the bare-bones. Still, if he could catch a fish, I knew I could.

The dogs followed my unsteady progress up into the trees where I found a small stand of willows. Using the crude knife from my last meal, I hacked off enough whippy branches to weave a net. The dogs eyed me with interest and Zig even went so far as to gnaw on the lathes. He spat them out making a funny face and rubbed at his tongue with his paws. Willow had a bitter inner bark that could be used for fevers or arthritis.

Once I was satisfied my seine would hold together, I retraced our steps to the river following it upstream until I found a shallow pool in a quiet backwater. Watching for the ripples, I waited for evidence of fish and was not disappointed.

Took me a while but by midmorning, both dogs and I had feasted on trout cooked in the coals of our fire, eaten late-season dewberries and drank our fill.

I knew the water was rife with bacteria from animal feces but I had learned how to dig a hole, let the water fill it and be filtered by passing through the sand. Fed, watered and rested, we were ready to head downstream for help.

Chapter Nine

Chase sat his horse staring at the GPS and its telltale lack of any blip indicating a live, moving person. He pursed his lips in anger as Aiken cast about for any sign that the pair had come this way.

“Jesus,” he griped. “Two horses, dogs and two people just don’t disappear!” He complained.

Aiken said, “they do if they know how to track and know they’re being hunted. I can see where someone wiped out their back trail, doubled back and left a false trail. That cost us half a day. This old man knows what he’s doing, he is Indian after all.”

No sooner than he’d said that, the GPS started beeping. A strong signal indicating it was within a mile. Aiken pointed, excited. “Just over that ridge.”

They stared, it was a massive slope towering at 14,000 feet and an impressive climb even on horseback. It would take them hours. They kept to a steady trot where they could, following deer trails and old logging trails, not that there were many. The last time that this forest had been harvested had been over a hundred years ago and it showed in the huge trees.

It was nearly 3 a.m. when Aiken called a halt. He had spotted a flickering light in the distance. “That’s a campfire,” he told them.

Chase sent Ferron and Aiken out to reconnoiter. “Don’t use force,” he warned them. “I don’t want the boy injured.”

“The trunk gun?” The scout raised an eyebrow. “What if the people at the camp are armed?”

“If they shoot, you can shoot back,” the Washington spook shrugged. “If you hit the boy, don’t bother coming back.”

Ferron and Aiken dismounted, tied their horses up and stepped lightly through the brush. They got close enough to see a man around 5’8” stoking up a white man’s campfire. A hunting rifle was at his side. He wore camo coveralls with Day-Glo orange patches that were just as

bright in the firelight. Although the pair made no sound something alerted the man for he stood up and reached for his weapon.

Ferron's reaction was instinctive, he brought his weapon up and pulled the trigger as the man yelled, 'hey!' A soft burp was all the noise that the silenced gun made. The hunter fell over just missing the fire but his rifle fell into it.

Dogs barked and other figures appeared in the tent's shadows. Ferron waited for the other man to step out before he shot him only to have Aiken slap the barrel of his gun down but it was too late, he'd already fired on the hunter.

"No shooting," he argued.

"He was going for his weapon."

"You idiot! Go see if they're dead and who they are. I'll take care of the dogs."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement and fired, heard a dog yike and then they were gone. "Didn't the doc say they had two dogs? Look sharp, the kid must be here."

"There he goes!" Ferron shouted as he saw a youngster running for the trees. He took off after the boy and Aiken hurried to catch up. The boy was fast, agile and desperate. He ran without looking back to see how close was the pursuit. He ran like an athlete, leaping over obstacles with an uncanny sixth sense that should have been impossible in the dark forest. When he stopped, it was with disbelieving eyes that they saw him flying only to realize that he was in fact, falling. In the distance, they heard a falling body hit the water.

When they returned to camp and went through the dead man's pockets, Aiken was speechless. He held up the man's wallet and said, "you shot a Corrections Officer. That's gonna bring a lot of heat down on us. Chase is going to be pissed. Who was the other guy?"

Ferron said, "some auto repair shop owner. Their hunting licenses say they're from Denver."

Aiken had dragged both bodies out around the fire, gathered up all their weapons and gear. He found the boy's pack and that of the grandfather side by side.

"What happened?" Chase asked flatly as he rode up on his horse. Before Aiken could open his mouth, Ferron jumped in to explain. Chase listened, interrupted Ferron. "He fell off a cliff?"

Without another word, Chase shot the man right between the eyes. He fell over backward and Chase dismounted, walking past the body as he entered the tent. The spook emerged from the tent seconds later. "Who were they?" he asked Aiken.

"Correction officer, auto repair shop owner---both from Denver."

"Get rid of the bodies." He told Aiken, who then told two of the other men to drag the bodies off into the woods and throw rocks on the corpses. He watched them walk off and waited for Chase.

"Three bedrolls." His ice cold eyes scanned the area around the fire ring. "Those their packs? The boy's?"

"Yes. He ran off without any of his gear."

"The GPS is still tracking him. Downriver, a river that isn't on any of your maps. How far did he fall?"

"Forty, fifty feet counting the seconds between his drop and the splash. Survivable if the water was deep enough, if he can swim and if hypothermia doesn't get him. He has no spare clothes, no coat, no food and no means to start a fire. I suggest we keep on after him. Sun will be up in three-four hours."

"Can you track in the dark?" Chase was skeptical.

“Don’t need to, just need to follow the river,” Aiken said laconically.

“You let that idiot shoot when I said no killing.”

“Couldn’t stop him. He was trigger happy. Had a silenced HK on him.”

“What do you have, Sergeant?” Chase demanded. “Give me one good reason to keep you alive.”

“I’m the only one who can track.”

“I have the GPS,” he snapped.

“And when it doesn’t work like last time?” Aiken returned calmly.

Chase said nothing but nodded to the packs and the horses. “Bring their gear. Pack this place up so that it looks as if nothing happened here.”

“Twenty minutes,” Aiken promised. When the rest of the group returned, they policed the area putting it back to the pristine condition it was in prior to the hunters’ arrival.

They mounted and rode on; no one commenting on the empty saddle. The boy’s two horses followed as if they were afraid to be left behind and being herd animals, that was to be expected. Aiken reined in at the edge of the bluff. Far below, they all heard the sound of rushing water. Here, the sergeant dismounted tracking back and forth until he found a game trail. Handing Andrews his leathers, he told them all to wait until he could determine if it was passable for horse and rider. He returned in ten minutes stating that he thought the trail down the bluff was suitable if they got off and walked their animals.

It was. Just. Had they seen it in the daytime, no one would have tried it but the horses were mountain bred and took the narrow steep trail in stride.

Dawn was just peeking over the ridge tops when they reached the flat where the river wound through the canyon. As they turned to look back, all of them glanced at the sight of the escarpment they had descended in the dark.

The valley broadened out, the river widened and deepened. Parts of it could classify as a Whitewater class IV and Aiken winced as he thought of a twelve-year-old trying to swim through it after a fall of 50 feet. They rode until broad daylight and Chase called a halt on a wide curve that had grass and a small stand of willows and aspens. The river curved around the finger of land making almost an island of about 5 acres. It had water, shelter and grass deciding for him to make a camp from which Aiken could trail the boy or find his body. The curve of the river would have caught a dead child and washed his body up on the banks.

The men dismounted and put together a military style campsite, out of sight and efficient. The unluckiest got to dig a pit to be used as a latrine.

“Get some sleep,” Chase ordered Aiken. “Then, you can go look. State you’re in, you’re likely to fall and break something. Then you’d be useless and we all know what useless deserves.”

Aiken didn’t argue, he pulled out his bedroll, found a spot near a fallen tree trunk and shook the bag open. He was inside it and sleep in ten minutes. A few of the others went fishing, catching some nice brown trout which were soon cooking over a fire on the camp ware. Chase went into the tent to report to Director Hamilton. He let Aiken sleep for two hours and sent Andrews to wake him up. Andrews laughed at that, if he knew anything about a former military man, especially ex-SF, it was that Aiken would be awake before Andrews could reach him.

Sure enough, as he stood a respectful distance away and cleared his throat, Aiken opened his eyes. “Andrews.”

“Boss wants you to start looking.”

“He doesn’t like to be called boss,” Aiken returned and tossed aside his sleeping bag. He carefully folded and rolled it back up, hanging it from a string off a limb of the tree behind him. At Andrews questioning look, he explained, “keeps the snakes and bugs from getting in where your body heat is.”

“Snakes? It’s too cold for snakes!” Andrews protested.

“Want to bet your ass on that?” Aiken returned and strode off to the fire. A taciturn blonde gave him an MRE with added fried trout and hot strong coffee. He ate and disappeared into the brush following the right side of the riverbank.

Two men followed one on each side, moving quietly and efficiently on the wide banks of the river where it was slow. Scrambling on the wet, slippery rocks where it was fast and chaotic. And it was cold. More and more, Aiken was convinced that he was going to find the boy’s corpse.

The further upriver he traveled, the more he was amazed at the terrain. Huge boulders dominated both sides of the water, many of them ribboned with quartz and in the quartz, he saw seams of gold. Soft enough so that his fingers could pry loose nuggets. In minutes, he had a small fortune in his pocket. His walkie-talkie crackled and it was Andrews from the left side of the river.

“Find anything, Sarge?”

“No.”

Working his way up to the foot of the escarpment from which the boy had fallen or jumped, he stared. The river started there, bursting out of a hole in the overhanging rock wall like cheap champagne from a bottle. The sunlight caught the misty droplets in the air and turn them into scintillating diamonds of every color. Here, Aiken thought, was the real gold of this place.

If the boy had landed here, he would have easily survived a 50-foot fall without breaking anything, the pool was deep enough to break his dive.

Aiken couldn’t cross to the other side so he headed back downstream to find a way across. At one such possible fording spot, he studied the narrowing of the river where the boulders would allow an agile and careful man a way to step from one side to the other using the rocks as footholds. There in a gap between two rocks in the gravel and sand, he saw a track. At first, he dismissed it as a wolf but decided it was too small. Following it out, he found a few more sign that a pair of dogs had traveled that way.

“The dogs are tracking him,” he mused in amazement. Another half hour brought him to the hollow between the rocks, the remains of the fire and tufts of dog hair. The interior smelled of smoke and wet dog, vomit where the boy had puked up river water and the remains of his last meal, probably what he’d been fed by the hunters.

On the rocks were the outlines of where wet clothing had been hung and steamed dry leaving lighter areas against the smoke-darkened patches.

“You’re smarter and luckier than I thought,” he muttered. “No sign of Gramps, though.” He found his radio. “Aiken here. Chase? I found where he rested and dried out. He is alive but the grandfather isn’t with him. He did make a fire and his dogs found him. You have a GPS location on him?”

Chase radioed back coordinates and soon, the former Sergeant was moving inland for the stationary dot.

Chapter Ten

I let the dogs lead and followed them. They chose a path that was easier than I would've expected – a game trail that skirted a ridge above the river. Occasionally, I could see traces of it through a break in the trees.

The trees here in this high valley were huge – mostly hemlocks and pines. Lodgepole pines, every bit of a hundred feet tall and some so wide that four of me couldn't put our skinny arms around their trunks. The dogs caught rabbits in the brush of the pine needles under them. I let them have two, the third I butchered for myself and a later meal.

I was tired, even after resting and eating, my energy reserves so low that moving was an effort and my feet dragged. Several times I stumbled, catching myself on tree trunks and Zag's back. He whined softly and licked my hand.

"I'm tired, Zag," I whispered. "I don't know where I am." I caught back a sob. "And I miss Grandpop."

Zig barked in front of me and I froze. His frantic yapping indicated there was someone or something up ahead that he did not know or trust. I looked around, my back trail was negligible, I was thin and slight, my sneakers were worn and leaving little more than faint scuff marks. Out of habit, I had walked in places so as to leave no impressions and the dogs had done the same following me. With a soft whistle, I called both dogs to me and we melted back into the brush.

Slowly, carefully, not putting a foot down until I was certain what was under it would not snap, crackle or rustle, I hid deep in a thicket of briars and gooseberries not caring that the thorns made scratches on every exposed piece of skin or that they stung and trickled with blood.

How, I wondered in a panic as I spied men in hunting apparel armed with military-style weapons and gear, how were they tracking me? I knew I wasn't leaving enough spoor for any white man to see yet here they were. Then, to top off the horror, I heard a man's voice call my name. A man's voice I knew and loathed. Aiken from Dr. Cameron's.

"Laky, come out, come out. We know you're here," he sang.

I swallowed a squeak, covered my mouth with both hands and both dogs leaned into me without a sound. I could feel them trembling against my body.

"Come out, Lakan or I'll shoot the dogs," he called but his voice was moving and came from a different direction. The ground trembled slightly under me, the vibration of a big man's feet. So at least, I knew what direction from which he was coming. The only way out of the thicket of thorns was to burst through in a dash; a slow careful crawl would only snare me further. I told the dogs to stay and my first stride was in the direction heading straight for him, a move he would not be expecting.

The moment I stood up, all that was visible was the top of my head and the spiky branches clung to me with blood-hungry thorns. I couldn't run, I could barely move – I underestimated the tenacious grip of the briars and my own meager strength. I was pinned like Andromeda before the Kraken.

"There you are," he said in satisfaction and now, I saw a ring of faces around the briar patch. What I did not see was Dr. Cameron. "Come out, Lakan," the guard ordered.

"I can't," I mumbled.

"Why not?"

"I'm stuck on the thorns." He reached in and grabbed me by the shoulders, pulling me free with a wrench that literally tore the clothes off my body. The sight of my bloodied, scratched flesh brought a wince from nearly every one of the six men present. I did not see Cameron or Aiken's sidekick, the one I'd heard called Ferron.

Too tired to struggle, I hung in his grip and as he sat me down, I collapsed onto my knees in a small clearing not far from the river's banks. One of his men squatted near me and opened his pack taking out medical supplies. He treated the worst of the scrapes removing some nasty thorns and painted me with something blue that stung. It brought tears to my eyes but I didn't cry.

"Can you walk?" Aiken asked and wearily, I struggled to my feet. "Where are the dogs?" He asked.

"I sent them away so you wouldn't shoot them." I stumbled and nearly fell, praying that both would stay until hunger drove them off.

"If they attack us, I'll kill them," he threatened. I stared at him with hate in my eyes. Spoke in Sioux and told both dogs to go home. They bolted for the woods and were out of sight before the men could fire on them. "You're quite the little liar, Laky," he taunted. "You've been fooling the doctor and his machines for years."

I ran. Ran as fast and as hard as I could. Didn't resist the urge to look back and was shocked when all of them just stood there with no signs of following me. I ran into someone. Tall, hard as a brick wall and the impact stunned me but elicited no more than a grunt out of him. Knocked the air out of my starved lungs. When I caught my breath, I looked up into the face of a hippie, not an agent, ex-military or guard.

He was over a foot taller than me, with long hair tied back in a ponytail, ice blue eyes and scarred skin. Wrinkles but I couldn't tell if they were from age or sun damage; his skin had the consistency of old leather. He held his arms around me and lifted me off my feet, waiting for the rest to catch up.

"Aiken," he said and his voice was bland and generic. It could've been some TV announcers. Aiken pulled out zip-ties and before I could do anything, had me bound wrist and ankles, proceeded to throw me over his shoulder and all of us traipsed back through the woods to their camp.

If I hadn't been on the run and hiding, I would've chosen the same spot. It was perfect, sheltered with good water, grass, trees and plenty of dry, downed timber. From the string of trout hanging near the fire, it had a good fishing hole also. My stomach growled and Aiken heard it. He threw me onto a sleeping bag next to a trio of foldout chairs and a table. On the table were maps and GPS tracking device along with a laptop. I rolled onto my side, it was less painful on my scratches.

"Who are you?" My voice came out as a thin squeak, not the angry roar I had envisioned.

"Lakan Strong, I presume?" The ponytailed hippie asked.

"Who are you?"

"You can call me Chase. I work for the lady the pays Dr. Cameron."

I was silent. "You're a Washington spook? With hair like that? I thought all you dudes wore sidewalls?" I would've pointed to the buzz cuts but my hands were tied.

"Some important people want to... test you, Lakan," he said studying me.

"Yeah, well, been there and done that." I wriggled my hands and feet but the thick plastic had no give and I had no strength.

"Time to call for an extraction, Sergeant. See to the boy while I make the arrangements." He retreated to the big tent and the Sergeant went for a plastic box that I recognized as one used for holding first-aid supplies used by EMTs.

When I saw him remove a syringe and a vial, I struggled in earnest. Screamed and carried on like a baby but it made no difference. He held my bound arms with one huge hand, found a vein and deftly slid the ginormous needle in. It felt like a scorpion had stung me, burned and instantly warmed me until I felt as if I were drowning in hot molasses.

Sounds intensified until all I heard was a loud drone that filled my head and my ears, I felt the wind on my skin as if I were in the heart of a wildfire. Movement around me and the thumping beat of a giant heart. Lights in my eyes and then nothing but the taste of brass in my mouth.

Chase sat next to the child in the helicopter, studying the small boy that had led his men on a merry pursuit. He was small, even for a twelve-year-old, his hair a curious shade of red so deep it looked brown. It was matted to the boy's skull, dirty with leaves, pine needles and bark. He was thin, the delicate ankle and wrist bones as small as a girl. His collarbones jutted out like a bird's, his skin a pale fawn and blued with bruises. There were enormous blue shadows under his eyes and his face had the sunken-in look of an unhealthy addict.

The shot Aiken had injected into him had knocked him out and would keep him under long enough to reach the airport, land, unload and board the Lear jet for Washington. In fact, the compound would keep the child in a coma-like condition until the antidote was administered.

The Lear jet landed at Langley where a blacked out Navigator met them on the runway. Chase carried the boy over his shoulder, a blanket covering him so that he looked no more than a rolled-up rug. The IV the boy was attached to hung inside Chase's long jacket.

Carefully, he slid the bundle into the back seat, belted him in and sat next to the child, eschewing the front passenger spot.

The Navigator zoomed off ignoring the posted speed limit. It did not detour for the CIA building or compound. Instead, it exited Quantico and slipped unobtrusively onto the Beltway for the inner city and a nearby safe house.

In the least desirable neighborhoods, there were plenty of abandoned and derelict buildings. It was to one of these that the black beast of an automobile pulled up and drove into the parking garage. Parked in a freight loading area and a red laser scanned the vehicle and occupants. With a near silent whine, the concrete under the Lincoln broke into a circle and descended. In less than five seconds, it had disappeared leaving behind a steel hatch covering the hole of the elevator shaft.

With a barely perceptible jar, the lift reached the bottom, the driver flicked on his head beams to illuminate a vast subterranean complex of tunnels and roadways.

Traffic was busy with electric cars and carts whizzing by, following the traditional red and green traffic signs. They gave way to the Lincoln which rolled majestically through the well-lit corridors like a Queen ant through her hive. Reaching a brightly lit avenue, it was guarded by uniformed and armed soldiers, armed with fully automatic rifles and full clips. They saluted as Chase stepped out of the parked Navigator and one offered to carry the agent's bags not realizing it was a child.

"Sorry, Colonel," the grunt stepped back. "I need to see your ID."

Chase offered his badge---a credit card shaped piece of plastic with a RFID chip in it.

"Get me a stretcher and a cart, ready a cot in the infirmary," he ordered and removed the blanket from Lakan's face.

His eyes were tightly shut, his mouth slightly open and drooling. He looked nothing like the genius Chase had been told he was. The soldiers stared trying to do so without being obvious

but it was obvious that they were startled at the sight of the unconscious child. Both guards double-timed back to the gate and radioed for help and transportation. Within mere minutes, Chase, the boy, and his entourage were racing for the medical bay.

Chapter Eleven

The infirmary was bright, airy and if you didn't know you were two hundred feet below the surface of Washington D.C.'s streets, you would not have known you weren't in some fancy health clinic. Capable of handling up to twenty beds at a time, it boasted state-of-the-art medical equipment, MRI, cat scan and three full-time surgical suites.

The doctors were world class in that this complex was part of the covert nuclear disaster system assigned to protect the Senate and Congress as the Presidential Bunker was even more secret and hi-tech.

A high-speed rail system connected the White House, Senate and Congress to the Complex. Called simply Redoubt B, it was a closely guarded secret between the CIA and the NSA. In fact, most of the agents involved in its day to day running thought it was just part of the D.C. subway system.

The boy had a private room and a Marine stood guard outside his door. He took up only a small space on the hospital cot with the rails up. His skin and hair were the only color in the white bed although the room was painted in a soft rose. The nurses had decorated it with posters a child might like---Batman, scenes from Frozen and Transformers.

Cameron was there and watched the boy sleep, he was dressed in boy's pajamas, not a hospital johnny. He was hooked up to an IV of fluids and liquid nutrition, a low dose of antibiotics to treat the beginnings of bronchitis and intestinal gripe. Probably contracted from drinking out of the streams. As of yet, he had not administered the antidote to bring Lakan Strong back from his forced sleep. For that, he was waiting for orders from Chase, Dir. Hamilton and the Medical doctor.

Chase entered the room dressed in a neat three-piece power suit of blue pinstripe with a tie sporting tiny snaffle bits and elegant race horses. Cameron sneered, knowing it was a Hermes and probably cost half a cheap car.

"Doctor," he greeted and stood over the child's bed. Cameron's lip curled at the ponytail tied back with an equally fancy gold clip. He looked and sure enough, Chase wore a diamond stud in one ear. "We're waiting for Dir. Hamilton. I believe you met her once?"

"Short, dumpy old lady? Bad temper?" Cameron asked. "Yeah. I thought she was somebody's grandma or secretary."

Chase smiled. "She wants people to underestimate her. Word of warning---don't. She's as sharp a shark as any Washington backstabber and she has the power to back it up. So, what does this wunderkind do?"

Before Cameron could answer, the door flew open and the director of the CIA barged in. She looked harried and even her expensive designer suit made her look dowdy. Her skirt was wrinkled, her collar wilted and the color all wrong for her complexion. It clashed with her gray hair. Worse yet, she had her nails painted in two different colors---a ghastly goblin green and a dark blue that sparkled. Both were supposed to match her outfit and failed miserably. She carried no briefcase or purse, only a huge shoulder bag that was reminiscent of a beach tote.

She looked at the doctor, Chase, and the hospital bed. "Well, why isn't he awake yet?" she demanded staring at Cameron.

“We were waiting for you, Director,” Chase said mildly. “And Dr. Chavez.” He named the Colonel in charge of the Infirmary.

“Well, get him in here. I have a busy schedule today.” She looked at the child who had turned on his side and placed his fingers in his mouth sucking on them like a much younger baby. “My son used to do that,” she replied and her face softened for a second. “He has red hair.”

“Yes, Dir. Hamilton. Agent Strong was his mother.”

“She was Indian?” She sounded surprised and her face whitened as the boy turned to face them. “Get him up. Now,” she demanded, her voice harsh and shaking.

The doctor came in before Chase could react and he took one look at Hamilton’s face, made her sit down while he took her pulse and BP. She pushed both men aside and reiterated the demand to wake up the boy.

The doctor called Chavez was Army and a Colonel but he deferred to both Chase and Hamilton. Picking up the boy’s IV, he injected the antidote into the port and watched it flow through the lines. The results were not immediate but almost.

Lakan’s eyes fluttered, flew open, his hands wrenched from his mouth and he bolted upright screaming in terror which brought the Marine into the room with gun drawn.

“Stand down,” Chase barked and the Marine holstered his weapon.

“Director?”

The doctor attempted to calm the boy and only succeeded in agitating him further. Finally, he sedated the child and even that took two of them to hold Lakan down for the needle. Once he was quiet, Chase gave his attention to the obviously distraught Hamilton.

“Sarah?” he asked gently.

“Everyone out,” she snapped and all of them obeyed, even Chavez although he gave the boy a last glance before closing the door.

“Chase,” she said standing shakily and approaching the bedside. Her hand came out to rearrange the disordered covers and stroked the boy’s sweat-matted hair. Chase gaped at the show of tenderness from the hard-bitten woman.

“Did I ever tell you about my son?” she asked.

“Michael?” Chase named the agent who had lost his life on one of his Treasury Agency’s missions. From all things, a hit and run crossing the street after leaving his divorce lawyer’s office. The Director’s only child.

“Yes, Michael. Did you know that he and an FBI agent were having an affair?” At his stunned look, she continued. “I knew he was fucking someone but I never suspected he would jeopardize his career, marriage and leave his wife for her. When I heard the bitch was pregnant, I threatened him, sent an anonymous e-mail from his computer telling her to get an abortion. Instead, she ran. He was killed a week later.”

“And you think this is his son?”

“My grandson, Chase. He looks just like Michael did at that age. Except for the red hair.”

“Should I pull a DNA test on him?”

Hamilton opened the tote and pulled out an envelope printed with CLASSIFIED stickers. It had not yet been opened. She handed it to Chase and said, “I don’t even need to read it, I know what it’ll say.”

He however, did and swiftly tore the seal, extracted the report and read the findings.

SUBJECT: DNA markers match 99.99% indicating a paternal genetic relationship between Former FBI Agent Rachael Strong and Michael D. Hamilton.

If it were possible for Hamilton's face to get any redder, he was afraid she was going to stroke out. "Did you say, Michael?"

Chase stared at the sheet and realized the implications. "Son of a bitch," he whispered.

Hamilton shrieked. "Goddamned fucker! I told him to stay away from that bitch!"

"What are you going to do, Sarah?" Chase asked and she stared at him with grim determination.

"I'm going to take my grandson home, Chase and raise him myself."

"He'll hate you," he offered.

"Not after we treat his mental state. I have scientists who can make a person believe anything, become anyone. I'll just have him reprogrammed."

"And do what? What about your project with Cameron? You think he's going to just sit back and let you steal the boy?"

"I am the Director of the CIA, Chase. I can make him disappear. I can make you disappear. Don't push me. See if the good Dr. Cameron can apply some of his fancy schoolings and make the boy...pliable."

With that, she left the room.

I woke up in a strange place but that didn't frighten me as much as who I did not see when I woke. Dr. Cameron and the man with the ponytail were gone. I was in a bed inside what was clearly a cell; the furnishings were bolted to the wall, covered with a thin mattress and equally thin sheets. A stainless steel toilet shared the corner with a sink of the same make and functionality.

I felt ill; weak and shaky as I sat up, threw the covers back and stared at my pajama-clad knees dangling over the side of the mattress. I wore expensive blue piped pajamas which were in direct contrast to the cell-like surroundings.

Standing up required concentration, my balance was off and I could still feel the dregs of sedative in my system. For a while, I wasn't sure who I was---I just knew something bad had happened behind the blank spots in my memory.

"My name is Lakan," I murmured raising my hands to my face. There was no mirror to see what I looked like and I could barely remember my self-image. All I kept seeing was the picture of a coyote slipping through the brush but this coyote had dark red hair and light blue eyes more like a wolf.

I leaned over the sink, turned on the water and drank from my cupped hands. The liquid had a strange flavor; one my taste buds had not tasted before. I knew I was more used to mineral based well water. This one was treated and chlorinated.

"Hello?" I called and drifted over to the door. It was steel with one of those glass windows in it impregnated with wire. An electronic keypad was the lock that accessed both in and out.

I scanned the room and saw no sign of camera or microphones but they could be so small I wouldn't spot them. I knew I was under surveillance; I could feel eyes on me.

"I'm hungry," I complained and rolled my sleeves up. There, in the crook of my elbow were several black and blues where needles had injected me.

The door buzzed and slid open into the wall. A man stood there, I remembered his name was Dr. Cameron and the man in the sharp three-piece suit was called Chase.

"How are you feeling, Lakan?" the doctor asked.

"Where am I?"

“My clinic,” he answered. “You said you’re hungry.”

I nodded. Chase left the room and the door hissed shut behind him. Cameron went around me and sat on the bed.

“You know why you’re here, Lakan?”

“Where is here? I don’t remember anything just coyotes and the forest.”

“Your grandfather---where is he, Lakan?”

I paused and rubbed my forehead in confusion. “I think he died,” I said slowly. “I remember the spirit guides coming for him, burying him on a platform in the old way.”

“That was very respectful, Lakan. He would be proud of you,” the doctor agreed and handed me a robe as the door opened. I set it on the bed as Chase wheeled in a cart loaded with food. My mouth instantly watered and I reached out for the plate, held it as Dr. Cameron scooped fluffy scrambled eggs, bacon, toast and fresh fruit in neat little piles. I scarfed it down and had it half gone before I realized they were not eating.

“Don’t you want any?” I asked and both shook their heads. I shrugged. “More for me.”

“Orange juice, milk or do you drink coffee?” the doctor asked and I must have made a rude noise. Orange juice and fresh milk were not two commodities commonly found out on the reservation. Canned milk, coffee, and water were the drinks of choice if alcohol wasn’t number one.

The coffee was good, rich and creamy; I drank it without sugar like my grandfather. He already seemed a dream from long ago and I could barely recall my mom's face. Something warned me in the back of my mind that this was all wrong but it was a distant feeble warning and I ignored it.

The coffee tasted funny---sweet and with a bitter aftertaste. Slowly, I set the cup down. The walls moved around me, sinking in towards me as the floor fell out from under my feet. Cameron reached for me and his arms were ten feet long, his hands at the end now shaped like dolphin flippers. His eyes were ruby red glowing in a coyote’s face and he spoke to me with yips and growls. I sat there until the walls fell in on me and buried me under wet plaster that filled my lungs making it hard to breathe.

Chapter Twelve

I had really strange dreams. Dreams where voices spoke directly into my brain and told me things that I knew weren’t true. I tried to make them stop, block them out but how far can you get when the ideas are in your own head? The more you focused on not thinking about them, the more they dominated your mind. Eventually, I stopped trying and obeyed the voices. After that, it was easier, they left me alone and I could concentrate on the other sensations that coursed through me.

I dreamed about the forest and a family, about an older woman who was my grandmother, about my real father who hadn’t known I was born or alive. How my mother had run away from him and hidden me so he could not take me away? That he had died in a car accident before he could tell his mother about me.

She had hired a man called Chase to find me and bring me home. Home was the Washington D.C.-Maryland area where my grandmother lived on a farm in the country. Home was the comfortable big round room in the brick Victorian mansion with the cherry wood four-poster bed, big screen TV and white marble fireplace with brass fire dogs. White chintz curtains and polished hardwood floors. I sat on the small loveseat in front of the blazing fire and it all seemed familiar yet somehow false.

The butler entered after a discrete knock, in his hands a silver tray upon which rested a flaky croissant covered with chocolate sprinkles and a cup of expensive hand ground Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee with half and half.

“Good morning, Master Lake,” he greeted setting the tray down on the table. “Breakfast. Your pills. Your grandmother wishes you to attend her in the Sunroom when you are through eating and dressed.”

“What’s your name again?” I could see his face but his name eluded me.

“Charles, Mr. Lake.”

“What day is this?”

“Friday, Mr. Lake. October 24th, Friday. 6:30 a.m.” Then, he added something that made my bones cringe. “2015.”

“2015? But –.” I ran to the bathroom, flipped on the light and stared into the mirror. The face that stared back at me was mine but different. Longer, less rounded with sharp high cheekbones, curly dark blood-red hair brushed back into tousled curls, ice-blue eyes that looked haunted and much older. I remembered a child’s face and this was the face of a youngster verging on manhood.

“How old am I?” I whispered as Charles followed me into the granite counter bathroom.

“Nearly 14, Master Lake. Don’t you remember the birthday party Mrs. Hamilton gave you last spring?”

“But –,” my brain froze. Last time I’d looked at myself, I saw a twelve-year-old’s scared face staring back at me. “I don’t remember the last two years,” I said in dismay. I pushed past him and bolted for the door. Running through the hallways of polished maple floors, ornately chased scrolled walls and antiques that cost millions, down the back staircase to the foyer choosing that way because I liked the back-stair connotation of sneakiness. Heading for the old door out into the side yard that used to be the servant’s entrance to stand in the yard under a huge old maple whose leaves died gracefully around my ankles.

I was panting by then. Not because of exertion but in distress. All this, the house, the yard, all of it seemed so familiar yet so wrong.

I heard both Charles and my grandmother calling for me and the sound made me head for the distant tree line. Once in the woods, leaves enveloped me in their scent and sounds like putting on an old familiar overcoat. My hands knew just where to find the pockets and what was inside them.

Automatically, my eyes sought out the sign of animal life. I saw a deer track and recognized one as a doe with her young fawns. Raccoon and possum spread their mark on the soft mud near a puddle along with deer mice and turkey.

Following, I found a game trail and kept on it delving deeper into the woods. The trees here were oak, maple, and gum. Some hickory and crêpe myrtles with their colorful flowers. Dogwood and Sassafras by their hand-shaped leaves. I knew the names but my senses told me I was more used to pine, hemlock, and spruce. Golden quaking aspens, all the signs and sounds and scents of the Western woods.

I could hear them stumbling through the woods behind me searching and I knew that there was no way for either of them to find me unless I let them. I knew I was better in the woods; I knew it with the same certainty as I knew my name. I felt like I was two different people but inside the same body and mind.

There was the boy, the twelve-year-old Lakan who was afraid and remembered wild forests with firs and aspens and there was the older, more sophisticated Lake who lived in the Southern brick mansion and ate with two forks, not one.

I ran until I couldn't anymore. My legs were tired, my wind was gone and I was lost. But not truly. All I had to do was turn around to see the distinct marks of my passage through the brush. Broken branches, scuffed leaves, and footprints in the sandy loam left a trail that a blind man could track.

I checked the pockets of my black jeans and corduroy shirt. Found a slim wallet with an ID card, credit card, and two twenties. The credit card was an American Express and had my name on it. Lake Michael Strong. It should have read Lakan Strongbow but then, Lakan Strongbow would not have had an American Express card.

I circled, put my back on a twenty-year-old shagbark hickory and judged which direction was West. That was the route I was headed in with a certainty that I knew in my bones was correct.

I traveled for an hour, resting for 15 minute intervals every two hours. Crossed several small streams but knew better than to drink out of them. I did find some small springs and knew those were safe being constantly filtered as they seeped up from deep underground.

Even here deep in the woods, I found evidence of man's occupation in discarded soda cans and beer bottles. Rinsed out, I carried spring water in the bottles capped with the remains of old plastic bags. I could tuck them into my back pockets and keep my hands free.

There wasn't much brush in there, and the further west I walked, the higher I climbed where hemlock began to creep into the picture. Pines and firs followed as I entered the Shenandoah National Forest.

I knew I had when I passed the trees blazed yellow and the green and yellow sign posted on the border lines.

The further away I traveled from the brick mansion, the lighter I felt, the clearer the voices in my head. I had left a great weight behind and only realized the extent as I left it behind.

The thought of leaving my grandmother, her fancy house, butler and all the comforts of a wealthy existence did not deter me. The further I got, the dimmer those memories became. The problem was that the other memories became no clearer.

I stopped when the shadowy forest became too dim to clearly see the ground. A moonless night, it was pitch black in the deep where I halted.

I had no lights, no matches yet my muscle memory knew what to do. Unconsciously, I had picked a spot with water, wood and rocks. The rocks yielded a striking stone and nearby, dry moss. In five minutes, I had a neat little fire going which illuminated the small clearing I had chosen. Surrounded by pines and a rocky outcrop that rose behind me, it formed a small cove that was sheltered from the wind and would conceal the fire from anywhere except ten feet in front of it. A small stream cut through the corner of the rocks on my left and to the left was due west.

Food was no problem either. I had seen animal tracks abounding under the hickory and beechnut trees. Finding some nuts that hadn't been eaten by squirrels and birds was more difficult. It was too late in the season for berries but there were roots I could dig up.

I found where wild turkey roosted and it was no effort to knock one out of the tree, club it and cut its head off with a broken piece of a beer bottle. The feathers and skin peeled off in one piece. Gutting it was more difficult with blood on the glass shard; it was slippery to hold but I managed.

Green elm branches through the carcass hole front and back laid over stones made a rotisserie even if I had to roll it myself. I didn't wait for it to cook completely, the smell made me so hungry I ripped into it as soon as the meat turned white. There wasn't much white meat---wild turkey was mostly dark but it tasted better than any Butterball my memory dredged up.

I huddled against the rock outcrop, sitting on a bed of pine needles as I pulled my arms inside my sweatshirt, tucking my head under as well. Cocooned inside my clothes with the fire reflecting off the rocks, I drifted into an easy sleep. I dreamed. Dreamed of a ranch house in the mountains and of an old man who took care of me with gentle patience.

I knew he was my grandfather but no matter how hard I strained, I could not recall his face or name yet I knew he watched over me as I slept. In the morning, it was the chatter of scolding blue jays and irate squirrels that woke me. They were angrily protesting intruders in the woods. I heard dogs barking and hastily stood up.

In seconds, I kicked dirt over my smoldering ashes and roughed over my campsite so only a trained woodsman could tell someone had been there. I couldn't do anything about the lingering odor of smoke. As for the dogs, all I could do was head for the stream and pray my scent would be drowned in the water. My shoes were sneakers, not the best thing on slippery wet rocks nor were wet feet yet I ran as hard and as quietly as I could.

I had no idea how anyone had found me; I thought I was deep in and far enough from casual searchers to have made finding me an impossible task.

I came upon a logging trail and rather than follow it, I ran parallel to it. The road fell downhill, twisting and turning to take advantage of the ridgeline's contours. On both sides was a deep ravine where the creek lay and it was there I concentrated on laying my trail. I left a sign that I had crossed the road, doubled back and gone uphill. It wouldn't fool the dogs but confuse the men.

I ran until the soles of my sneakers were in tatters; I did not stop as I passed old tarpaper shacks buried in the woods or the expensive hunting cabins built on flatbed trailers that had been driven in and dropped. I ran past state forest signs warning of unmapped trails and difficult terrain. When I reached the swamp, I stopped to rest, catch my breath and look for the deer trails through the muck. They would take me safely through and the swamp mud would bury my scent. I waded in with fresh determination.

Chapter Thirteen

By late afternoon, I reckoned I had covered almost thirty miles into the Shenandoah National Forest. I had crossed the Shenandoah River once where it was a mere stream and swam a larger section using a canoe to hide my slowly drifting body. I was tired, wet, cold, hungry and footsore yet all the more determined to reach my goal. I wasn't sure exactly where out west I wanted; I figured my brain would tell me the right spot when I reached it.

My memory pulled up a map of the area and I guessed that the next major crossing would be the South Branch of the Potomac river, not the one Washington was supposed to have crossed. That was nearly 120 miles back east.

I was out of Shenandoah National Park and probably inside George Washington Park, a vast area that was largely ignored by campers and hikers. Filled with ghosts of moonshiners, ridges runners and hillbillies, it was part of the legendary area made famous by the movie Deliverance.

Any pursuers behind me would not fare well in the backwoods where government men were hated worse than Yankees.

Breakfast and lunch were fresh caught trout steamed inside kudzu leaves over a small fire on the banks of a tiny waterfall I called Lace Knickers. It was in an out-of-the-way spot on a small game trail that humans hadn't found in years but they had been there---and left their garbage. I found old Coke bottles and metal cans that had been there since the 1960s. I cleaned the area up and buried what trash was left. **Leave No Trace** was a mantra I had been born understanding.

The air shimmered around me. Chilled and the hairs lifted on the back of my neck and arms. I was suddenly cold and thought about scrounging up a coat.

A man walked out of the yellow mist. He was tall, with long dark braids, red skin, and a solemn, noble face. Dressed in pale tan buckskins, his chest, sides and sleeves were adorned with exquisite beadwork. He wore only four eagle feathers in his braids and dangling were red velvet ties.

He spoke in Siouan and instantly, I knew what he was saying.

"Doe key ya lay hey?" he asked and I told him that I was going home.

"Wah gnee kyta!"

"Hunta yo!"

"Who? Who is coming?" I stared around me but all I saw were trees, ridges, and mountains. "Who are you? Where did you come from? Are you Cherokee?"

"I am Tungasila," he answered. *"La 'kota."*

"Grandfather." His was the face I could never remember, the old man who had raised me.

"I don't understand," I said softly and he told me to follow him. I stepped into the yellow mist and it curled around my ankles like a curious cat. I had the sense of being somewhere otherworldly.

"You are in danger, Lakan. Many people search for you."

"I know. Every time I try to throw them off my trail, they find me. How?"

"The doctor who birthed you had a device implanted in you that radios your position to him within a matter of inches," he explained.

I could have kicked myself for not thinking of that but he told me that they had done things to my brain to make me forget. Forget my life with him, being caught and the last two years of my life under their care.

"Will I regain my memories?" I was terrified that my mind was no longer my own. "Where is this tracker? Can I dig it out? Disable it?"

He pointed to my chest and the touch of his finger was a cold pinch that stung me to the core and numbed the spot. "It is buried next to your heart and you cannot remove it. A doctor must do it. As for tracking you, underground kills the signal as does entry into this place."

I looked around. Blowing yellow sand, yellow dust, haze and far-off outlines of yellow mountains. Yellow sky with no clouds and a barely discernible horizon.

"What is this place?" It gave me an uneasy feeling as if my time in here was limited and his answer confirmed that.

"This is the land between worlds. The waiting place for lost spirits. You cannot stay here long but long enough so that those who search for you will leave and look elsewhere."

"My grandmother?"

He snorted and looked very much like a Native American warrior. "She is not your grandmother. She is related to you only through the blood of her son."

"Her son?" I gaped.

"He was going to marry our Rachel but was killed before he could keep that promise."

“Her husband is running for re-election this year,” I said and looked around. I wasn’t hungry or thirsty. Good thing, I was sure there wasn’t anything remotely like food in this place. I sat on the sand and Grandfather sat beside me. I wanted to touch him but he warned me not to – that I could bind his spirit to this place forever.

“But you touched me,” I rubbed the still numb spot on my chest.

“I may touch you as I have no substance here, it does nothing to my existence within this place.”

“Why haven’t you gone on, Grandfather?”

“It is not my mission to leave you, yet,” he replied. “Sleep, Lakan. You have a little time to rest before you must go on. *Thich’ill’iila iyotaŋ child chaŋtochignake.*”

I whispered back ‘I love you’ and closed my eyes. Slept knowing I was fairly safe from those that followed me and no dogs would pick up my scent. I had no way of knowing how much time had occurred in this spirit realm. The cell phone my grand – Hamilton had given me I had tossed into the Shenandoah a day ago. Reading had brought me the knowledge that anyone possessing a cell phone, a card with a RFID chip in it or even an EZ-Pass card could be tracked and found.

Grandfather woke me with a cold shiver, showed me the way out and warned me to be careful. His eyes twinkled when I asked if the men were nearby. “No,” he explained. “Black bear. Many of them.”

“Great,” I muttered. All I had for protection was a broken beer bottle. I could throw it and piss the bear off unless he stopped to drain the dregs.

I stepped forward on a spot no different that I could see or feel and into the world in which I had been born. Cool forest surrounded me, the beginnings of a camp-head. I could see a parking lot with an eclectic group of vehicles but all were SUVs or trucks. No sedans or two-door sports cars.

Many sported bumper stickers from National Parks, Wildlife Foundation and Greenpeace. Some had prominent **Leave No Trace** stickers and all were tagged with either day or overnight camping permits.

I peered into each vehicle careful not to touch or leave fingerprints and especially DNA samples. The license plates stunned me. I had figured I had walked some 60 miles in two days bringing me from Washington DC area into Virginia but if the cars were any clue, I was now in southern Alabama near the Chickasaw Oklahoma Indian reservation. Once called the Five Nations, it was a vast parcel of land the US government had given to the Five Tribes because it was thought to be useless. Only a century later, oil had been discovered under it making it one of the richest Indian nations ever.

They had their own government of Tribal Council, police force, health organization, cities, and towns. Ran their own schools and gambling establishments. Sad to say, though their alcoholism rate was just as high as any other reservation. I was pretty sure I could count on the Elders for help and sanctuary.

The terrain here was different, tough thickets of mesquite and cedar with sandy soil and spiny prickly pear. What large trees I could see were cottonwoods, their leaves turning brown and falling off. Scrubland, thickets where one could hide out and unless you stumbled on top of someone, would never find them. Unless you were microchipped.

None of the vehicles were unlocked or keys left in them but the hood on the Park Ranger’s truck was still warm. I guessed that he had just arrived and was either collecting rent or

checking on who was overdue. The back of his pickup had crap piled in it and offered a hiding place between old tarps, garbage bags, and someone's ratty old tent.

Climbing over the tailgate, I arranged the tent over me and prayed the Ranger wouldn't notice someone or something had pawed through it. Luckily, it was cool enough that the garbage didn't stink and I could lie there quietly. Even though I had slept, I fell asleep again not waking until I heard the engine turn over. The truck lurched forward and for the next hour, I endured a spine-jarring, bone-bruising ride of torture until the truck hit the highway. That wasn't much better but at least it was faster.

I got cold. The air whistled down over the cab and straight through the bed. If I hadn't been holding onto the tent and tarp it would have flown out. It flapped loud enough to hit and annoy me.

His brakes came on a few times on curves and finally, he skidded to a stop. I risked a peek and gaped. Standing in the middle of an arrow-straight highway was a horse – a spotted horse and astride it was an Indian. He wore blue jeans, Carhartt jacket, and a black felt Stetson. His horse was a big black and white paint with a narrow head and a mean eye.

"Redline," I heard from the driver of the truck. "What's up?"

His reply was a soft murmur that did not reach my ears but the voice of a girl sounded loud in my face as something thin and whippy hit the tent over my head.

"Out," she ordered as I flinched. "Hurry up before Ranger Rick notices."

"Huh?" I returned brilliantly.

She reached in, grabbed my collar and heaved me onto the horse. I wrapped my arms around her slender waist so I wouldn't fall ass-backwards over the horse. She kneed her mount, an equally impressive red paint around to the front of the truck making the driver jump.

"Jesus! Rach, where did you come from?" He studied me but couldn't see much as I was hidden behind her.

"Grass fire on old Tupelo Road," the man reported, nodded and loped off. She followed and I went with them having no choice as she kicked the horse into a gallop nearly tearing my head off.

Chapter Fourteen

We galloped across the flat playa, the horses weaving skillfully around creosote bushes and Spanish dagger. I saw that they were following dirt bike trails but I had no idea where they were going – I didn't see anything in the three directions I *could* see over her shoulders.

"What's your name?" I asked between thumps of my butt on the horse's croup. I had to push myself away from the cantle so I didn't squish my nuts.

The horses galloped for ten minutes and as I looked back, I realized that we had descended but it was so gradual that you didn't notice until you looked backward. The Park Ranger's truck was long gone and spread out below me in a sunken pit was a truck, horse trailer, campers and a small plane. If there was a runway, it wasn't apparent to my eyes.

Neither of them stopped until he drew level with the plane; I saw that it was already running and the pilot behind the perplex windshield was another handsome dark-skinned Native American hanging out the passenger door.

"Come on, Rachel," he called. "Redline, hurry." The older man dismounted from his running horse to land on his feet. The horse continued on to the trailer. The girl pulled hers to a sliding stop and if I hadn't grabbed hold of the saddle, I would have flown over backward. She pushed me off with an elbow and when I landed on my back, it knocked the air out of me. A

cloud of dust lifted around me and the horses' hooves. I choked. It was the younger man who reached down from the open doorway and dragged me to my feet.

"How," he said and I got my breath back but she rushed past me into the plane and all three of them bundled me inside. Set me down and seat belted me before I had a chance to open my mouth. In seconds, we were bouncing along on a dirt trail scraped out on the bottom of the pit and literally bounced into the sky. The younger man slapped a hard plastic shell on my chest and I felt it humming.

All three of them proceeded to strap their own seatbelts and faced forward ignoring me. Pressure built up in my chest. What started as an annoying tingle became an inch, then a pain, and then – a crushing weight. I couldn't breathe, couldn't move even though I tried to reach out and attract their attention. Finally, I passed out.

"Wow," a soft female voice murmured near my left ear. "I've never seen anyone turn that shade of blue before."

"Yes, well, the EMP shield is not supposed to interfere with brain or heart electrical impulses. It's a good thing you saw him stop breathing and did CPR, Rachel. He'd be dead if it wasn't for you."

"How old do you think he is, Uncle Pete?"

"Fourteen, maybe fifteen. His great-grandfather was a friend of your dad and I met him once. He was a Lakota, from a well-respected and revered line of Shamans."

I stirred. My eyelids fluttered and my hands went to my sore chest. It felt as if my grandfather had rolled a boulder with him sitting on it onto my chest.

"Grandfather?" I asked and stifled a sob as I saw neither home nor grandfather. What I saw was an open room decorated in Southwest motif in a fancy house of hand-hewn timbers, a house of obvious wealth. Out of two sets of open French doors, I saw huge deck overlooking a mountain lake surrounded by tall pines and snow-capped peaks. The air smelled of pine and cedar and I heard the whistle of a hawk and the cry of a loon.

"How do you feel, Lake?" The older native asked and I saw he was Cheyenne or Arapahoe. He wore comfortable fresh-pressed jeans, starched Western shirt and soft Lucchese boots. The girl from the plane was with him and she wore jeans, T-shirt and jean jacket. Ladies Ropers and heirloom silver jewelry.

"Who are you people? What's going on, what are you doing to me?" I demanded.

"Well, you certainly wake up in a bright cheery mood," the girl pouted.

"Who are you?" I asked her directly. She was very pretty, and inch or so taller than I with glossy black hair, exotic black eyes and skin tone lighter than usual.

"My name is Rachel Vaughn Little Bear," she said. "This is my uncle, Redline Pete Otseno, and my brother, George Little Bear."

"Okay. So how did you know I was in the Ranger's pick-up? How did you know who I am?"

"Your great-grandfather is my friend, Lakan," Redline answered. I swallowed.

"Was. Was your friend."

"He still is, Lake. Just because he's passed does not mean he stopped being that. Besides, he told me where to find you and how to help you. As for what's happening – the shield over your chest contains an electromagnetic field that interrupts the signal embedded in your heart. We were flying to the Casino Tower where the Elders will discuss what to do with you. But you coded so we made a stop at my house."

“What to do with me? I need to hide! Some crazy woman has sent goons after me! She says she’s my grandmother!”

“Dir. Hamilton,” Redline nodded. “She wants you and the head of one of her Black Ops wants you. They’ve been engaged in a tug-of-war over you for the last two years. A man called Chase just found out where she’s been hiding you. Dr. Cameron is pestering the NSA for access to you, also now they are aware of your... unique abilities.”

“My what?” I stared hard at him but he wasn’t intimidated.

“Oh, come on,” Rachel sneered. “You know the doctor from Harvard genetically modified your mother’s DNA before you were born. He made you a super baby.”

I snorted. “I’m just a regular kid. No super genius or superhero.”

“Then explain how you can enter the Spirit Realm and speak to your grandfather and mother,” she retorted.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I started and she touched me. Instantly, I was back inside the Yellow Realm and the man who called himself Tungasila was sitting cross-legged on a big yellow chunk of quartz.

“Lakan, *Boy Who Thinks Too Much*,” he greeted me. “These people are your friends. They will hide you and Redline’s niece is pretty, too.” He grinned.

“Grandfather!” I said embarrassed, using the term out of respect not because I recognized him.

He stroked my head. “You’re on the cusp of becoming a warrior and a man, Lakan. Be happy, that’s all your mother and I want for you.” Abruptly, I was back in the plane surrounded by expectant faces. Rachel looked sleepy, yawned and leaned back against her seat cushion.

Her uncle explained, “it tires her to visit the Spirit Realm. Does it affect you that way?”

I shook my head. “I don’t remember going there before...today, yesterday. I literally woke up Friday, October 24, 2015. The last day I remember clearly was August 29, 2013, and I was with that man who says he was my great-grandfather. Yet I remember a woman saying she was my grandmother – Sarah Hamilton. I can’t remember my mother or father at all.” I shut my mouth with a snap as I realized I was babbling.

Redline patted my arm. “You’re safe now, Lakan. No one can take you off-reservation land without the permission of the Tribal Council and they have to find you first. As far as they know, your signal disappeared in the Devil’s Sinkhole in Tularosa, Alabama about 10 feet up in the air.”

The pilot called back, “landing in ten, fifteen minutes, Chief.”

I looked out the window and saw a small city below us, laid out in a grid shape with a modern skyscraper dominating the center. Other equally imposing multi-story buildings lay at its feet as if in worship. It vaguely resembled a restrained Las Vegas with the same desert scrubland surrounding it yet no Lake Mead or giant pipeline feeding it.

The airport runway was modern and large enough to take a DC-10 or 727 and there were several terminals for the main carriers. We had no wait time, the pilot was directed to set down on the runway and taxi to Hangar Twelve where our ride was waiting. The air traffic controller called the pilot by name and they chatted before we hit the tarmac.

I watched as we rolled over to a hanger set on the side. A black stretch limo was parked there with a waiting driver. He was Indian but his only concession to his chauffeur duties was that his hat was a baseball cap, not a Stetson. When he saw us, he reached inside the open limo window and put a Stetson on his head.

Redline said, “my other nephew. Darren White Deer. He drives for the casino.”

“Does he wear a suit then?” I asked.

“Nope. Guests expect Indians to dress in buckskin and eagle feathers. He wears jeans and a jean jacket. Sometimes, he braids his hair.”

I looked again and sure enough, he had long hair tied in a ponytail that disappeared down the collar of his jacket.

The plane stopped. Two men ran out from the hanger with wooden chocks connected by ropes and tossed them under the wheels. I heard noises outside the door and it popped open as everyone unhooked their seatbelts. Redline gently pushed the girl and she woke groggily, rubbing her eyes.

“Come on, Rachel,” he said. “Darren’s waiting.”

She was up and out before I could blink and I saw her throw herself into the driver’s arms planting a passionate kiss on his face. I frowned. Cousins were not allowed to intermarry in Indian culture, especially close cousins.

“Can you walk?” George Little Bear asked and I stood up. Wobbled and he held the shield up against my chest. I wondered about my back and whether the EMP shield covered both directions. Instantly my brain was processing the technology that was behind the shield, how to expand and improve on it. I held it on myself. “I’m okay. My feet went to sleep.”

I stepped forward and descended the four steps to the ground with Redline in front of me and George behind me. Rachel and Darren came forward. He spoke in Cheyenne and whatever he said pissed Redline off.

“Mind your business and your manners, Darren,” he said shortly. “Drive us to the Tower.”

“As you say, Uncle.” He turned on his heel and returned to the limo as Rachel flounced after him. We piled into the back seats and he did not hold the door for us. She sat in the front and faced forward.

The interior was plush and had a minibar. No alcohol but bottles of sparkling water, soft drinks and iced tea. George handed over a water without me asking and I drained it dry. I was also hungry and he gave me my choice of energy bars or fresh fruit. I took both and ate until I was full.

The limo pulled off and onto the main road, the suspension so smooth and quiet I barely felt us moving. The windows were blacked out but I could see the panorama of open country, sagebrush brush, piñon trees, cactus and cottonwoods in the draws. Although it looked flat, there were arroyos and dips that could hide a car. What I didn’t see were sources of water – no creeks, no rivers, and no small ponds. Occasionally, I saw a windmill turning lazily near a stock tank. No cattle although we did pass a five-strand barbed wire fence that trailed off into the distance.

One minute we were in the desert, the next we entered the neighborhoods surrounding a small city and streets merging into the downtown area.

Chapter Fifteen

We were met at the curb by armed security guards, some were Native American and others white. They stared at me but no one said anything as we were ushered inside, led to an open waiting elevator that had only one-floor button – ‘P’ for the penthouse. The ride took ten seconds and with a discrete ding, opened on a space large and luxurious. Equally as expensive and impressive as the Hamilton estate.

“Bullet-proof glass and treated so no lasers can penetrate. You should be safe enough from anyone accessing the tracer in your chest until we can remove it,” George said.

“Remove it? I was told it required heart surgery!”

“It’s no more complicated than putting in a pacemaker. We have top heart surgeons who can do it here under local anesthesia. We do have a state-of-the-art hospital,” he returned. “The choice is yours. You can hide in here indefinitely and wear the shield 24/7 or have the bug removed so you can go anywhere.”

“So, heart surgery or prison?” I twisted my mouth. “Not much choice.”

Rachel and the driver had disappeared into one of the hallways. I assumed it led to a bedroom but she emerged carrying a plate of sandwiches and coffee. She set it down on the glass covered table and poured three mugs of fragrant black brew. I recognized the smell of chicory.

“There’s a room for you, Lakan. When you’re ready, I’ll show you to it.”

I grabbed two sandwiches, lifted the bread and saw roast beef and ham with Swiss cheese. Took a bite, chewed and swallowed as if I hadn’t just eaten a half hour ago.

“What is it I’m supposed to be able to do?” I asked after both sandwiches were gone. I picked up a cup and poured myself a coffee. Added cream and sugar to the mug which had a picture of Wayne Newton on it, whoever he was.

“We know Dr. Cameron worked on GMO research. We know he used Indian babies that were diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and that you were the only child to survive,” George said.

“My mother didn’t drink.”

“How do you know? You said you can’t remember,” she said.

“I don’t know how; I just know she didn’t.”

“According to the records, you were in a fatal car accident that killed your mother when you were three. You suffered serious brain damage and weren’t expected to live. But you did and were diagnosed Developmentally Disabled. Failed to advance beyond an IQ of 40 yet you clearly created items that were of significant advancement in microchip design,” George added. “There’s more, too. Our scientists have postulated on what modifying an embryo’s genes could achieve.”

Then, he did something that made me screech in pain and alarm – he poured hot coffee on my hand. Instantly, the skin blistered and scalded. I ran for the nearest water source – a dispenser in the corner but by the time I reached it, the burn had stopped hurting, the skin had turned my normal color. There was no sign of what had been the beginning of 1st and 2nd burns.

“You heal almost instantly from minor injuries,” George said. “Your blood carries antidotes for anything you can contract, you’re faster, hear better, see better than any human on this earth. You learn instantly what you’ve read and know it word for word.”

“Bullshit,” I returned and he handed me a book. I opened it, flipped through the pages and stopped. It was a book on anatomy and my head was suddenly full of the Latin names of bones and medical conditions.

“You could fly a 747 after reading the manual, pilot a helicopter, perform brain surgery,” he continued. “Just after reading or seeing it done.”

“No,” I whispered. “No. I can’t even remember my childhood. How can I know this stuff? I was slow as a child, I suffered brain damage.”

“We think it took years for your brain to repair what had been done to it in the accident and because you had some awareness of the danger, it caused you to suppress your intellect; your brain kept you in the dark until puberty kicked in. That started everything. Then, the Director’s men caught you. From what we could learn, she’s had you for two years, re-programming you as

her grandson. Your mother was Agent Strong. She was an FBI Special Agent and she had an affair with Hamilton's son, Michael."

"An FBI agent had an affair with the President's son?" I asked.

"Agent Strong was dating the son against her wishes. Your mother vanished and we suspect Dir. Hamilton scared her away before she could do anything worse."

I threw my hands up in the air. "I give up! Get this thing out of me so I can go back to my old life!"

Once I had made my decision, George wasted no time in setting up the operation. That's what he called it--the 'operation'. He was on the phone for an hour and I grew tired of sitting around doing nothing so I stood up and went exploring.

The Penthouse was huge and on one top floor covered by a huge skylight was a shimmering blue swimming pool. I was amazed but even more so when Rachel showed me the stairwell to the roof which was a marvel of garden engineering.

The staircase was circular, one piece and each stair tread supported the one below and the one above. I was fascinated by the mechanics and engineering behind it and my brain conjured images of bridges, roadways, and pedestrian walkways all using the same techniques. In a frenzy of inspiration, I drew on the walls with a BIC and no one stopped me.

Rachel dragged me away after an intense fifteen minutes to show me my new room. It was nearly as large as the one at the Hamilton estate; done in earth tones that reminded me of the desert. The furniture was modern and comfortable, clearly expensive. I bounced on the low bed with geometric quilt, ran my hands across the ASUS computer keyboard and opened and closed the oak dresser drawers. There were clothes folded neatly inside---underwear, socks, t-shirts and jeans.

The closet was big enough to house *me* let alone my meager clothing collection which consisted of one pair of jeans, torn t-shirt, and underthings. Someone had lent me a thin jacket on the plane but I had left it in the limo.

There were soft paintings on the walls of desert landscapes. Some so realistic that they resembled photographs. The bathroom was done in terra cotta tiles, double sink, commode, walk-in shower with three glass sides and a whirlpool tub. The towels were thick and plush, the faucets and knobs gold and I meant real gold. Ostentatious in a gaudy way that seemed at odds with the understated elegance of the rest of the suite.

Rachel stood in the doorway. "There's Netflix, HBO, Showtime, Cinemax and Hulu on TV. It's in here." She went to the only wall not holding a painting and pushed on a small knob. The wall slid back to reveal a 52" TV, bookshelves and a steel door.

"That's a safe," she added. She went to the other wall near the bathroom and opened another hidden panel to reveal a door to a panic room. "Once inside, only you or Uncle Redline can open the room. It has independent electric, air and phone lines. Enough food in storage for a month's siege. An escape hatch into the cellars via a pneumatic tube. It's only one way and leads to a tunnel, buried in bedrock out into the desert where a mini bike and radio are stored. The former owner of this Penthouse was a bit of a zombie Apocalypse fanatic."

I'd seen the movie with Brad Pitt, thought it was stupid. The reality of my situation hit and I was overwhelmingly depressed. Turned around and smashed both hands into the mirror over the vanity and screamed in anger as glass shattered and blood splattered.

Rachel yelped in shock and tried to wrap my hands but I ran for the roof. I had a sudden irrational idea of throwing myself off to see if I could heal from that.

I was halfway up the circular stair when Rachel's yells brought others into the room. Before I could open the door to the roof, George had thrown something. When I could look, it was a south American bola. It hit me in the legs, wrapped around them to knock me down. I tumbled down the steps only to be caught in his arms.

I cursed. I ranted and raved, punched him, tore my nails into him and when he was within reach of my mouth, I even tried to bite him. Just when I thought I had broken free, somebody stuck me in the butt with what felt like a needle the size of a drinking straw. I felt an instant heat, lethargy, and my vision darkened to a tiny pinhole. Then, even that popped and I was washed into a sea of impenetrable darkness.

I woke up in stages. Whatever they had given me kept me dragged down. I'd open one eye, stare at a picture of a desert rose and then drift into sleep. I knew something was wrong but I didn't care, the hold of the drugs was stronger than my will.

What finally woke me was not my stomach though I was starving but the need to pee. I rolled over and slid out nearly onto the floor as the bed was very low. I had to stand up to walk off. My feet had a tendency to drag and I stared, puzzled as the layout of this bedroom did not conform to the memories of my room at home.

I went to the door I assumed was the bathroom but it turned out to be a huge walk-in closet with clothes in my size that looked like the kind I'd wear. The bathroom was a study in some playboy's dream, even the mirror over the marble sink was just too much. I did my business and washed my hands staring at the sleepy-eyed boy who stared back at me. My hair stood up in rat-tails, my eyes were bruised underneath and matter caked the sides of my mouth.

I was thirsty. I drank out of the faucet and nearly brained myself when a man's voice spoke to me.

"That is a disgusting habit, Lakan. There are tumblers under the sink."

I whirled around. George stood there, holding out freshly pressed jeans, polo, and underthings. He sported a black eye and I flushed, knowing I was responsible for it.

"Sorry," I said briefly. I reached out and to his credit, he did not flinch away as my fingers touched the swelling mouse.

"What happened, Lakan? Rachel said your eyes went all flat, completely black as if your spirit had just... gone."

"I was suicidal, I think," I whispered. "I was going to hit the roof and jump. I'm tired of this whole GMO/DNA thing. I just wanted some peace."

Under my fingers, his skin grew warm and then cool. The mouse disappeared and the black and blue with it. His eyes widened and he reached up to prod what had been swollen flesh and was now normal healthy tissue.

"You healed me," he said, dropped the clothes in my arms and examined his face in the gilt baroque mirror. The black eye was completely gone but I looked like death warmed over.

"What did you shoot me with?" I rubbed my butt where there was a huge bruise.

"Ativan and Thorazine. You were psychotic, Lakan and hard to handle. We were afraid you were going to hurt yourself." He grinned and his eyes sparkled. "I feel great. You're a healer, too."

"I don't know what I am except hungry," I returned. I picked up the clothes that I had set down, stripped and started dressing not caring that he watched me.

"You're in pretty good shape, Lake. What did you do at Hamilton's? Go to school, play football? Work out?"

“I told you all, I don’t remember anything more than waking up on Friday. Everything else is like a dream. Breakfast? Or lunch?”

“Closer to lunch. You can eat here or in one of the restaurants in the Tower. Your choice.”

“You’ll let me out of the cage?”

“You’re not in prison, Lake. The door is open any time you want to leave. Just know that once you leave this Tower, every satellite and cell tower will home in on you.”

“I want a hamburger and fries,” I said. “How about your chef cooks up one or three for me?”

He laughed. “I’ll see if Rachel is up to it.” He left me to follow or not.

Chapter Sixteen

Rachel said, “Uh-uh, no way am I cooking for you. Next, you’ll want me to do your laundry and pick up after you.” Today, she was dressed in skinny jeans with rhinestone studs on the pockets and a fancy silk blouse with trailing sleeves. I thought they were useless and would get in her way. Her boots were also impressive and hand-sewn. Everything about her screamed ‘money’ yet she didn’t seem to care for the ‘bling’.

“Grab a jacket and I’ll take you out to eat,” she suggested and I wasted no time in obeying. I was eager to investigate this tower and its occupants. She took me to the twelfth floor which was one fancy restaurant after another. And some not so fancy. I had always had a craving to try McDonald’s but Mrs. Hamilton wouldn’t be caught dead near one let alone inside. When I asked if I could try a Big Mac, she informed me that those were no longer on the menu. I settled for a mushroom bacon cheeseburger, fries, and a vanilla shake. With my belly full of grease, carbohydrates, and plastic cheese, I burped in contentment.

“Want to try some of the games or the machines?” She asked, a strange gleam in her eye.

“Sure. Why not? It might be fun.” We went down to the lobby and entered a world of fantasy and make-believe. I’d never been to Las Vegas but I imagined it looked very much the same. Gold, glitter, costumes, bright lights. Girls with cleavage wandered between tables wearing black suits and ties with short shorts. The dealers wore neat uniforms like old-time Western card sharks.

There were rows upon rows of slot machines and several went haywire with alarms and lights signifying jackpots. Rachel stood back and let me take it all in. I was overwhelmed, I’d never seen so much activity and commotion going on 24/7.

A waitress approached us carrying a tiny tray and not much else. She was blonde, extremely well-endowed and carrying a year’s worth of face powder. Her eyes were made up to look like a cat and her lips and nails matched in a deep red.

“I’d ask if you wanted a drink but I know you’re under age, Miss Vaughn. Coke? Pepsi? How about you, sir?”

“Dr. Pepper?” I asked trying not to stare. Up close, she looked like an overly made up doll and not a real woman, much older and harder than I thought.

“Hello, Nikki,” Rachel greeted. “This is my cousin Blake from the East coast. I’m showing him the casino.”

“Well, have a good time and beginners luck,” she said giving me the once over. She licked her lips as if I was a tasty tidbit. “Be right back with your sodas.”

“Thanks,” I said and wandered over to the Blackjack table. I watched for a while and without even thinking too hard, calculated the odds of the next cards to come out of the shoe.

Rachel stood at my side and handed me a hundred dollars. “Go ahead,” she said with that same strange gleam in her eye. “See if you can beat the odds.”

I pulled up a chair and for the next hour played the game. I won more than I lost, I could almost predict what cards would appear next and my luck attracted attention especially since she was at my side.

The hundred dollars grew exponentially. Before I knew it, I had amassed a small fortune of a hundred thousand before the manager came out to whisper in the dealer’s ear. I heard him say, “I already changed the shoe twice, sir. He’s not counting cards and he’s too young to be a card shark.” The manager was Native American and he stared at Rachel.

“Hey. Don’t look at me,” she laughed. “I had nothing to do with this.”

“You know the House Rules state no one under eighteen can gamble, Miss Rachel,” the manager said.

“That’s a Federal law, Mr. Longbow. We’re on reservation land,” she came back. I pushed the chips back to the dealer.

“Here. I was just playing for fun, anyway,” I said.

“How did you do that?” The manager Longbow asked. “Can you calculate the odds on certain cards appearing?”

I hesitated as I looked at Rachel. In truth, I wasn’t quite sure how I knew which card would come up next, it was almost as with as if I saw it before the dealer flipped it over.

“Intuition,” I answered weakly. Mr. Longbow escorted Rachel and me to a back room behind the bar where a huge flat screen TV was playing LOTTO numbers. As soon as he closed the door, all sound from the gambling room ceased but we could watch the action on overhead CCTV’s.

The desk faced the door and the closed-circuit TV’s, there were no windows in the wood-paneled room. No photos, no paintings, the TVs the only decoration to be seen. There were two plush chairs done in leather opposite the desk and a massive overstuffed office chair behind the desk.

It was a work of art that desk – black granite top polished to a mirror shine and flecked with mica sparkles. A laptop was the only item on the surface.

“Have a seat, Mr. –?”

“Blake Strong,” Rachel answered for me. “My cousin from the East Coast. He’s visiting.”

“Didn’t know you had any redheaded cousins on the East Coast, Rachel,” he returned mildly. “What were you doing, Blake Strong?”

“Playing cards,” I answered nervousness playing with my stomach. “I wasn’t trying to break your bank or anything. I just wanted to see if I could predict the play of the cards.”

“Gambling is 90% luck and 10% skill,” he returned. “What you did was more than luck. Rachel, unless your cousin wants to be banished from this casino, I suggest you limit your playing to the machines.” She nodded. “And Rachel, I don’t like to see any underage players in my casino.”

“Yes, Mr. Longbow,” she swallowed. She stood up, took my hand and tugged me towards the door. Twenty minutes later, we were back in his office after having played four machines to five jackpots, the largest hitting twenty-five thousand dollars.

His face was grim as he pointed to the chairs and we sat down again. This time, he studied me with razor-sharp, hard anthracite eyes. Abruptly he pulled a brand-new deck of cards out of his desk. Flipped the cellophane off the pack and shuffled them leaving all the cards –

Jokers and instruction card in the deck. Slapped them down on the desk and split them into two piles.

“Name the cards, boy,” he ordered and flipped over the top two of each pile.

Ace of Diamonds

Queen of Hearts

Joker

Two of Clubs

I called them down to the last card and missed only two. His lips thinned even further as if I had somehow offended him. “How are you cheating?” He demanded.

“I’m not,” I protested.

“Rachel, have you given him anything to help him?” He demanded and she became angry, leaping out of the chair to spit in his face. Her eyes flashed like chips of obsidian, cold and flinty.

“How dare you! I value honesty and integrity as much as my father did and my uncle does! I would no sooner cheat than I would prostitute myself! Lakan, come on!” She grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the chair, the room and the casino.

I heard the manager protesting all the way behind us as we stepped into the ornate lobby, down the escalators and out onto a broad avenue that looked like a second strip. Casinos, theaters, steakhouses and outright massage parlors vied for space with pawn shops, wedding chapels, and even diners.

I tried to get in a word of warning but she was so incensed that she ignored me. She didn’t stop but simply ran across the street, down a set of cement stairs and dragged me into a well-lit, modern subway system.

“You’ll be safe enough down here,” she panted. I didn’t think it was because she was out of shape but more to do with her emotional state.

I planted my feet and she was pulled to a dead stop on the platform where posters advertised shows and eateries, not products. Surprisingly there was no graffiti on the pure white walls.

“Rachel, I can’t go wandering off into the underground! Even if my...signal didn’t go out, there are people who will see me and report me.” Even as I said that, there were commuters veering around us as the train pulled in. I stared, although it looked like an old West UP engine and cars, the train was electric and worked on a maglev rail. The only noise I heard before it had pulled in was a slight whoosh as it displaced the air in the tunnel. Even the air conditioning units on top produced little or no sound. The loudest noise down here were the voices of the commuters. These were the service people – dressed in uniforms or coveralls. They smiled politely as they detoured around us and a few even greeted Rachel by name.

“Come on,” she hissed and pulled me over to a corner near a pillar, a restroom and a wall boasting French CanCan dancers at a theater uptown.

“This is the real world of the casino, Lake, the real people live down here.”

“Live down here? In the tunnels?” I asked.

“The subway system was built using old mining tunnels and caverns. The workers built homes into the bedrock and made a small town down here. With water and Hydro-electric power from the river. The ones who live above are the rich who’ve embraced the whites’ values and morals. Down here, no one will ‘rat’ you out.”

“Rachel, if I wanted to hide in a hole in the ground, I could have stayed in one of the caves in Shenandoah National Park. Besides, your uncle is going to have the tracer removed.”

She stared at me and hung her head. “Lakan, I saw your X-rays that they took when you were...asleep. That thing implanted in your chest is more than just a tracking chip. It also

regulates your heart itself. Any attempt to remove it will cause it to send a lethal shock into your heart and kill you.”

“But, your uncle said they have doctors who can remove it!”

She shook her head. “What they were going to try was open you up, implant a small shield around both sides of your heart and hope it blocked enough so that it would only give out a distorted image that the government couldn’t trace. But, you would show up only as a curious anomaly on any X-ray or scanner.”

“Rachel, what am I going to do? I want to go home, retrieve my memories, find out who I used to be!” I whined and she took both my hands in hers. Instantly, we were back inside the Yellow Realm and the sand slid insidiously into my sneakers, the wind carried pieces into the crevices and cracks between my skin and clothing. My hair lifted and even the dark shine of Rachel’s black hair had a yellow glow.

Tungasila stood watching us, his face in shadow. “*Hunta yo!*” he said and ran. We followed him, my heart pounding in sudden fear yet I had no explanation for that feeling. Rachel ran with me.

Chapter Seventeen

I don’t know how long we ran. There was no sense of time in that place but it was long enough for our legs to grow weary yet the man who called himself my great-grandfather and Tungasila did not slow or falter. He ran with lithe, easy strides that promised he could go forever but we were mortal and tired.

Rachel stopped first and I slowed to stay with her taking in the surroundings. We were in a small meadow with stunted yellow trees that resembled aspens, yellow grass that looked withered but wasn’t and the far-off mountains. It was the first time I’d seen anything growing in this place. Still no sign of water, insects or animals.

Tungasila came back and urged us on. “I can’t run anymore,” Rachel gasped, her chest heaving. My eyes were drawn there and I felt an uncomfortable fullness below. He saw it and smiled.

“Danger is a powerful aphrodisiac, Lakan. That is why many babies are born before and after wars.”

“What’s coming, Grandfather?” I asked using the polite and respectful term in his language.

“Soul snatchers. Creatures that masquerade as coyotes or small dogs. They will kill you for trespassing and steal your souls, binding you here forever to be tormented by them as slaves to their lusts.”

“Why are they after us?” she gasped as she bent over, searched for a pebble to suck on. It was an old trick to fool your mouth into thinking you were not thirsty and to ease the stitch in your side. “They never bothered me before.”

“The more you enter and longer you stay,” he explained, “the greater your signature on the landscape, the stronger your scent where they can track you.”

“What should we do?” I asked “Is it safe to exit? Where will we come out? In the city? The Tower or the subway?”

“Wherever you want. Just focus where you will step through,” he said. His head lifted hurriedly. “Quickly, Boy Who Thinks Much. They are coming for you!”

I opened the door and we stepped out onto the subway platform, nearly in the exact spot from which we'd left. I glanced up at the big clock on the walls and the schedule board with its LED display. Four hours had passed. No wonder Rachel was exhausted and my legs tired.

"They must be frantic over our absence," she noted worriedly. She pulled out her cell phone and I was surprised to see that it was an old Tracfone with no SIM card and untraceable. The thing was almost archaic, stone-age. I knew that no one could track her by it as it was unregistered.

She dialed and spoke into it, using a language I assumed was one native to her tribe but I understood it without knowing how or why I knew it. She was telling her uncle we were safe, in the subway and would be back inside the casino shortly. She asked if anyone had reported me missing and did not seem surprised at his answer. I could hear his strident tones through the cell phone and started walking back towards the steps leading up to street level.

When I reached the fourth step from the top, I was able to tell that it was early evening though the skies were lit up by the 24-hour cycle of a nonstop gambling Mecca. People were bustling back and forth; the streets as busy then as they had been during the day. Night-time brought out the women who worked in the massage parlors – women who dressed for sex and had the looks that plastic surgery had created. There weren't lines heading into their establishments but they were humming along with no lack of customers. The pawn shops were busy, too and for the first time, I saw drunks stumbling down the street. Some were panhandling and others lay on street corners of back alleys.

I couldn't help myself; I went over to one and pulled him into a sitting position out of the street. He was dead to the world, drool and vomit staining his once white dress shirt with a string tie and scuffed boots. I checked his pockets and found his wallet. His name was Jamie Bolton and he was from Alpine Texas, a member of the PBA or had been up until two years ago.

Rachel stood over me. "I remember him. He was bucked off, broke his back and couldn't ride anymore. Started drinking. Alcohol is our curse," she sighed.

I touched his shoulder and felt that same tingle flow through my hands and into him. He stirred, muttered something and opened his eyes. Clear, deep brown and solemn, he studied my face and called me Shaman. I swallowed and told him not to sleep here on the ground but to go back to his hotel room where it was safe.

He informed me that he had no residence only a trailer he pulled with his old truck. I gave him part of our winnings from the casino. He climbed to his feet, tucked the cash inside his shirt, thanked me before he walked soberly down the street and out of sight. Only then did I walk back into the casino where we were met by the Manager, Security, Redline, and George. All of them surrounded and escorted us back to the Penthouse.

Redline was furious and he started several times to berate us, finally sputtering to a stop as he plowed his fingers through his hair.

"Do you realize that even now the NSA could be descending on us to retake you, Lakan? Do you want to spend the rest of your life in captivity as a guinea pig? There are AMBER alerts going out all over the US. How long do you think you'd last out there? We have customers who come from all over the country to play here." He paused. "The Park Service found two skeletons near where your great-grandfather used to live and one of them still had his cell phone---he was a missing Corrections Officer up hunting with his best friend also missing for two years.

"Unfortunately, the last photos taken from his camera was an image of a 12-year-old boy who called himself Lake. The FBI is investigating his disappearance and is now looking for you, too."

“Shit,” I said and started looking for a way out, an escape route. He grabbed my shoulders.

“You wouldn’t get ten miles, Lakan. You are on Reservation land, that gives us some warning before they can legally come after you. However, we both know that legalities mean nothing to the NSA and Black Ops.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth about the implant?” I demanded.

George looked at Rachel. She stared back defiantly. “We felt it was in the best interests of your mental health not to tell you.”

“There is one way you can remove it,” I said with a dry mouth and sweaty palms. I looked at the floor and at my feet. I couldn’t believe I was going to say what I had in mind. “You need to stop my heart. Once I’m dead, you can take it out and then resuscitate me.”

“Are you nuts?” Rachel burst out. “No way!”

“It’s the only way. You have cardiologists here and a full-fledged operating room. Then, the risks are minimal. If you were willing to implant a small shield around both sides of my heart, then this should be child’s play,” I argued. “I’m not crazy about the idea either but it’s the only viable way I can see to remove the tracer without doing open heart surgery. Besides, you might trigger the device doing it your way and kill me anyway.”

George slowly nodded his head. “We were aware of the possibility but were hoping your enhanced cells would prevent death from occurring. After all, it saved you when you were three.”

“I wouldn’t want to bet my life on it,” I said grimly knowing that it was exactly what I was doing. “When can you do this?”

“I already had everything set up for noon tomorrow. The doctor...wants to play tonight and frankly, we need him to be sufficiently in debt so that he has no reservations.”

“You’re bribing my doctor?” I gaped and he had the decency to flush.

“Well, we don’t have a consulting cardiologist or cardiac surgeon in our back pocket and although we do have ties to some Native American MDs, we thought we needed one we could...manipulate into keeping silent.”

“He agreed to do this?” I continued.

“We told him only that we had a patient who needed a pacemaker implanted.”

I was aghast in horror. “When were you planning to tell him the rest, when my chest was open?” He didn’t answer. “I insist you bring him in here and let me talk to him.”

George nodded and took out his cell phone, spoke into it and we waited. Twenty minutes later, Hotel Security escorted in a tall, lean man with gray hair, deep blue eyes, and casual attire. He had long, slender hands with well-cared for fingernails.

“I’m Dr. Rivers, you’re the patient?” He held out his hand to me and I shook it.

“Lake Strong,” I said and he seemed surprised at my age. “I’m nearly fifteen,” I added. “And it’s not a pacemaker in me.” I handed him my x-rays and he read them swiftly, his face stilling as he realized the implications of what he was seeing.

“What the hell!”

“My life is in your hands, Dr. Rivers. If you don’t take this thing out of me, I’ll not have a life, I’ll be spending it in a cell under government confinement just because I was an experiment.”

“What do you expect me to do with this?” He asked soberly.

“You have to stop my heart, remove the implant and then restart my heart,” I said calmly. “Any other intervention will send a lethal shock into my heart and fry it.” I went on to explain exactly how he needed to remove the bomb and he listened intently.

“Fourteen, you say? You know what your IQ is?”

“198,” I answered. That was one of the things I remember from the Hamilton estate. She had boasted to everyone that her grandson – me – had the IQ of a superior Einstein, that I took after her side of the family. Of course, I wasn’t sure if those were real memories or something fabricated by her programming of the last two years spent under her ‘care.’

“What kind of schooling have you had?” He continued and I couldn’t answer him. I could and did tell him what I knew of my past medical history. Somehow, George and his group had access to that, back to the car accident when I was three. He said, “your brain scans at that age were...catastrophic. How is it you recovered from what was clearly a fatal brain injury?”

“I’ll let George explain that one,” I said. “Now, I’m hungry and I have a hankering for a thick steak and mashed potatoes with gravy.” I nodded to Rachel and she picked up my hand, heading out the door and back to the elevator with Dr. Rivers in my wake.

“Wait a minute, Lake,” he said. “There’s a few things I need from you before I touch a scalpel to your chest.”

I stopped. “Doesn’t George have all that in my records?”

“No. And I wouldn’t be much of a surgeon if I took his word for it.” He turned to Redline and Little Bear. “I need a phlebotomist and a surgical tech in this OR of yours and I want to examine it before I do anything. You have a lab, too?”

George nodded. “I can show you the facility.” He entered the elevator and held the door open for us. I hesitated and Rachel pushed me inside. We rode in silence down to the seventh floor and it was a full-fledged hospital run by the Indian Health Service, staffed by Native Americans and serviced both natives and customers. Much as a cruise ship’s infirmary would operate.

I spent the afternoon being undressed, blood was drawn, vitals taken, EKGs and x-rays retaken, weighed, probed and gone over until not one inch of me remained untouched. Last, he ordered an MRI of my brain but not my chest, afraid that the metal inside would be affected by the magnetic machine.

During the few minutes between tests, a pretty young nurse brought me a light lunch of cheese sandwich, tomato soup, and coffee. I fell on it like a rabid wolf and when I begged for seconds, she brought me a repeat.

I sat on the edge of the bed hooked up to the machine that took my vitals and listened to the pre-op nurse explain the procedure. She warned me not to eat or drink anything after midnight and no alcohol. I rolled my eyes at that. I was nearly 15 and had no way to procure booze.

“Yes, well, boys your age are very creative at acquiring alcohol,” she said and I had to snort.

“You’re not much older than I am,” I retorted.

“I’m 22.”

“An old lady,” I teased. Her name tag said Penny Bright Star; she had copper skin and brown eyes, pretty dark brown hair cut short and curled over her ears. She was an RN.

“You’re here for pre-op? What kind of surgery?” She looked at my orders and her eyes widened. “Cardio – you have a bad heart?”

I knew what she was thinking – I didn't look anything like the typical heart patient, I was too healthy. Not thin, gray with sunken and hooded eyes. Fatigued and depressed.

"Will you be one of the nurses on tomorrow?" I asked with a lump in my throat. Hers might be the last friendly face I saw before I died.

She saw my fear and gave me a hug. "I'll be here before and after to take care of you, Blake," she promised. "You won't be alone." She smiled and told me she'd be back later.

I was ready to leave but Dr. Rivers suggested I spend the night resting. I suspected he wanted to make sure I didn't bolt.

Chapter Eighteen

Around midnight, I finally fell asleep and that was after Penny came in and took my vitals again. She joked with me, spent time doing the Times crossword – the Sunday edition that was supposed to be super hard and we finished it in ten minutes. After that, she gave me a sleeping pill.

It was a different nurse that woke me up early in the morning. She bustled in with a tray that she set down on the bed near my legs. "Good morning, Lakan," she said quietly. "I'm here to put in your IV."

Quickly and efficiently, she tied off my elbow, wiped it with an alcohol wipe and inserted a butterfly into my vein. I stiffened as she made ready to inject me with something. She'd called me 'Lakan' when I was registered only as 'Blake'.

"What are you giving me?" I demanded. My eyes searched for her ID card and she wore one around her neck but the picture didn't look like her.

"Just a pre-op sedative to relax you," she returned and stuck in the needle. I grabbed her hand and managed to knock the syringe away before she could press the plunger all the way. Even so, I felt drunk as I attempted to get out of bed. She reached down for the syringe and pushed me back.

I punched her; a wild swing that had no power yet it was enough to knock me out of bed into her. My weight caused her to woof as I knocked her air out. I felt soft breasts under my hands and the needle close by. I picked it up and pushed it into what flesh I could reach and slowly, she melted into me.

She had ridiculously long eyelashes over dark gray eyes, Brunette hair and lightly freckled skin. She looked Midwestern or even English but not Native American. I struggled to get up, whatever she had forced on me was strong enough to make me feel as if I were drunk or stoned.

I pushed myself off her, my hands sinking into soft flesh that felt more like dead rubber than a human female. I could see the call button hanging off the side of the bed but getting to it was like running a 50 K marathon on my knees. When my fumbling fingers finally reached it, I laid my head on my arm and rested my face on the cool floor. Only then did I push the emergency button. When someone finally arrived, all hell broke loose. They wouldn't let me get up until they checked me over and made sure I had no broken bones.

In halting, slurred speech I told them what had happened. In minutes, George arrived with the Head of Security who insisted on moving me to another room and posting an armed guard. One of them carried her off and I did not see her again.

The doctor gave me another shot and this one charged through my veins like bleach cleaning a spot. I was suddenly and instantly awake as the Narcan reversed the sedative she had

given me. My first words were to George, “Who was that woman? She was sent here to snatch me back, wasn’t she? Where is she now?”

I was in a VIP room on a wing that was open only to keycards, guarded by armed men and security equal to high-powered movie stars. George was at my side and the doctor who had treated my drugging had been replaced by Dr. Rivers.

“Her name is Sarah Coventry, she is an RN at a local hospital who was contacted by an anonymous man on the Internet; he offered her \$100,000 to kidnap you and bring you to an undisclosed location,” George answered. “She has a drug and gambling problem. \$100,000 would pay off her losses, school loans and then some.”

“How did she know who I was?” I asked.

“From the AMBER alerts. She recognized your face in the casinos, saw the posters and looked you up on the Internet. As soon as she did that, her query triggered an alert which went straight to the NSA. It wasn’t but hours later they had a team alerted from Chicago and heading out here.”

“She’s from Chicago?” I asked in confusion.

“No. She works in the hospital, Denver General. The NSA keeps files on everyone in the U.S. that’s on the grid – Social Security, credit cards, student loans, cell phones. All they needed to do was pull up a query on an RN with credit problems and twist the knife. If it wasn’t Ms. Coventry, it would have been someone else. At least they didn’t want you dead---the drug in both of your systems was propofol. Just enough to knock you out and keep you under for 8 hours.”

“Eight hours? So, they were taking me out of the country?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Maybe. Or the East Coast somewhere they couldn’t fly directly and needed to transport you on the ground.”

“Is there a plane waiting at the Airport?” I asked.

He looked pensive. “I don’t know. Uncle Redline has the security part of this deal.”

I looked for him but he wasn’t one of those in my room. Dr. Rivers was and I asked him if he was still going ahead with the operation. “Are you sure, Lake?”

I nodded. “Even more so, now. Now, they know I’m here in this state, this city, and this building. I have to disappear. Or die to get them off me. You said they sent a team from Chicago. Are they here yet?”

“The plane lands in an hour,” George said.

“Can you do this anywhere else? Like a clinic?” I asked Rivers.

“No. No matter how I plan this, I need a sterile environment and micro instruments or I have to crack open your chest. That requires a lengthy hospital stay and a long convalescence. You won’t be able to run from anything if I go that route,” he argued.

“I may not have a choice. You need 75 minutes’ minimum to do this?” At his nod, I continued. “You’d better get started, then. I’m sure the agents have some idea why I’m hiding out in a hospital.”

“All right.” Once he decided to go ahead, he was a whirlwind of action. In 10 minutes, both of us were prepped and ready for the OR, a different one than previously scheduled. I was happy to see that Penny was one of the nurses and George, too. Rachel was there in the waiting room and she gave me a soft kiss on the cheek near that silly hat they put on over your hair for surgery. I was in a gown covered with blankets, doped and groggy.

“I will see you when you wake up, Lakan,” she said. “Promise me.”

I knew what she meant. “We will not meet in the Spirit Realm, Rachel Little Bear,” I told her in a slurred voice. George did something to my arm and told me to count. I made it to three before the darkness took over.

My chest hurt. It felt as if I had the worst case of heartburn, nausea and sore ribs ever. Like I’d been pummeled by the entire scrimmage line at practice and then kicked by a mule. My eyes wandered over my surroundings. I didn’t recognize anything. I was in a small room with a curtain across it, a blue spotted one and in a hospital bed laid almost flat. The ceiling was tiled and a couple was painted with superheroes. Spiderman and Arrow, the Flash and Batman. There was a machine recording my vitals and a chair presently occupied by George who was dressed in scrubs. No window, no bathroom, no pretty girls to fawn over me.

“Did it work?” I asked in a voice that sounded as if it belonged to an 80-year-old frog.

“How do you feel?” He asked quietly.

“Sore. Like a mountain fell on me,” I rasped.

“We had to shock your heart twenty times to stop it,” he said soberly. “Finally, Dr. Rivers gave you a massive overdose of potassium chloride. Then, he was able to remove the tracer and the device. Starting it was a hell of a lot easier.” He hesitated. “Lakan, there was also a minute amount of an explosive in it, enough to blow your heart to hamburger along with half of your body and probably anyone within touching distance. These people don’t care who they would have killed besides you.”

“I thought as much,” I mumbled. “They would want to take me out if they suspected I might fall into the hands of terrorists or worse. Where am I?”

“Not the recovery suite,” he grinned. “This is one of those extra rooms we keep for the ... less privileged of our patients.”

“The bum’s room?” I mumbled as I fell back into anesthesia-induced sleep. I didn’t hear his answer.

Fingers running across my forehead pushing sweat-dampened hair back woke me. Perfume and clean-smelling clothes. Coconut shampoo and makeup. “George?” I mumbled and a girl’s voice laughed.

“I hope not.”

I opened my eyes to Rachel’s smiling face. Her eyes were suspiciously bright, almost as if she had been crying. George was gone.

“Where’s your boyfriend?” I mumbled and she flushed.

“Darren isn’t my boyfriend. He’s working at the airport, driving some VIPs around looking for the casino. How are you?”

“Been better.” I raised the bed and winced as the change in angle made my chest ache. My breathing roughened and I was grateful for the O2 pumping through the nasal cannula. Next, I tried to push aside the covers and slide my feet onto the floor. She made sounds of protest but I ignored her. The floor was cold. It seemed so far away from my head as if I were on a mountaintop and my feet in the valley. I swayed, caught myself on the bed railing and waited until my blood pressure leveled off. By the time I felt almost capable of moving, Rachel had placed new clothes on the bed for me.

Without comments or fuss, she helped me dress in underwear, new jeans, polo in black and teal blue, socks, boots, and down vest before she ran a comb through my hair. I was passive and let her treat me as if I were a life-size doll. Or mannequin.

“Lakan, are you with it?” She asked me, snapping her fingers in my face. I stared at her cross-eyed.

“I feel kind of loopy,” I admitted. “For a supposed Superman, drugs sure have a potent effect on me.”

“You’re still human. Mostly.” She helped me walk over to the chair and sat me down in it while she pulled out her old cell phone. “Uncle Pete, he’s dressed and awake. We’re ready to go. Are you bringing a wheelchair? He’s a little shaky on his feet.”

I didn’t hear his reply but her face blanched and she hung up. She grabbed my arm and put it on her shoulder as she stood me up. “Those agents? They’re in the hospital with warrants and US Marshals, Lake. They’re not intimidated by our Tribal Laws or immunity.”

“I can walk,” I said and managed to place my feet in front of each other. Exiting the room, we stood in a small hallway on what was an unglamorous wing of the hospital. Small rooms just down from the laundry and the morgue, easy access to freight elevators to the basement and the subway system.

I didn’t put all my weight on her but she carried more of me than my own legs. The only good thing was that the more I walked, the clearer headed I felt. The freight elevators were bare boxes with half-doors, half-gates so that we could see the walls of the shaft slide by; the floors passing with quick glimpses of the less desirable parts of the Casino Tower Complex. If we saw any people, it was the Service Personnel and they would not say anything to anyone.

It creaked and clanked its way to the bottom, opening on the lowest floor of the tower – Sub-basement IV. Carts of dirty linen lined both sides of the broad hallway and steam marked the entrance to the cleaning facility which serviced the hotel rooms, bathrooms and hospital floor. Towels, linen, bedding were all piled on trolleys. Dirtied, cleaned and folded. Mountains of white and colored stuff, enough to supply a city.

Rachel hurried past heading for a cross hallway and another set of doors that led to the subway system. Once through those, we were in a warren of tunnels that were lit only by small 13W LED bulbs every 10 feet making it just barely bright enough to walk. She seemed to know where she was going and I had no choice but to follow her.

Chapter Nineteen

She took me ever deeper until I was almost afraid that I would never see the sun again or I would step foot in Hades’ underworld. When we emerged in a vast cavern, I gaped in astonishment. I had read about the Crystal Cave in Mexico but its beauty was limited to those scientists who braved its dangers because of the extreme conditions of the cave---heat, maneuverability and the like. Plus, they had re-flooded it to preserve the spires. This cavern, although smaller was a comfortable 68° and there were open paths between the crystals. Not all of the were plain quartz, I could see topaz in golden yellow, rose quartz, and even amethyst. Crystals as large around as a full grown heavy man and in clusters resembling pipe organs. One particularly fine cluster looked like a purple aster only it was the size of a Uke’s tire. Any one of them would make us a millionaire yet I noticed no one had so much as broken off a piece nor picked up one of the shards.

To one of the Native Americans, this place clearly belonged to the World of the Dead and when we passed old burial platforms, I knew why it was a sacred place. The old ones laid to rest here had been placed in graves over a 1000 years before white men had stepped foot on this continent. I could tell by the archaic pottery and grave ornaments on the skeletons and by the patina on the bones.

“Who were they?” I whispered reverently and Rachel shrugged.

“Not Cheyenne or Arapahoe. These people came before us. We had our archaeologist examine them without disturbing the graves and they dated the pottery at around 1000 to 1200 B.C.E. Some even had clothing still on them – buckskin with painted geometric and floral designs that bore a resemblance to Egyptian motifs.”

“Did they do DNA?”

“No. The Tribal Council would not allow that. To touch the bones of our ancestors is taboo. A sacrilege. It does not hold the same connotation as the ‘chindi’ of the Navajo but braves have gone to war over burial grounds being disturbed.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“There is an entrance through here to the upper world in the desert where my brother has stored a vehicle, papers, cash and a map to the Interstate. We’ll leave the Reservation and head north to the border, lose ourselves in the woods and cross into Canada. There’s a big Reservation that straddles both countries and the natives will take us in until we can establish a new identity for you – a family, school, and papers.”

“I want to go home,” I said flatly.

“They’ll look for you there,” she shook her head.

“That’s the last place they’ll look. I don’t remember where it is, they made sure of that when they wiped my memories. So how can I go someplace I don’t know?”

“Why do you want to go back? What’s so important you’d risk everything?” She argued.

“I haven’t a clue, just an intuition that says I have to do it,” I returned. “With or without you.”

“I can’t go with you,” she said. “If I disappear, they’ll link me with you and it’ll make it too easy to spot you. I was going to take you to the car and then return home.”

“Was?” I asked.

“We left without meds, just hours after you died, were revived and had major surgery, Lakan. How far do you think you’ll get on your own? You’re barely moving under your own steam; I’ve been carrying you for the last hour.” She let go and my legs wobbled. I said down on the nearest stump which turned out to be a flat crystal of white quartz the size of a piano. It reflected the lights strung up on slender poles like Christmas garlands on a tree. I wondered where the power came from that fed all these lights. There had to be a substation somewhere.

I yawned, found myself slowly sinking down the side of the slab until my back was on it and my feet on the cavern floor. “I’ll just rest here a bit,” I mumbled and was vaguely aware that she had removed her jacket to use as a pillow under my head. She sat next to me, gathered my upper body against her and I fell asleep in minutes warmed by a very soft and fragrant girl.

“You got anything to eat or drink?” I asked her before I opened my eyes. My head was tucked on her chest, a surprisingly soft and sweet-scented pillow.

“Good morning to you, too,” she returned tartly.

“Yeah? How do you know what time it is?”

She flipped open her cell phone and held up her watch. “Indiglo.” I read both, she had them synchronized at 5:43 AM.

“Christ on a crutch,” I said. “I don’t get up until noon.”

“Really? I thought you were a country boy up with the chickens.”

“Chicken tenders maybe. So, is there anything to eat? Or drink? Did you think to grab anything before we took off on this jaunt?”

“No. I wasn’t exactly planning a picnic but an escape,” she snapped. “As for water, there’s the underground river that runs through here.”

I realized I had heard the soft susurrations of running water in the background as a subliminal noise that barely registered. I knew it was safe to drink but I wasn’t sure if I could get to it.

“Let me,” Rachel said, sighed and walked over under one of the lightbulbs. Once she was fifteen feet from the light, she disappeared from my sight. I strained and could barely make out a dim form moving through a forest of stalagmites. The harder I strained, the easier it was to discern shapes against her moving body. When my ears heard her gasp and then a loud splash, I leaped to my feet and ran for the now faint glimmer of water.

“Rachel!” I shouted and heard her call my name from further away. The river here was running at a good clip; my brain automatically calculated the distance from her voice and where I stood, the rate at which she was moving and the river.

I dove in, a shallow dive and the water was a sudden shock. It was ice cold. I knew within minutes, Rachel would be unable to move and would drown before hypothermia could take her. I swam furiously, my chest muscles pulling but I shoved the pain down and concentrated only on reaching her. The current helped, pushing me along until I was going at least a mile or two faster than the water.

“Rachel?” I called and got a mouthful of ice cold pure water that tasted curiously like Perrier. Ahead of me, I could just barely make out a white oval that I knew was her face.

My reaching hands grabbed her hair and such was her apathy that my snatch didn’t cause a reaction as I dragged her into my arms by a handful of her locks losing some in the process.

Next, I tried to swim for the banks but all I could grab were sheer rock walls as my ears picked up the sound of rapids. I kicked as hard as I could for the sides hoping to find something to grab onto but there was nothing.

We entered the stretch that contained the rapids and here, I could see the ghostly luminescence of the frothy water. Enough so that it highlighted the stalagmites causing the river to roil like an angry child in a tantrum. Not enough to keep me from bouncing off them or breaking bones, just enough to steer Rachel’s body away from the worst of the impacts. Thankfully, the river took us through that section fast and the next stretch was a soft curve of relatively quiet water that felt warmer, too. I was tired, achingly cold and hurting. I knew ribs were broken and suspected maybe an ankle or two.

I sensed something under my feet, held my breath and dropped to touch gravel. Once I knew the ground was underneath me, I lunged towards the sides of the river bank and felt it coming up under me. I stood up and waded through the quieter waters of a shoal and onto a gravel bank. Staggered as I climbed the shallow hill and set Rachel down. The cold was affecting my brain, it took me several minutes to associate the stuff underneath us as plants or grass. When I looked up, I saw stars but they didn’t look familiar until my tired, cold brain deduced that I was looking at the night sky through a collapsed cavern ceiling. Quickly, the sights, sounds and scents of the afterworld rushed in on me. I wanted only to lay down and let nature take over but I barely recognized that if I didn’t do something both of us would die here. If Rachel wasn’t already dead from the cold.

I shook her, tried to listen for her heartbeat but I was shivering too much myself.

“F-f-f fire,” I chattered. “G-g-g gotta –m-m-make f-f fire.” Dumbly, I stared around, broke off pieces of the brush that grew around nearly everywhere and then reached for the rocks scattered within reach. There was a lot of quartz, nuggets of what I suspected was gold but

finally, I found flint and a striker stone. Cold fingers, a desperate need and a body going into shock and hypothermia did not make starting a life-giving fire easy. Yet somehow, I managed.

The blaze was a beacon in the dark sinkhole. I could see the wall; the cave was as big as a Cathedral and had the same hushed atmosphere. The river curled around one side appearing from a large tunnel and disappearing down another.

Grass, brush, and small trees grew in the center where light could reach, an area about the size of a small banquet room. The trees were manzanita, juniper and cedar, the brush yaupon and mesquite. I saw prickly pear and Spanish dagger. Both could provide some antiseptic salve and had some food value. In fact, prickly pear jelly was a gourmet item I had enjoyed at Hamilton's.

I kept the fire small enough knowing that my fuel was limited. Once it was hot enough to make my ring rocks hiss, I set about digging a shallow pit just the size of a grave and deep enough to hold two bodies. It took a long time and I prayed the fire was enough to keep her alive until I finished. Once I judged it deep enough, I pushed the rocks into the bottom. Over that, I put handfuls of grass and needles, stripped off my clothes which had somehow dried on me. Then, I removed all of Rachel's things except for her underwear. Her skin was gray and had the texture of cold rubber. When my fingers lifted off of it, no blood rushed to fill the spot.

"Oh God, Rachel," I moaned in despair. "Please don't die."

I pushed her into the hole and lay on top of her, using one hand to arrange her damp and cold clothing over the top on the sticks I had used as joists. My body heat and the warmed stones under us slowly filled the hollow and the moisture from damp clothing made our breathing easier. It wasn't a sweat lodge but the closest thing to it that I could build.

I fell asleep unable to stay awake even though I feared she was too far gone. It was shivering that woke me. At first, I thought it was because the wet clothes had fallen exposing my back. Then, I realized it was underneath me and I was rising and falling as she breathed. I felt the flutter of her breath on my cheek.

"Rachel?" I asked raising myself off her by leaning on my elbows. She mumbled something. Her black eyes opened and she looked directly into mine. She kissed me. Rolled her body and arched her arms around my back, pressing into the dip above my hips. Her nails dug lightly into my skin and sent a lightning jab of pleasure through me. "Rachel?" It was a question for which I didn't have an answer but she did and she showed me a world of pleasure that was almost pain yet I would have endured torture to remain in it.

Chapter Twenty

In the morning, I watched her sleep. Her face in repose was beautiful and noble. With dark lashes, aquiline nose, soft lips and cheekbones to die for. Tawny skin the color of apricots but paler now.

Her body was long lines and lean; she was taller than me. The arch of her ribs as finely made as a thoroughbred racehorse, her breasts just large enough for my hands to cup. Her waist was tiny, her hips the hips of a runner with long, muscled legs and high insteps. She did not paint her toenails.

I was in wonder. I had masturbated in the privacy of my bathroom but I had been a virgin when I had met her. At least, so my programmed memories had inferred. Yet, I had not had 'the talk'. I mean, I knew how it worked and all, but I had no idea it was like that.

"Could you move over?" She asked with a grunt. "You're squashing me." I blushed and she stared at me in confusion. "What? What did I say?"

"You...you -," I stammered. "I -."

“Hey. You saved my life and all, Lakan. It’s just sex. I don’t love you or anything,” she snorted. “Now, get up so I can go pee.”

I moved and yiked as all my hurts took that moment to remind me that they were still there.

“What’s wrong?” She asked sharply, gently rolling out from under me.

“I broke some ribs,” I muttered. “And my ankle.”

“Crap.” She managed to extricate herself from the hole and stood over me. The view took my mind off my own pain. “How the hell did you get down there with me?”

“Desperation. I slid in on my belly.” She could see the shallow scratches and abrasions on my stomach, knees and hands.

“Can you raise your arms?”

I did and although it pulled on my ribs, I held back my groans as she helped me out of the grave. Her eyes roamed up and down my naked body as I knelt on the edge. She turned me on my butt and slid me over to the remains of my fire before she jumped back into the hole to retrieve our clothing.

Once dressed, I felt less vulnerable but agonized over her previous statement. Worried about it more than the aches in my body. Her words had pierced something in my chest.

“You and Darren?” I asked painfully as her fingers probed my swollen feet.

“We’re fuck buddies,” she said briefly. My eyes widened in shock. “What? You’ve never heard of it before?” Her eyes rounded in sudden comprehension. “Oh my God! Were you a virgin? I didn’t know!”

She pulled my foot. I didn’t have time to scream before I passed out. It was only for seconds, when I opened them again, I was flat on my back and she was wrapping both ankles with a torn T-shirt. “One is broken, the other’s just a bad sprain. Your ribs – they might be cracked but I’m not going to mess with them. I could puncture your lungs. Better to leave them alone if your breathing is fine. Is it?”

“Is what?” I asked dazedly.

“Your breathing.”

“I guess. I’m doing it, right?”

“Look, you’re not going to get all goofy and stuff because we did it?”

“Rachel –,” I said softly.

“Never mind, Lakan. Look, it was just a way to thank you, okay? No strings attached. It doesn’t mean anything.” She walked off looking angry.

“It means something to me,” I whispered. She came back minutes later, saying that she was cold and cuddled next to me, murmuring that I felt like a furnace. After a few more minutes, she repeated it, touching my back.

“Lakan, your body temperature is higher than normal---are you running a fever? You’re hot, burning up in fact.”

I nodded. “I can regulate my temperature,” I said slowly. “That’s how my clothes dried on me and yours didn’t.”

She handed me her jacket which was still a little damp. “Can you dry this?” I hugged it to my chest and steam pooled off the damp denim. In seconds, it was dry although still wrinkled. She giggled. “You’re almost as good as an iron. How do you feel? Hot?”

I assessed my aches and pains and wasn’t surprised to see that the minor scrapes and abrasions were gone or that my ankles merely sore as if I’d only strained them. My ribs didn’t hurt at all and I wasn’t any warmer than normal.

“We have to climb out of here,” I said. “Unless you know of another way out of here that doesn’t involve swimming.”

“This sinkhole wasn’t part of the cave system our people explored and mapped. I haven’t a clue where we are or where we’ll come out.” She stared up at the bright blue sky without a hint of clouds. Judging from the angle of the sun coming through the opening, I guessed it was about noon. My stomach grumbled reminding me that my last meal had been too long ago.

“Too bad I can’t fly,” I muttered walking over to a patch of pear. Carefully, I popped off several leaves without disturbing either the large thorns or the small hairs that caused painful itching. Laid them in the coals and burned them clean.

The skins roasted and broke apart exposing the cooked meat inside. Rachel and I ate just enough to quiet the craving in our bellies---too much pear would give us cramps and diarrhea. Not a good thing in an environment that was hot and dry.

The sugar hit me like a shot of caffeine. I could feel it zoom through my bloodstream and I wanted to use that energy to finish repairing my wounds. But, I held off knowing that I needed to keep it to climb out of here.

Rachel had coaxed the fire back to life and made a torch out of a large branch of yellow lechugilla. With it, she explored the floor of the sinkhole. I studied the sides and found that my vision was just as sharp in the available light as if the place was lit up by Klieg lights.

Walking over to the south side of the walls away from the underground river, I thought I could make it part of the way up, almost to the rim. It was the rim that defied my climbing knowledge, it hung under like the inverted lip of a bowl---meaning I would have to hang from my fingertips and flip my legs backward over my body, head and hands to land on what I hoped would be flat ground. For all I knew, it could be the sides of a cliff or a mountain. There was no way I could carry Rachel out without ropes, pitons or a harness.

Rather than call her over, I let her explore on her own guessing that there was no other way out. I flexed my hands, shoulders and legs, rubbed my palms through the sandy soil roughing them and thought how much easier this would be if I had sucker pads on my fingertips.

The route I picked out started with a large crack that had filled in over the years with fallen debris. I climbed over dead trees and branches, boulders and gravel, disturbing the bones of burros and deer.

It was easy climbing until the crack narrowed and became nearly vertical. Here, I had to ascend using the chimney technique, i.e. my back and feet holding me in like a cork. This required some great physical effort and my energy was quickly depleted before I’d reached the halfway mark.

It was then that I noticed how my fingertips stuck to the rock surface. On closer inspection, I could see fine depressions and pads where my fingerprints had been. I kicked off my shrunken tennis shoes and found the same sticky pads on my feet.

“Huh,” I said with a grin. “Spiderman has nothing on me.” With renewed enthusiasm, I continued climbing. Before I knew it, I was on the edge of the lip and my newly adaptive hands and feet carried me over with little effort.

Once on the outside of the rim, I stood up and looked around. Orange-tinted rose mountains and cliffs climbed and fell around me. Below me lay what looked like crumpled paper bags covered with the white icing of snow where wispy yellow grass poked their stem-heads through the blanket of white. Juniper trees dotted the landscape like green pimples on an acned surface. Desolate wasn’t the word to describe this landscape. Moonscape fits it better. I could see

for miles and yet, I saw nothing that would help us. I still had no clue where we were or even what state we were in.

“Rachel?” I called down and leaned over the edge of the rim to see her standing in the center nearly 150 feet below. She looked frightened.

“How did you get up there?” she asked.

“You ever read Spiderman comics?” I returned grinning.

“No. How are you going to get me up there?”

I looked around. No coil of rope fell out of the sky at my feet, no ladders lying around and I couldn't run down to the local Home Depot for supplies. I climbed down the mountain ridge to stand on the rocks at the base and spent the next hour searching for another entrance into the sinkhole. There wasn't one.

By the time I had returned to Rachel, she had wedged herself into the chimney nearly to the same spot where I'd been stuck. Her voice was hoarse from calling me, she was nearly in tears and her limbs were trembling from exertion.

I climbed down quickly, maneuvered under her and held her against me using my body as a ledge upon which she could rest.

“You okay?” I asked in genuine concern.

“I thought you'd left me,” she gasped.

“Rachel, I would never abandon you,” I promised. “Can you climb on my back and hold on?”

“Lakan, you can't carry me up, too! Your ribs!” she protested.

“Trust me,” I said softly and she nodded once. Climbing onto my shoulders took the last of her strength. I used the torn strips from my ankles to tie her wrists in front at my neck and bind her waist to mine.

Like a new parachutist bound to his instructor, I climbed back up to the rim. It wasn't easy. Every muscle screamed for release and my tissues demanded more fuel and less strain. With gasping breaths and trembling arms, I barely made it over the top and collapsed in a jumble of limbs. Hers and mine. There was a definite limit to what my body could take.

The sky darkened. I thought I felt soft lips on my neck before my face hit the rocks.

Chapter Twenty-One

I wasn't out for long. Rachel shook me awake and even had the foresight to carry water up with us. She'd found an old coke bottle and some cans washed in from somewhere and filled them from the river. She was more careful this time and had laid on her belly instead of trying to wade in. One she wasted pouring on my head and that was what had woken me. I came up sputtering and nearly pushed her off the top of the ridge.

“Hey! What did you do that for?” I complained and looked at my bare feet. Oops. I shouldn't have kicked off my shoes or left them down the sinkhole.

Rachel reached inside her shirt under her jacket and dangled the sneakers in front of my eyes. “You might be a super genius, Lake but you're D.U.M.B.”

I snatched them from her hands and slipped my feet back into the ratty canvas and leather ASICS. Hamilton might have been richer than Croesus but she shopped at Walmart and Payless.

“Ready?” I asked and stood up. Rachel did a 360° and tried to recognize where we were.

“Any ideas where this is?” I asked heading for the same track down that I used before.

“It looks like the moon's surface,” she marveled. “What a strange place. That mountain to the southeast might be Maglin's Table.”

“What’s that?” I slid down and held my hand out for Rachel but she managed on her own.

“Maglin’s Table is a flat plateau on the high desert, a part of the Badlands and the Buffalo Gap Grasslands. If that’s where we are, we’re surrounded by Federal Park and the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. It reaches all the way up to Alberta.”

“I thought we were in Colorado,” I said as I stepped down onto the small track that skirted the edge. I could see the scuff marks made by a hooved creature, most probably a burro. They were one of the few animals that could survive in these barren hills, washes, and arroyos. Further on, we came upon their manure but it was old and dried out.

“We were until you passed out on the plane. Then we took a detour to Uncle Redline’s and the Casino. We let you think you were still in Colorado in case you were thinking of ditching us.”

I didn’t say anything. Then, I suggested we follow the tracks as it would most certainly lead us to water. Eventually. We walked for a couple of hours heading towards the Mountain flat called Maglin’s Table where Rachel said the Snake River ran. The terrain changed more to a flat grassland with rolling hills and far off, I could see the massive brown lumps that dotted the land and became the humped coats of bison. They smelled us long before we smelled them and the bull lowered his head to paw slowly at the ground. His hooves dug furrows and sent clumps of dirt and withered grass flying behind him. Rachel stomped and began singing a chant.

*Ta tanka ho
Yo hey hey ho
Ta tanka ho
Yo hey hey ho.*

I understood her words, that she was calling the buffalo and honoring him. I was uneasy with her actions; he was over two tons of angry testosterone on the hoof. And he had big horns.

“Uh, Rachel, I don’t think he likes your singing,” I mumbled and just as the bull charged, I scooped her up and ran. Not back away from them but towards the bull which made two things happen. Rachel started screaming and the bull stopped in confusion as the puny two-legged creature---me---doubled in size as it came for him.

He threw up his tail, bellowed and swiveled around in a rollback that would have made a prize reining horse jealous. Within seconds, the herd was gone in a cloud of dust and flying divots.

I set her down and she yelled at me in Abenaki not Siouan but I understood that, too. My eyes widened. Some of the things she called me and promised to do were highly inventive. I knew why braves would rather die than be given over to the women of the tribe. I waited politely until she was done and then when after the fleeing buffalo.

Cameron was livid. He stood in Hamilton’s office and screamed at her for losing the boy. Hamilton took his abuse without complaint. When he finally wound down, she nodded in agreement. “You’re right, Dr. Cameron. I put too much faith in my people’s programming. He was fine until the last session. Have you had any sign of the tracer?”

“A short signal for about ten seconds. Just enough to trace it to Oklahoma. But it was...odd,” he admitted.

“Odd?”

“It disappeared 10 feet into the air.”

“An airplane? Did they take him in an airplane? Why would that make the signal disappear?”

“There’s only three reasons, Director,” Cameron shrugged. “He’s underground, they removed it surgically and killed him or he’s dead.”

“I was under the impression you removed the failsafe option,” she said her voice deadly quiet. The door to her office opened and the man known as Chase entered without any announcement. Hamilton’s personal assistant hovered anxiously in the background. He looked as if he expected a firing squad for allowing in the NSA director.

“Shut the door, Jason,” she said curtly as Chase made himself comfortable. He was a tall man, handsome with cold eyes so gray that they appeared colorless.

“Director,” he greeted. “Dr. Cameron, I hear you’ve lost something that I’m interested in.”

“Oh, what would that be?” She growled.

“The boy you called your grandson,” he prompted. “The one you’ve kept under wraps for the last two years.”

“Why do you want him?” Cameron asked. “He’s just a fifteen-year-old boy.”

Chase threw down a vanilla folder and it slid on the Director’s desk to reveal patents and blueprints from the US Patent Office, micro circuitry designs of computer processors, Wi-Fi routers and solar cells well beyond modern models out on the world market. All of them had been applied for and awarded to a company called Lake Enterprises LLC.

“Took a bit of digging but we’ve traced the ownership of Lake Enterprises LLC to an offshore bank account used by the CIA to front Black Ops back in the 90s, Director. Operations you were well aware of and in charge of.”

“I wasn’t with the agency then,” she countered.

“No, but your husband was.”

She snorted. “I had nothing to do with his covert activities.”

“Really? You used agents to spy on him and your son’s love affairs. That’s how you found out about him and Special Agent Strong.”

“What do you want, Chase?” She snapped slapping the folder, patents, applications and blueprints onto the floor.

He leaned forward. “I want the boy, his medical records and everything you have on him. From both of you. I want where he was when he escaped, his last known whereabouts and the last recorded coordinates of his trace.”

“Then what?” Dr. Cameron asked. “Do I get to continue my research on him?”

“Just what did you expect from him, doctor? A super soldier? Genius? Superhero? Just what is this child capable of doing or growing into?”

Cameron looked bleak. “That’s just it, Chase. I have no idea. He fooled me for thirteen years. I have no clue what he’s capable of.”

Hamilton’s cell buzzed and she answered it, her face remaining hard but her eyes burned with a brilliant flare. “He was spotted in a casino on the reservation in Oklahoma by a nurse after seeing an AMBER alert. She called it in and was offered \$100,000 to kidnap him. A team is on its way out from Chicago.”

“Give me the address of the nurse, her name, the casino and whatever else you have,” Chase ordered flinging himself up out of the chair. He was headed out the door as he threw over his shoulder, “Dr. Cameron, you’re coming with me.”

Cameron looked at the Director but followed the agent out of the CIA building where an unmarked black SUV with blacked out windows and a driver waited. Both got in the back and Chase gave orders to drive to the airport on base where a Learjet was waiting. Twenty minutes saw them in the air with a team of agents already aboard.

Chase did not hand out any briefing folders and spent most of the flight napping. He opened his eyes exactly 30 seconds before the pilot announced that they were landing at the Pine Ridge Airport. Cameron wasn't surprised to note that none of these men were of the group he used to track and hunt the boy two years earlier.

He cleared his throat. "You know this kid is Indian, right? He's an expert tracker and knows to hide his trail."

"Native American, doctor. We must be politically correct. Besides, I thought your programmers wiped out all his memories?"

"We did. Somehow, his brain is rewiring itself and negating that programming."

"He's 14, has no money, hasn't used Dir. Hamilton's credit card," Chase shrugged. "He has limited resources."

"Yeah? Then, how the hell did he get from Virginia and D.C. to Oklahoma and on a plane to the Dakotas?"

"He hitched a ride," Chase said slowly.

"Our computer analyzed his estimated arrival between sightings and relayed that it was physically impossible unless he took a USAF jet, had a police escort to clear the roads and a helicopter to drop him out of the hatch. Last I knew, you couldn't do more than 100mph on Interstates."

"Really? What's your explanation?" Chase sat up, his eyes curiously bright. "Does he twist time? Open a dimensional portal? Run as fast as the Flash?"

"Sneer all you want, Chase. He can open a rift; he calls it the Yellow Realm. I saw it once when he escaped us at the Clinic. He opened a door and stepped through. He and his great-grandfather. When he did that, no tracer signal got through. He vanished."

"Why didn't he use this trick to escape from your...custody in D.C.?"

Cameron shrugged. "We don't know. We tried to get him to do it while wired but he couldn't. Said he didn't remember how and we couldn't replicate the trigger. We couldn't even recognize the activity of his brain. When we did a PET scan, the thermal image showed red across the screen. All parts of his brain firing at the same time and at an incredible rate. If we had a computer with half his capacity, I could solve every mystery on earth."

"So you think this kid is a...god?"

"He very well could be," Cameron said bluntly.

"Then we must be the *God Slayers*."

The wheels touched down smoothly and Chase was up, out of his seat and heading for the door before the pilot's announcement of 'you have arrived.'

Chapter Twenty-Two

Not surprisingly, the four-man team that boarded the plane in Chicago and de-planed at the small Indian Run Airport were tough men, two of which Cameron would have recognized. One was Andrews and the other Aiken who had been sent for his tracking skills. Because there had been an AMBER alert put out on the boy, the FBI also had a team on the way from Bismarck, their main office in the Dakotas. Aiken and his team had those credentials as well as their official government ones.

They were met at the terminal by a limo driver who was Native American but wore jeans, t-shirt, and Carhart jacket. He wore a battered black Stetson and fancy ropers.

“I’m Darren White Deer. I’ll be taking you to the casino and your hotel.”

“No,” Aiken said flatly. “We want to go to the hospital.”

“The hospital is in the Casino,” Darren shrugged. “So we’re going to the same place. Get in.”

Three of the men sat in the back and one in the front passenger seat. Darren frowned, but said nothing other than, ‘seat belts’.

All five of them buckled up and he drove out of the airport and back towards the city. They could see the massive towers that seen in profile against the Black Hills looked like a drawn bow. Though not excessively high, the towers were larger than Aiken expected for such an out of the way place.

“What brings people all the way out here to gamble?” he asked curiously.

“No tax on the winnings and we bank it here where the IRS can’t touch it,” White Deer said. “You’d be surprised at what a draw that is.”

“The IRS doesn’t step in and freeze your assets?” One of the other agents asked.

White Deer snorted. “They’ve tried but according to one of your treaties way back when, we were given the right to manage our lands, monies and assets free from Government control. Your FBI and IRS can walk on this land but are only visiting tourists. Nothing more. You are all subject to our laws and not the other way around.”

“Until you step foot outside your reservation,” Aiken smiled and Darren met his gaze with the look that Custer had seen and dismissed to his regret. White Deer did not say another word as he took them on a scenic tour around the city avoiding the daily gridlock that occurred at lunchtime and prolonged the usual 15-minute drive to half an hour.

Anderson tried to tip him when he pulled up at the front arch of the casino entrance. He went around to the trunk and placed all four bags on the first step.

“It’s part of the Casino’s service, man,” White Deer said and finished with ‘assholes’ in Abenaki. “That’s good luck in my language.” He drove off around the block and parked the limo in the lot reserved for drivers.

The four men stepped inside the lobby and two commented that it was as fancy as Trump Plaza, the women as exotic as Las Vegas. They were met by the Manager who brought them through to the Hotel’s front desk where their rooms were confirmed. 9007 and 9009, on the ninth floor.

Going up in the elevator, Aiken was first out onto the hallway and in the suite. Andrews unpacked and went over the three rooms searching for any recording or listening devices. When he was done, he did the second set of rooms and pronounced both clean. Only then did Aiken outline his plans. He sent Andrews and Ferguson to find the nurse, Sarah Coventry, break in and search her hotel room while he and Martin would check out the hospital. They left the room with electronic key cards safely tucked away in their suit pockets.

The hospital was two floors below the hotel, on the entire seventh floor. The tower had four elevators dedicated solely to its use but every elevator in the complex had a button marked ‘H’,

Aiken was impressed, the entrance looked like any first-rate emergency center yet it wasn’t frantically busy such as Chicago Memorial which treated dozens of GSWs every day.

There was a varied mix of Caucasians, Afro-Americans and Native Americans in the waiting room but most of the staff were Hispanic or Indian. A pretty girl in nurse's scrubs with chocolate eyes and feathery black hair cut in a pixie asked if she could help them.

Aiken pulled out his wallet to expose his FBI credentials. "Special Agent John Tighe," he said. "This is my partner, Special Agent Edward Herr. We're here because someone reported a missing juvenile."

"Here? In the hospital?" she asked and Aiken read her nametag.

"You're Penny Bright Star," he smiled. "Pretty name, Penny. Yes, a nurse reported seeing the child."

"Do you know this nurse's name?"

"Sarah Coventry."

She ran it through her computer and frowned. "Sorry. We don't have a Sarah Coventry working here."

"She's a guest at the hotel," Aiken said.

"Sorry. I can't access the hotel or casino computers. What's the boy's name and why would she spot him here? Was he in an accident?"

"That's what we need to discuss with Ms. Coventry."

"His name?"

"His name is Lake Hamilton. And I didn't say anything about him being male or female, Ms. Bright Star."

She flushed. "I just assumed the child was a boy. I heard the AMBER alert, too. It's been playing on all the TVs since he's the grandson of the President. How did he escape the Secret Service agents assigned to protect him?"

Aiken looked pissed. "He wasn't being watched by Secret Service, he was under the protection of his grandmother, Director Hamilton."

"She wasn't too careful about his safety, was she?" Penny retorted smartly.

Aiken said, "I want a list of your ORs and any surgeries scheduled today and tomorrow."

"You'll have to ask the DON for that," Bright Star said. "I can't give out any information on patients. HIPAA you know."

"We can get warrants," he threatened and she smiled sweetly.

"Warrants stop being legal the minute you crossed onto Reservation land." She rose from behind the counter and disappeared down the hallway towards the cubicles for examining patients.

Aiken shrugged, pulled the computer monitor around and stared at the screen saver that held a message in what he assumed was her native language. He copied it into the web browser and translated. "It says 'go home, assholes'," he grinned. "Not good luck."

They wandered on the floor and checked out every room allowed access and found no trace of the boy. Of the four ORs, two were in use and neither held a 14-year-old boy. Aiken double checked by flashing his badge to the people anxiously pacing in the waiting rooms.

One group were the children of an 80-year-old who had slipped and fallen getting out of his car in the parking lot of a grocery store. He was in for repair of a broken hip. The other couple was parents of a ten-year-old native girl who had fractured her arm falling off a bucking horse.

The parents told him that the other two surgical suites had been empty since Monday, two days earlier and that it had been used for the victim of a hit and run that did not survive. A drunk

school teacher from Boston who had left the casino to wander downtown looking for sex and found more than she had bargained for.

Aiken was amazed at the frankness of these people's information but suspected fear and adrenalin had loosened their tongues. That and the fake Federal IDs. Most people didn't question the authority behind the FBI badge, they just assumed and went on from there where police credentials were ignored or disrespected. Of course, most of those he talked to were Caucasians and had an innate respect for the badge.

By the time Aiken and Martin had searched the entire seventh floor, Ferguson and Andrews had returned and met them in the hospital cafeteria.

"Her things are still in her room but the desk clerk said she checked out last night. Her reservations state that she booked the room for the weekend, she has tickets open to Denver on Sunday afternoon. We pulled her credit report and phone records from her cell and the room. She called the Chicago office to report the sighting. Someone intercepted her call and called back, offering her \$100K to kidnap the boy."

"One of Chase's, I assume. Where is she supposed to bring him?" Aiken questioned.

"Don't know. She must have her cell phone. It would be on there but I haven't been able to trace that call or cell tower," Martin returned. "Why are we here, anyway? Is the kid sick, hurt, what? I saw a photo of him, he looks healthy enough."

Aiken had deliberately kept some information from the team. Now, he outlined the boy's unique makeup; his relationship and the tracer in his chest. He did not disclose the exact nature of the device or that it was explosive. He fully expected to hear a bomb go off inside the hospital.

What he heard instead and it made him jump, was his cell phone vibrate in his pocket. He answered it; the call came not from Cameron but Dr. Hamilton herself. She brought him up to date on the situation and warned him not to contact Dr. Cameron as he was with Agent Chase and they were searching for Lake.

"There's no sign he's been here although I caught a nurse lying to me," he returned. "And the other nurse has disappeared."

"She was reported boarding a commercial flight to Denver an hour ago," Hamilton said. "I have an agent in place ready to pick her up. Find my grandson before Chase does," she hissed and hung up.

Aiken sighed and wondered who had arranged for the woman to disappear. He would bet his eyeteeth that she wasn't on the plane. "Search the hospital again," he decided. "We're looking for the nurse, Coventry." He passed around his cell phone with the image of the fair skinned brunette with gray eyes. She was pretty in English peaches and cream way yet her eyes contained a defeated look as if life had beaten her down. Aiken knew she was deep in debt; her car repossessed, her apartment in the process of eviction and her credit cards maxed out. She was living paycheck to paycheck and taking extra shifts anywhere she could to catch up. Yet, she still gambled. The one hundred K would have pulled her up and out of the hole she'd dug herself. If she could bear to use the money to pay off her obligations instead of gambling it into a bigger stake.

They found her in a semi-private room on an IV drip that was keeping her out. She had a large bruise on her face and a black eye. Aiken removed the IV and put Andrews outside the door while he dressed her lax body, lifted her into a wheelchair and casually removed her from the seventh floor to their own rooms. No one noticed or made comments, the staff were busy with the influx of dozens of vomiting tourists.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Aiken filled the tub with cold water and sent two of the men to collect ice cubes. He cranked the air-conditioning on and slid the unconscious woman into the tub, tying her upright so that she only had her feet in the water.

Slapping her face, he attempted to wake her but it was more than an hour before she stirred with a groan. She opened bloodshot eyes staring in confusion at the bathroom and the agents standing over her.

“Ms. Coventry,” Aiken said. “Where’s the boy?”

She sputtered already attempting to deny when Aiken slapped her. Her skin instantly reddened showing the imprint of his palm. She cried and folded, begging him not to hurt her, she needed the money but didn’t remember what had happened after she had found the boy in the lobby and the hospital.

“He punched you?” Aiken prompted.

“I don’t remember,” she wailed. “I swear. I don’t even know where I am.”

“You’re still in the Casino Complex, Ms. Coventry. Tell me everything you can remember.” She spilled her guts, shivering as the water and ice dropped her temperature. Aiken stared at her and she became paler than he thought possible as she realized that her life was measured in seconds.

“Please,” she begged. “Please don’t kill me!”

Aiken smiled. “You’re lucky we’re on reservation land, Ms. Coventry and that I have no contacts here to help me dispose of a body. You’re scheduled on a plane for Sunday afternoon. You better be on it or you’ll just be another set of coyote gnawed bones out in the desert.”

“Anything,” she promised. “I’ll do anything to make the flight.”

Aiken nodded to Andrews who cut her down and helped her over to the toilet where she rubbed the circulation back into her hands and feet. Her toes were shriveled and white; Aiken suspected she might have lost a few to frostbite.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to stay here until dark before we can escort you to the airport, Sarah. In the meantime, I’m sure you can... entertain my men.”

She looked terrified but nodded fractionally as a grinning Ferguson dragged her off to one of the bedrooms. Minutes later, they heard the muffled sound of a woman screaming and sobbing and the grunts of the agent as he raped her. Only Aiken abstained and when the last man had finished, he shook his head at Aiken’s questioning look.

He entered the bedroom to stare down at the nurse. She was bruised and bloody. Her breasts had been bitten, one nipple nearly tore off and hanging by a thin strip of tissue. She was bleeding between the legs and semen glittered on her pale skin from her mouth to her knees. None of them had used a condom and when he rolled her over, he saw that she had been sodomized. His fingers reached for the pulse in her neck and it came faintly. It would not be long before it faded completely.

“Martin, get rid of the body,” he ordered as if telling the man to take out the trash.

“Dump it in the desert?”

“No. Wait until dark, dress her, take her up to the roof and push her off. Given her credit history and debt problems, the authorities will assume she jumped.” He turned around and went into the kitchenette where he perused the available foodstuffs before making sandwiches. Once he had eaten, he called Chicago and the phone drop relayed his signal to Hamilton’s private encrypted line. He reported all the information he had to the recorder and waited for his return instructions. When it came, he was alarmed. Chase was on his way out there with his team and

aware of their arrival. He told Andrews to get rid of Coventry's body by ditching it in the nearest laundry chute and vacating the hotel. His instructions were to return to the airport, track Chase and his men, let them find the boy and then snatch him back. Aikens didn't like the idea but he knew better than to argue against Hamilton.

The limo driver was a different man; this one was a Pakistani who spoke limited English but enough to understand 'car rental' and 'airport'. He rented a Jeep SUV and waited for Chase's private Lear jet to touch down. Watching from their vehicle in the long-term parking lot, they saw the jet come in and make a graceful landing before taxiing to the VIP terminal.

The new group had a short walk over to the car lot where Chase picked up a large SUV. One of the younger agents carried the luggage and stored it in the back cargo compartment. Dr. Cameron was seated between the two agents in the back seat while Chase took the passenger side. Aiken recognized the driver; he was a discharged SF sergeant from Iraq and they knew each other, and each would know why the other agent was there. Needless to say, Aiken did not want Chase or the driver to spot them.

They watched the SUV drive off and followed at a discrete distance although tailing them wasn't necessary yet---Aiken knew where they were going.

Surprisingly, the SUV did not go to the casino or the hospital entrance but downtown near the subway system entrance. Two men exited the vehicle and disappeared down the stairs as the SUV drove off and Aiken watched as they proceeded to the gambling tower where they had already allowed the valet to park the car. Each man went around and picked up the small bag in the back with the exception of Cameron. They entered the casino. Aiken sent in Martin as he was unknown to them and would not arouse suspicion. He was dressed in a flamboyant tourist outfit, beachcombers and Hawaiian T-shirt, sunglasses and a deep tan. Aiken gave him instructions to follow them only to the elevator and observe which floor button they punched but not to approach them or make eye contact. Chase stepped into the elevator and went up to the eleventh floor where the management offices of the casino were situated. His team kept the doctor between them as he flashed his credentials to the good-looking secretary who sat at an equally expensive looking desk just outside the lobby of the security offices. The name on the door read Nathan Pete which was not a Sioux name but Navajo. The girl looked up with a professional smile.

"May I help you?" She did not seem impressed at his badge or his authority.

Chase said, "I want to speak to Peter Redline Otseno."

"Mr. Otseno is on his way to Pine Ridge Reservation Tribal Council, Mr. Chase," she smiled brightly. "Perhaps I can assist you?"

"Where is Lake Hamilton?" He snapped and she jerked back as his spit hit her in the face.

"Lake what? There is no Lake Hamilton around here."

"Not what, who. Lakan Strong Hamilton, a runaway you were seen harboring. I can have you all arrested and jailed for kidnapping the president's grandson."

"This isn't your land," she returned. "And your laws don't mean squat here."

"Really? You think your tribal regulations will stand in the way of Homeland Security and the Secret Service? Just try me," he barked. "I want access to your video cameras, guest lists and hospital records."

The door to the Security Offices opened and a tall man stepped out dressed in a finely cut three-piece suit with a string tie. Instinctively, all of them went backward as this individual bore a decided resemblance to the great Indian Chief Crazy Horse. "Can I help you, gentlemen? Rosa, some coffee please," he smiled at the girl.

"I'm not thirsty," Chase snapped and the security man looked at him without any change on his impassive face.

"The coffee is for me."

"We know you have Lakan Hamilton," Chase said. "He was seen exiting this casino and in the company of Peter Otseno. Where is he?"

"I have no clue," Nathan Pete shrugged. "I just flew in from a conference in Las Vegas with the Gambling Commission. The Governor was there; shall I call him to confirm my whereabouts for you?"

Chase fumed. "Where is Pete Otseno?"

"Tribal Council Conference. You're welcome to search the casino," Pete shrugged. "You can see the guest lists."

"The hospital?"

"That too. We have nothing to hide. Rosa, print out what Agent Chase requested," the Native American ordered.

"Before I get your coffee, Mr. Pete?" She asked sweetly as she stood up.

"Why no," he cracked a smile and his teeth were white and perfect. "I would prefer a cup from the Starbucks." She scurried off and all of them watched her trim rear end in the tight linen skirt. Dr. Cameron snorted. Nathan Pete gave him a curious look. "You have something to add, Agent -?"

"Dr. Cameron," he answered. He leaned forward and got in the Security Manager's face. "I am the one who implanted the tracking chip in the boy, Chief. And my instruments state unequivocally that he was here in this building. Your people might have removed the tracer but he was marked with no less than four such markers, one of which is a radioactive isotope that is unmistakable. We know he's here."

Nathan Pete licked his lips but his face remained impassive. He spread his hands. "Go ahead and search. No one here will stop you. All I ask is that you don't disturb the guests."

Chase took his team and started at the first floor systematically working his way up. Cameron and one of the other agents were going over the computer lists when the doctor saw the guest names in the hotel. He circled it and told the Agent to check room 12503. Chase answered on his cell phone. "Doctor?"

"Yes," Cameron replied.

"No, Dr. Cameron. What do you want?" Chase was short, he was frustrated and wanted to take it out on someone.

"Room 12503 is a Dr. Rivers. He's a pretty famous cardiologist and surgeon from Boston General. If they took out the boy's implant, a doctor such as he would be the one to do it. If he gambles – well, you get the picture." Chase didn't say goodbye, he simply hung up as the pair headed for the twelfth floor and the cardiac surgeon's room.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chase waited 30 seconds for a reply after he knocked on the surgeon's door. When it was not answered, he nodded to the Sergeant who took a slim card from his vest pocket and slid it through the digital keypad. It hummed, clicked and the light turned green as the card opened River's lock.

It was a suite, probably comped although the heart surgeon surely made enough money to afford the high-end hotel room. It had a balcony with French doors and one of his men went to check if the doctor was hiding out on it.

The room was obsessively neat and no sign of anyone having been staying in it. They opened drawers, closets and checked the drains in the sink, tub, and kitchenette. Even the mini-bar was fully stocked.

"It's a ringer," Cameron said. "They knew we were coming and changed the reservation list to an open room."

"Check the rooms on either side and one floor lower," Chase ordered but Cameron stopped him with a terse word as he activated his chemical sniffer. Designed to ferret out minute traces of harmful radioactive waves, he had adapted it to seek out and triangulate certain other isotopes. It worked very much like a microchip worked on a dog.

"He's been here but not in this room," Cameron said. "The concentration is greater near the elevator."

"The Penthouse?"

Cameron walked over to the Penthouse Elevator and held the scanner to the doors. He got a strong reading. "We can't access the Penthouse from here, we have to get it from the lobby."

"What about the stairs?" Chase asked. They were locked and did not go to that floor from the 12th. By the time they had returned to the lobby and been admitted into the Penthouse elevator, a half hour had passed. His two men stationed in the lobby reported that guests had come and gone but none were the doctor, Otseno or the boy. It took some threatening and blustering before Security would allow them entry to a private residence but Chase had come prepared with a Federal warrant even though it wasn't quite legal on reservation land. Someone had called the Secret Service and to Chase's annoyance, agents were on the way to the casino to investigate the disappearance of a presidential grandson no one had previously heard of or reported.

"We have to be out of here before the Secret Service arrives," he told his men. "Dir. Hamilton hasn't told her husband that the boy is his grandson."

"With or without the boy?" one asked and Chase snarled it had better be with or they would all be dog meat.

They searched the penthouse down to the cupboards and the laundry chute. The most that Cameron could state was that he had been there and suggested that they try in the subway system for further traces of him.

Without a word to the management, they left the hotel and followed the doctor as he retraced Lakan's trail underground.

I

We followed the buffalo although rightly they were bison. Their trail was easy, they left behind a huge cloud of dust. They didn't run far, perhaps a quarter of a mile before they settled down and started grazing again.

This time, as I approached the lead bull raised his head to stare at me and snorted softly. He pawed the ground but he was more curious than angry. Slowly, I approached him while Rachel called dire warnings behind me. I think I was more surprised than she when the bison let me touch his shoulder. In my head came the image of me scratching the area nearest his hump where ticks had lodged, driving him mad with itching.

I dug in my nails, and found the hard scabby lumps, removing them. The harder I scratched, the more the bull leaned into me and grunted his relief. I climbed on his back and he reached around with his massive horned head to sniff at my feet. Grumbled and lazily twitched his tail. Waited for me. I had to swallow nausea in my throat at the rank smell of him, it was worse than a wet dog and heavier than pig manure.

“Rachel,” I called softly. “Come up slow.” I patted his shoulder as he watched curiously but only continued to switch his tail and stomp at green bottle flies.

Reaching down, I took her hand as she swung her leg over his back. She settled herself against me and held onto my waist. She smelled like a girl and I drew in an appreciative lungful.

“If Crazy Horse could see us now,” she giggled. “No one would believe this.”

“They might when we ride into town,” I grinned and directed Buffalo Hump to head for the nearest civilization. Riding him was more like sitting on a camel and he was wider than was comfortable for human legs but he covered ground faster and more efficiently than we could travel.

The herd milled around puzzled at our scent but eventually followed the bull. We traveled for several hours heading east and hit a drift fence that channeled us towards a wash that became a creek and finally a river that Rachel said was the Snake.

Here along its banks, we saw signs of occupation. Coke cans and campfire rings, places where canoes and white water rafts had been dragged ashore.

I slid off Buffalo Hump before he attempted to cross and helped Rachel down. Both of us were leg sore, stinky and thirsty. Rachel cautioned me against drinking straight from the river. I told her that I guessed that it would be full of bacteria from animal feces and heavy minerals not intended for human consumption. She showed me how to dig a hole in the sand and let water filter in, cleaning most of the dangerous stuff out. We used the coke cans to scoop out the clean water and drink.

The bull and the herd spread out along the banks and grazed after drinking. I gagged as a few dumped in the water and turds floated lazily past us.

Hunger pains gripped my stomach and wistfully, I thought of the backpack lost in the cave. It would have had candy bars and sandwiches in it.

“Hungry?” Rachel asked. “I recognize that look on your face.”

“What look?”

“The one that boys have when they see something they want and can’t have it.” She walked off and began scanning the ground.

“What are you doing, Rachel?”

“Looking for something to eat,” she said. Before too long, she bent over and dug up a plant throwing it at me. Others followed. Amole. Agarita berries and sump weed. I knew all the names of the plants but didn’t know how I knew them. When she had an armful, she pulled off her t-shirt and piled them in the material carrying it back to me. After that, she scrounged for cow patties, picking only the driest. Once I realized what she was doing, I joined her.

There weren’t any trees out here to start a fire so we made do with what the pioneers used. She even had the foresight to find flint and striker stone. Within a few minutes, she had a merry little blaze going. Using the coke can, she boiled up a sort of tea and roasted mesquite beans. We dined on plants that most people would have considered weeds and it was just enough to satisfy the hunger pangs.

Next, she waded into a shallow cove of the river and washed off. I marveled that she could endure the cold until I remembered that she was counting on my super metabolism to warm her up. When she flung water at me, I ducked and gaped at the flopping fish that lay at my feet.

“Lakan, wake up,” she snapped. I grabbed the salmon and whacked its head on the nearest rock killing it. Then it was my job to gut and clean it. Rachel was a mean fisherman. She

tickled two salmon and a trio of catfish that we cooked for later. Bellies full, we gathered up our leftovers, doused the fire and followed the river downstream.

One moment we were alone on the wild grasslands surrounded by bison, the river and lonely cottonwoods struggling to grow and the next, we were on the edges of a camp with boy scouts, tents, ATVs, and teepees.

Most of the kids were around 14 and all boys. There was a mix of white, black and Hispanic. The Boy Scout leaders were two middle-aged white men who looked fit, tanned and perplexed when we walked into camp.

“Where did you two come from?” The older one had gray hair and brown eyes, his accent was east coast. “Are you lost from another group?” He stared at our bedraggled clothing, my shoes were worn almost to uselessness and lack of outerwear.

Rachel burst into tears and blubbered about falling off her whitewater craft, me diving in to save her and both of us being separated from our party. She told them our names, Blake, and Rachel and that our cell phones had gone to the bottom of the river. She also said that our families were on the reservation.

Both men bundled us into blankets, brought us to the tent, plied us with food, coffee, and first aid. I let them baby me; it felt good to just lay back and pretend I was helpless. Besides, I was really hungry and the taste of hamburgers, hot dogs, and chips satisfied the hole in my belly more than weeds and fish.

The group leader’s name was Rudy Scolari and he wanted to call the police on his cell phone. Rachel convinced him to call the Tribal Council instead of 911 as the only authority recognized on Reservation land was the Indian Police. The last thing we wanted to do was let the authorities know where we were or that we’d surfaced.

Bellies full, warm and comfortable, I finally asked a question. “Where are we?”

Scolari looked puzzled. “Badlands National Park.”

“No,” I shook my head. “What state?”

Now, he looked alarmed. “Did you hit your head? What’s your name? Today’s date? Who’s the president?”

“I’m fine,” I answered patiently. “We were on the Snake and probably crossed a border. We started our trip near Bennett’s Mountain.”

“Holy crap,” Scolari said. “That’s nearly a hundred miles north of here. You’re in southern Idaho, not the Dakotas.”

“The reservation?”

“Four Rocks. Small, mostly Blackfoot and Cree.”

Hereditary enemies of the Sioux, I thought. Rachel spoke up. “My grandmother is near here. We can call her. Abenita Stands Alone.”

Scolari gaped at the mention of the woman’s name. Even I had heard of and read about the fiery Amerindian crusader. She also happened to be a State Senator and had been governor for two terms back in the 80s.

“You know her number?” We both asked at the same time and Rachel nodded. The Boy Scout leader handed over his cell and she dialed from memory.

Her conversation was in Abenaki. I heard every word and even heard the replies but I kept my mouth shut and my face blank. The number she had dialed was the time and temperature in Spanish; it was repeated as Rachel carried on her pretend conversation. Finally, she said goodbye in English and shut the cell off.

“She says she’ll send a plane for us as soon as she can arrange it. She wants us dropped at the nearest bench where it can land.”

“That would be Sumpweed Bench, about ten miles from here,” Scolari mused. “That’s in the middle of nowhere. Town’s closer and has a decent road in and out. You should both be checked by a doctor, not just first aid from me.”

“You can’t refuse a Senator’s order,” Rachel said so that was why we were sitting on an ATV in the middle of a godforsaken part of the country where the average person per square mile was 2.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Cameron snapped his laptop open as he heard the particular chime he had marked for Patient Zero, otherwise known as Lakan Strongbow. He swiped the screen to reveal a rotating image of a DNA helix superimposed over a map of Idaho.

“Jesus,” he whispered. “What is this kid?”

Chase’s head swiveled. “Doctor?”

“Load up your guys and head back to the plane. I have a reading, a strong one... in Idaho. Near the National Park.”

Chase’s reaction was almost the same as the doctor’s. “Idaho? How the fuck did he get to Idaho?”

“I’m guessing---on a plane?” Cameron retorted. Chase called in his men and they left the casino complex in a flurry of squealing tires and disgruntled employees.

Aiken’s men watched them retreating and reported back, was told to meet up with their leader to follow Chase’s team. When they saw that they were returning to the airport, Aiken remarked that Dr. Cameron must have gotten a trace on the subject.

Chase and his team boarded the Lear Jet and it took off ten minutes later, bumping several commercial flights. Aiken heard the waiting passengers complaining in the terminal as he called his contacts and asked if the jet had filed a flight plan and where. He requested a chopper and was told that one would be waiting at Terminal 5. The contact also reported that the subject had been spotted in Idaho in the company of a troop of camping Boy Scouts.

NSA had picked up several phone conversations between the Boy Scouts and their parents, about two teenagers walking out of the Badlands Park after falling off their raft on the Snake River. One boy had actually mentioned the teen’s name and snapped a cell phone image of the boy---Blake. The girl was named Rachel and an Amerindian.

Aiken said that was the name of the CEO’s niece, Rachel Little Bear. “She must have helped him get away,” he said. “Probably walked right past us dressed as two girls. He’s not very tall for a 14-year-old.”

Martin replied he hadn’t seen any teenage Indian girls in the casino or airport and would have noticed because they would have stood out as underage. Besides, he would damn sure have noticed a pilot under the age of 21 if he was suggesting she had flown Lakan out of the city’s airport.

The chopper waiting for them was a commercial /agriculture bird. The pilot said he mostly flew for ranchers to locate lost stock but was under government contract on a ‘will call’ basis. He explained that he’d only been called out twice before---both times for lost tourists in the desert. Both had been found dead of dehydration one hundred miles from nowhere after leaving the broken down vehicles and trying to walk for help. He told them cheerfully that more than one mobster had left behind in the desert a new resident skeleton and ghost.

Martin was spooked as he climbed into the seat nearest the team leader. As the chopper lifted, he leaned close and spoke into Aiken's ear. "Just what is this kid, Sarge and what can he do? I thought we were after a runaway half-blood that's related to Hamilton?"

"We are. But he's so much more," Aiken returned. "Which we don't need to know about."

I

Chase worried his lip, sucking part of his cheek into his mouth and chewing on it. His eyes seemed even colder and more mercurial than ever. Twice, he got up and spoke to the pilot, then returned to his seat to once again worry his cheek. Cameron finally went and told the agent that the trace hadn't moved significantly in the last two hours; it was solidly planted in the middle of the Snake River Plateau in Idaho but not on Federal Reservation land.

"Just what do you think this kid is capable of, Doctor?"

Cameron hesitated. "I know he's never caught a cold or a childhood disease even when I tested him and he was a brain-damaged patient. He was inoculated for everything but never even had a head cold. He never seemed to have cuts and scrapes nor broke any bones playing. As a child, he was capable of intense concentration for hours but at simple tasks, like threading his shoelaces or putting pins in boxes. He never once showed any sign of intelligence higher than 65. He rarely spoke. I tested him extensively and he was brain damaged, his IQ 62."

"He was faking it?" Chase asked. Cameron shook his head.

"No. That's what makes him so valuable. Once a brain cell dies, it's dead. It can't be repaired or replaced like bone cells or blood cells. Yet, he did it. Which means if we can find out how he did it, we can do it too."

"So? We fix retarded people?" Chase shrugged.

Cameron sneered. "Your brain renews itself, your cells renew themselves, your body doesn't break down or age. You extend your lifetime for virtually forever and you don't get dementia."

"Immortality? Bullshit!"

"I don't think it's bullshit. Even if he isn't immortal, he can create microchip designs that are lightyears ahead of the rest of the world. His solar array on his great-grandfather's house is still working maintenance free. We reverse-engineered it to build one of our own. Right now, his designs are powering an entire military complex in the South using less than \$40 a day."

"What did Hamilton want with him?" Chase was curious as to what the director of the CIA intelligence committee wanted with him.

"He's the last remaining link to her son, Michael," Cameron said.

"I thought he was the President's son?"

"No. We lied to her, we wanted to drive a wedge between them, split them even further. She applied for divorce right after he won the second election and she kept the news of the boy quiet because the president promised to appoint her head of the CIA for a second term."

The pilot announced that they were over Boise where they would land near a waiting helicopter from the Parks and Rescue people. It would take them to the plateau where the tracer originated. Ground agents were also on the way with ATVs and horseback. There was no way the pair of teens could escape the net that was closing in on them.

II

I looked at Rachel, at the Boy Scout leader who had insisted he drive us to the supposed rendezvous with the Senator's chopper and spoke. In Abenaki, I asked, "what are we doing here,

Rachel Little Bear? No one is coming for us, not from the time and temperature phone call you made.”

She answered me in Siouan which I did not know she spoke. “I didn’t know what else to do,” she admitted. “We can’t go back to the reservation, call the police or the casino. I remembered that a cousin lived out here on a sheep ranch. I thought we could walk there and ask him for help. I didn’t think the *belangi* would bring us here and stay until we were picked up.” She used the Indian word for white man.

“Some people have a sense of responsibility, Rachel. There’s no way he could leave us here and justify it to his conscience.” I stared at Mr. Scolari and felt a shift inside my brain. My senses told me that he was nervous, unsure and didn’t quite believe in us anymore. I resonated my brain waves with his and slowly, his thinking became more relaxed. I could feel his emotions and even read his surface thoughts. Which prompted me to try something else. I pictured in my mind the image of a helicopter approaching, the noise of the rotors, the smell of the engines, the turbines blowing the bunch grass heads into the legs of our borrowed jeans. It was as real as I could make it and I caught Rachel staring up into the perfect blue sky with her mouth hanging open as she saw the fake image too.

“Look at me,” I told her and the minute she dropped her eyes, her face tightened as her brain reacted in pain at the wrenching pull out of the hallucination I was creating.

She stared at me as I manipulated Mr. Scolari’s mind into seeing us board the chopper, wave goodbye and take off. Without another word, he mounted the ATV and left us there alone without any means of travel except for our feet.

“How did you do that?” She demanded. “How did you make me see what wasn’t there? Do you read minds, too?” She looked afraid. “Can you see inside my head?”

“Hell, Rachel. I’m not sure what I just did myself. All I know is that he was expecting a helicopter and I gave him one.”

“Couldn’t you make him leave the ATV?”

“Not and explain why he walked back on foot. They need the ATV more than we do. I can always call Buffalo Humpback.”

“We’re 100 miles from his territory. There should be some BLM mustangs out here. Can you horse-whisper them?”

“Oh sure. You want a paint or an Appy?” I retorted and smart-ass that she was, she ordered a leopard ap mare for herself and a bay medicine hat paint for me. I closed my eyes and let my mind drift out, caught the telltale emanations of equine life and coaxed it towards us.

“It’ll be a while,” I said doubtfully. “They’re a long way off. We might as well start walking.”

I put one foot in front of the other and headed north for the ridge of mountains I could see in the distance. What looked like flat grasslands were a broadly rolling series of gullies and washes. In the deeper washes, small trees and brush competed for the little rainfall the collected during flash floods out here.

I saw dung – mostly from range cattle but out here it took nearly 20 acres to support one steer and ranches were upwards of 200,000 acres or more. Mostly leased from BLM land. Wild horses were common and when they grew too numerous, the government rounded them up and sold them across the US. Those animals were incredibly tough and savvy mounts. Sadly, they were still shot and left for varmints because they took grass away from the more profitable beef steers.

I heard a hum in the background and it didn't register for a while because of the image I had put into Mr. Scolari's head. I heard the muffled beat of helicopter blades and passed it off first as my imagination but when Rachel heard it too, I stopped to stare at the sky.

A green and yellow Park Service chopper was coming straight at us from the east. My heart thudded and my stomach dropped as adrenaline flooded my system. I didn't stop to question the sudden fear that hit me, I grabbed Rachel's hand and ran.

I didn't know where I thought we could go, the only cover for miles were the washes and they would only hide us for seconds. "I thought your people removed the tracer!" I yelled and Rachel's reply was unintelligible. I realized I was dragging her more than she was running and jerked her up onto my back piggyback style so I could run faster. Her weight seemed negligible and I put on a burst of speed. The chopper caught up and I dodged down into a wash but the footing was loose and treacherous. Rachel screamed in my ear.

"Lakan! Run!" I ran but it was useless. As fast as I was, I couldn't outrun a helicopter and finally, I staggered to a stop as my body simply refused to go another step and fell to my knees. Rachel slid off my back as the chopper landed in front of us and discharged six men. I recognized one of them. Dr. Cameron. His grin was huge and predatory as he stalked up to me.

"Lakan. Do you know how fast you were running?"

I stared at him and the calculations were in my head. "Not fast enough," I said and he pulled out not a shot but a Taser. Before I could do anything but gasp for breath, he zapped me. I remember falling over, my muscles spasming and my brain misfiring like when I'd seized. I didn't even hear Rachel scream.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The effects of the Taser wore off after half an hour and I woke up on the floor of the chopper hands and feet tied together like a trussed turkey. My face was smashed into the floor of the bird and between the feet of the agents. I tried to turn my head to look for Rachel but all I could see were boots and shoes, the metal struts that held the seat to the frame of the helicopter and the rudders on which the pilot's feet rested. I reached out and seized control of the pilot's brain, cyclic and rudders, forcing the chopper to the left. The pilot yelled and fought back but whatever my mind was doing was stronger than his control of his hands.

I smelled engine exhaust and burning oil as the RPMs increased beyond their normal capacity. The chopper flung itself in the opposite direction and I watched the metal holding the seating stress, melt and loosen. The hatch opened and two of the seats gave way to let those unlucky agents fall out, their screams echoing long after they were gone.

Voices raised in alarm around me. I heard Rachel scream and it shocked me, made my concentration falter. Cameron reached down and grabbed the back of my neck by the hair, slammed my face down twice into the steel floor. I felt my cheekbone shatter and blood poured from my nose and mouth. Sounds became muffled, words wrapped inside a blanket of geometric wool shot with arcs of lightning. I marveled at the intricate design not realizing it was my consciousness splintering.

My next recollections were fragmented and thick with pain. My face hurt. My ribs ached and I couldn't move. I couldn't see, either but I felt it when someone deftly inserted a needle into my arm and taped it to my flesh. I felt the flow of cool IV liquids and then a warm sensation that traveled up my arm and into my chest bringing a detached mood that I struggled to resist.

“Don’t fight it, Lakan,” his voice said gently. “It’s Thorazine and a dose strong enough to sedate a horse.”

I opened my eyes and mumbled. “I can’t see!”

“You’re blindfolded. I’m not sure how you took control of the chopper pilot and nearly crashed it but we’re taking no chances with you until we learn how you did it. Visually or mentally, so you will be kept gagged, blinded and sedated until we control you.”

“Rachel?” I asked thickly and waited with a sick feeling for the answer.

“She’s fine. We gave her a dose of Rophynol and made sure she doesn’t remember anything. Dropped her off on the reservation near the police station,” he said and I was still awake enough to know that he was lying.

“Rachel?” I called out that my voice never made it past my lips. I was aware of being moved in a wheelchair, loaded into a small jet and taking off. After that, only bits and pieces made it into my head. The taste of brass in my mouth. My stomach tight and crampy. My mouth so dry my lips cracked and bled. I had to pee and my bladder hurt. Crinkly noises around my bottom and legs. Cold shivers on my skin. Iodine and antiseptic. Faint pricking on my cheekbones. Droning voices over my head.

Things cleared up sometime later. I had no idea how much time had passed only that it must have been hours or days. I was lying on my back, handcuffed to a hospital bed at wrists and ankles. The room was small with green painted walls and an overhead light; the kind they used in examination rooms and ORs. At my feet was a door with a small wired window. The only thing in the room was me, the bed, an air vent blowing AC and the light. I was wearing an open hospital gown laid over me but not snapped. An IV was in my right arm and to my disgust, I had a urinary catheter in place. I felt horrible. Every muscle ached, even my bones felt as if they were made of brittle plaster of Paris.

My eyes wandered over to the IV poles but someone had thoughtfully placed it behind me where I couldn’t reach it. Thankfully, Cameron had not made good on his threat to blindfold or gag me. The Thorazine running through my system was enough to make keeping any single thought in my head impossible, let alone attempting to plan an escape.

Every time I moved, a machine chimed. My movements were minuscule; I could turn my neck from side to side, bend my knees up two inches and roll my torso about the same. I could lift my ass off the bed but that made my belly ache with what felt like bruises from somebody’s boots. All these efforts left me exhausted so I lay quietly and let my thoughts drift aimlessly.

When the door opened, the man who entered wasn’t Cameron but the long-haired hippie I’d seen in the helicopter. He wore his hair in a ponytail and had a one karat diamond stud in his ear. His clothing, this time, was an expensive three-piece suit that I recognized from association with Hamilton’s aides.

“My grandmother will have you shot,” I said and the words came out slurred and not nearly as frightening as they’d sounded in my head.

“Your grandmother is helpless,” he smiled and his teeth were predatory and very white against his cold gray eyes.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Agent Chase. I’m with the NSA, not Director Hamilton’s CIA.”

“But Dr. Cameron—,” I said and stopped.

“I kidnapped him and convinced him to join the winning team.” He studied me from my toes to my head. “You look whiter than Amerindian. I’ve seen pictures of your mother and father. You do look like Michael Hamilton.”

“Where’s Rachel?”

“She’s safe. As long as you cooperate, she’ll remain safe. Tell me how you did what you did to the chopper and the pilot?” I tried to reach his mind and tweak his brain waves but the anti-psychotic was too strong to overcome. “You’re trying to do something now, aren’t you?” He smiled. Raising his voice, he called for the doctor and Cameron’s came on over an intercom.

“I’m getting some interesting EEG readings, Mr. Chase.”

My stomach cramped and I felt vomit hit the back of my throat but I swallowed it before I could puke. Chase rubbed my throat and it wasn’t because he felt sorry for me but because puking might cause me to aspirate. I might drown in my own vomit.

“You feel sick to your stomach, Lakan?” Cameron’s voice sounded almost as if he was standing next to me. “I can order you Reglan. You’ve been on several different drugs that can upset your stomach.”

“My stomach hurts,” I said through clenched teeth. “Somebody kicked me.”

“Yes, an unfortunate occurrence. One of the agents that fell out of the helicopter was a younger brother of the one left behind. He’s been...reprimanded.”

“Did you check me for ruptures?” I asked and that brought silence. Next thing I saw; Cameron was hurrying into the room pulling a portable X-ray machine with him. Ten minutes later, I was receiving two units of blood and being sedated for emergency surgery. I tried to keep my eyes open as they wheeled me down the hallway. It looked like a hospital corridor with open patient doors but the nurses and medical personnel I saw wore uniforms under white coats. I didn’t hear any announcements and I saw only one other room with a closed door where an armed soldier stood guard.

I mouthed ‘Rachel’, made an intense effort and managed to sit up. I could barely see through the window but enough to recognize Rachel’s black hair as she sat on the bed. She saw me and leaped for the door but then, Chase and Cameron pushed me down where I melted like a boneless fish on a grill. Chase stopped outside the OR doors and Cameron went in.

The room was freezing. I started to shiver and then, my metabolism kicked in turning up my body temp. I heard the surgical team commenting on how I was running a high fever; one adjusted the IV and I sank into a darkness I could not control.

Soft rustlings pierced my dreams. I sat on a rock the size of one of the giant turtles in Central Park. It stood all alone in a primeval forest while below me, the people moved with the seasons. I saw Indian maidens foraging for wild rice and oats, acorns and chicory. Creating slender reed baskets from willow strips and cattails. They worked deer hide with their teeth and softened it into exquisitely tanned and decorated buckskins.

I saw some squaws bought and paid for with many gifts and when the white men came, horses bought their favors. They built their homes in teepees on the winter prairie and moved further north into the great forests where the braves hunted elk and mule deer.

I saw a great warrior fight the white men and was saddened as I recognized Crazy Horse. His way of life would soon end bringing misery, starvation and alcoholism to the tribes.

I saw a warrior I knew---his name had been Tungasila or Grandfather in Siouan and he wore the garb of a medicine man.

Lakan, he spoke. Boy Who Thinks Too Much. You must be prepared to die to be free. You must escape before these evil men learn all your secrets.

I can’t leave Rachel, I said without speaking.

Nor should you. You may speak with her in your dreams where they cannot go.

The Yellow Realm? Can I escape them there?

The Hunters have your scent and would track you down swiftly, he warned. And you cannot concentrate long enough to hold that door open. Perhaps Rachel Little Bear could do that for a while. Long enough to aid you in an escape.

They cut open my belly, I said. I don't know if I can walk.

He sneered. The braves in the Sun Ceremony hung from hooks in their flesh for days before they danced themselves free, tearing at their flesh. Are you any less than they?

I swallowed and when I opened my mouth to answer him, he was gone and I was standing in a girl's bedroom with posters of pop stars, dream catchers and computer CDs everywhere. An easel stood near the window with gauze curtains and there was a painting of a doe and fawn in a field of goldenrod. It was exquisitely detailed and realistic, a real piece of art. Standing in front painting blissfully unaware of me and in pajamas was Rachel. Her hair was down to her waist, her face soft in repose. She was concentrating with her tongue between her lips and a tiny frown between her eyebrows.

"It's missing something," she said staring.

"A Hunter," I spoke and pointed to the corner where the beginnings of a forest were suggested. "Danger lurks even in paradise."

She did not whirl around startled or afraid that I was behind her. "Lakan."

"Rachel. Are you okay? Did they hurt you?"

"Is this your dream or mine?" She turned her head to look at me, her dark eyes calm and deep as midnight skies.

"Both, I think. Put a warrior here but have him holding his bow down as if he chose to leave his gift of life for the pair."

She smiled and swiftly painted in the figure before she laid down her brush and brought me to her bed.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rachel cradled my head against her breast and stroked my hair. Her voice vibrated into my chest. "You're a very talented 14-year-old lover, Lakan," she murmured.

"Is this still my dream?" I wondered, awed at the second set of sensations coursing through me.

"Yes. And it's about to end so you'd better figure out how we're going to escape," she retorted.

"You have any suggestions?" I asked marveling at how real this dream seemed. Because it was my dream, I felt everything – the satiny texture of her skin, the sweet scent of her hair, the lightness of my own body after an ejaculation. I wondered idly if my body back in the solid world had experienced a nocturnal emission. I laughed. It would serve Cameron or Chase right if I came all over one of them.

"I can open the door to the Spirit Realm for you but your great-grandfather warned me that the Soul Hunters would find you almost immediately. Plus, I'm not sure if I can physically carry you with me."

"I'm drugged back in my room, Rachel," I told her, playing with a strand of her hair. "They operated on my belly. I had a ruptured spleen."

"Then they won't be moving you anytime soon. Or experimenting on you."

"Maybe not. That doctor is crazy, he did things to me when I was a kid and he often didn't use painkillers."

“Your childhood must have been terrible, Lakan,” she encouraged. I knew she wanted me to speak about my youth but truthfully I didn’t remember anything.

I felt myself drawing away from her. Stubbornly, I tried to hold onto the dream but it was no use. A woman’s face in a mask and surgical scrubs was shining a penlight in my eyes.

“Dr. Cameron, he’s coming up from the anesthesia,” she spoke over her shoulder to the doctor. He was in scrubs also and his face framed by a surgical cap that covered his hair.

“How do you feel, Lakan?”

“Floaty.”

“You had a 2-inch laceration of the spleen and 2 pints of blood in your gut cavity. Of course, it was closing as I stitched you. Probably would’ve sealed itself without my help but we did surgery anyway. Your pressure is normal and your temp, too. At first, we thought you were spiking a fever of 105° but as soon as we warmed you up, your temp dropped back to 98.6. You can regulate your internal temperature?”

I mumbled something and slipped back into sleep. Didn’t feel it when they wheeled me back to my room, transferred me to the bed and put me into restraints. I did wake up as they rolled me onto a bedpan and told me to poop.

Of all the things that have been done to me, that ranked as the most humiliating, not being able to crap on my own or wipe. After that, a male nurse came in, washed me off carefully, changed my sheets and re-gowned me in a clean one. Another checked my IV, the covered incision and took my vitals.

I still wore the continuous IV and the pain was a distant memory telling me that I was on some kind of painkiller or the Thorazine. It was like thinking through a cloud of pea soup.

“Thirsty,” I whispered and the male nurse placed a few ice chips in my mouth. They melted instantly. “Where am I?”

“Recovery. Just rest, Dr. Cameron will be by later,” he said.

“Your name?”

“Blue. This is Red.”

“Better than Smith and Brown,” I returned and closed my eyes. I heard them muttering about the room but I ignored them. Late that afternoon, I was more cognizant of my surroundings and others around me. Either the doctor had not reordered the Thorazine or it interfered with the pain medicine that the male nurse Blue injected into my port every four hours. Those shots left me sleepy but not so spaced out that I couldn’t think.

I was alone, my hands still in restraints but these were soft padded leather, not stainless steel handcuffs. My ankles wore the same leather and sheepskin but these were looser so that I could move my legs and almost turn on my side if I didn’t mind stretching one shoulder uncomfortably.

My stomach grumbled. I was almost hungry. I had a vague memory of the old man Tungasila bent over a campfire cooking steaks. Bears steaks he had caught earlier that year because the animal had been attacking our sheep. He had stalked and shot the bear with the help of our closest neighbor but the memory of that person or their name did not come back to me.

“*Oma key yo!*” I mumbled but no one answered or came to my help. Time drifted and me with it.

The door opened startling me. In came the doctor who did the surgery and Cameron, followed by men in suits with Agent Chase. They stared at me with hard eyes and Cameron pulled down the sheets, pushed aside the gown to peer under the surgical tape. His fingers were

cold as he pressed hard on the incision. My guts writhed under the pressure yet it didn't hurt any more than the bruising from the kicks.

"The incision looks days old, not post-surgical," he sounded excited. "The bruising and swelling have all but disappeared, there is almost no evidence that this child had a severe laceration of the spleen twelve hours ago. I would calculate that within twenty-four hours, there won't even be a sign of a scar."

"Can the ability transfer through his blood?" One of the suits questioned.

"We've only acquired the subject these last seventy-two hours, Sen. Gibson. Further testing has to be done," Cameron admitted. "First and foremost, we need to control his behavior."

"Can't you just threaten him? Pay him off or something? What about his parents?"

Chase stepped in. "His parents are dead."

"So, what's the problem?"

"His grandmother is Sarah Hamilton."

"The Director of the CIA?" The Senator gaped. "That does pose a problem. I take it she's not aware that the boy is in your custody? Does the president know?"

"He doesn't know that he has a grandson, no. The Director has managed to keep Lakan Strongbow a secret for two years," Chase said. "He's the son of that FBI agent that disappeared fifteen years ago."

"Why? Because of his genetic mutations?"

Cameron answered the Senator. "At first, she funded my GMO research but when she learned that he was her grandson and one of my test subjects, she had him snatched, brought to D.C. and re-programmed with memories she created. Something went wrong and he ran. We tracked him through the Shenandoah National Park, George Washington Forest and all the way to Red Pine, Oklahoma. His microchip tracer disappeared and showed up back in the Tower Casino Complex on the Pine Ridge Reservation. In the Dakotas for about thirty seconds.

"Then again in Idaho where we apprehended the pair."

"Pair?"

"Another juvenile, Rachel Little Bear. She's 17, an Amerindian and the niece of the Tower's CEO," Chase added.

"His girlfriend?" One of the other suits asked. He looked like an aide to a Senator, too young to be one. Chase called him Johannsson with Special Agent in front of it. He had dark hair with just a touch of gray over the ears and a fashionable two-day scruff perfectly trimmed. His eyes were a pale blue and he had slight freckles on his nose. It looked like he used a tanning booth, he was too bronze for this time of year.

"She's not my girlfriend," I denied. "Just a friend and I only met her for the first time three days ago. I'm hungry."

Cameron nodded. "I'll have the orderly bring you a lite meal, Lakan."

"Is he going to feed me?" I asked peevishly, wiggling my hands and feet in the restraints.

Cameron laughed. "We can dispense with those for now." His hands were swift as he released me and I swung myself up to sit on the edge of the bed. All of them stepped back as if they were afraid of me with the exception of the doctor. He put his hand out to hold my chest as my body tried to fall onto the floor. I tried to right myself but my head whirled and I had absolutely no sense of balance and no feeling in my legs. I had lost the ability to stand.

"What have you done?" I cried out.

“Hobbled you, Lakan. You won’t be escaping on those legs.” He carried me over to a wheelchair and seat-belted me in. Shortly after that, he drove me out into the corridor and down to a small room that was set up for meals. On the table were plates of breakfast stuff – eggs, toast, bacon, and sausage. Coffee, cream and sugar. Catchup. Salt and pepper. Fresh biscuits. It was enough for everyone, all of them sat down and made themselves a plate while in orderly remained at the door. He did not look like a nurse but was clearly there for security.

I was starving but still in shock over what he had done to me. I stared at my legs and cursed them. I was able to move them normally but the moment I tried to put any weight on them, they turned boneless.

“Your hands work, Lakan,” Hamilton said. “You said you were hungry. Eat.” He pushed a loaded plate towards me and I picked up a fork. Shoveled eggs and bacon in, eating not because I was hungry but because I knew I needed the fuel to keep my system running. I despaired over how I was going to escape when I couldn’t even walk.

They discussed my case in front of me as if I wasn’t there. Finally, I had had enough, slammed my knife down on the plate and glared at them. “I’m here, not some plastic petri dish,” I snarled. “I’m a real person, I bleed, I hurt.”

“But are you human?” The Senator asked holding up a piece of sausage on the end of his fork and stared through it at me.

“As human as you are,” I retorted. “Although I’m not sure if a US Senator classifies as human. More like a subhuman species.”

He didn’t like that and he sputtered, food flying from his mouth as he stood up. He got in my face; I opened my eyes and drew him in to hold his mind in my own, the hold of their drugs not quite so strong. He sat down abruptly and said, “you’re a dangerous creature, Lakan Strongbow.”

I let him sizzle, to change his attitude too quickly would send up a red flag that I had taken control of his will. He reached forward before Chase or Hamilton could stop him and slapped me on that cheekbone previously broken.

“Don’t smart mouth me, boy. I can do worse to you,” the Senator threatened and I wiped my face as involuntary tears ran down by cheek.

“You gonna let him do that, doctor?” I asked.

Cameron sniggered. “You ask me, you deserved that and more. You killed two Federal Agents, Lakan,” he said. “When you’re done eating, we’ll go visit the labs.”

“I can hardly wait,” I returned. Little did Cameron know that I had planted a suggestion in Gibson’s head to visit me later with certain items from the nurse’s cart.

I couldn’t say the visit to the lab was a piece of cake. It qualified just this side of torture. The lab tech was matter-of-fact but it still hurt when he took bone marrow samples, blood, skin scrapings and all those other things that Cameron wanted. Halfway through the session, the Senator and his group grew bored and Chase escorted them out of my presence. I tried not to watch anxiously as my slim chance of escape walked out tucked away in the Senator’s head.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Cameron had ordered a complete physical for me, one that in the outside world only a VIP patient would have rated. After that, he had me brought to a room that was clearly used for interrogations. The walls were padded, the table and chairs were bolted to the floor and a large shackle ring was affixed to the table for handcuffs to ease through. It was all done in depressing gray. No windows, the door was steel and locked behind him. It was cold inside, the temperature

just this side of uncomfortable especially if all you were wearing was a gown and pull-on slipper socks. Mine were gray and matched the walls. I was afraid to raise my temperature thinking that his instruments would record my returning abilities. The room made me depressed and I slumped in defeat.

Cameron entered, placed a laptop on the table and opened it. The glow from the screen was the brightest thing in the room. "Good evening, Lakan."

"Is it evening? You people don't have clocks around here. I don't know what day it is or what time," I complained.

"Answer my questions and I'll answer yours," he said and opened a site. For the next two hours, he ran me through personality and perception tests, an IQ test, behavioral analysis and every other examination out there geared to finding out how I thought, felt, rationalized and coped with the daily stress and life of a human. When we finished, he checked the time on his computer and looked astounded.

"Holy Jesus."

"Didn't know you were religious, doctor," I said exhausted from the extensive rounds of testing. Mental tests could be just as taxing as physical ones.

"I'm not, Lakan but you just finished ten hours of testing in two and you passed 100% on those that scored that way. Your IQ is off the charts. If you had been enrolled in a gifted program on the East Coast you'd be winning a Nobel Prize in science right now."

"But I'm not smart enough to stay out of your custody," I retorted.

He laughed and it was cold. "Well, Lakan you are only fourteen years old and led a sheltered life at your great-grandfather's. And I've had twenty years to learn spook tricks."

"How many tracking bugs did you implant in me?" I was curious and halfway didn't believe he would answer.

"Four besides the one on your heart. Just how did you have that removed?"

"I thought it away," I answered flippantly.

"I think not. You had surgical scars on you when I saw you last and I saw the doctor's report," he came back.

"There wasn't any surgery," I said flatly.

"Really? Because when we threatened to pull Dr. Rivers' license, he caved," Cameron stated.

"Dr. who?"

"It doesn't matter, Lakan. He's not going to be a problem anymore," he promised. I was silent, I knew it most likely meant that Dr. Rivers was dead.

"So, what are the other four? I heard you say something about my blood being tagged?"

"As I'm sure you're aware, Lakan your blood is tagged with a radioisotope that can be picked up by any satellite. There is another in your skull that was put in during the surgery to save your life after the car accident but it hasn't been active these last five years and can't be removed without major brain surgery. Another is implanted inside the bone marrow of your femur. I won't tell you which one but it also cannot be removed without taking part of the bone with it. Suffice to say, you wouldn't be walking on it. The last one is in your neck attached to your spinal cord. That's why you can't walk, it's been programmed to interfere with the signals from your brain to your leg muscles and nerves."

"I was working on something like that for paraplegics at Director Hamilton's," I said slowly.

He smiled broadly. “Oh Lakan, the discoveries I found in your room and on your computer! The irony is – your creations to help cripples recover is also keeping you a prisoner.” I tried to lunge for him but he stepped back nimbly and I fell out of the chair to land at his feet. I banged my elbows, hip and knees but he didn’t offer to help me get up. He left me lying there while he finished making notes and I desperately tried to influence his mind. Finally, he closed the lid with a snap, went to the door and called the orderly into the room. It was Blue and he picked me up by my armpits and put me back in the wheelchair. His fingers grazed the bleeding abrasions on my knees. I saw his cheeks clench but he said nothing as Cameron told him to return me to my room. The doctor stayed behind.

It was a short ride back down the hall but Blue passed the door to what I guessed was my room and continued to another further on. He pushed the door open with his back and wheeled me in backward to an exam room where he lifted me onto a table. Turning his back to me, he set out gauze 4 x 4’s, scrub and Band-Aids. He was gentle as he cleaned off the scrapes and treated them.

“What’s your name, Blue?” I asked carefully.

“Brian Blue, actually,” he grunted as he concentrated on what he was doing. The stuff stung but it was a minor ache compared to say – the bone marrow aspiration and the spinal tap.

“I guess I can call you Blue, then.” I sucked in my breath as he washed off the blood on my knees.

“What happened?” He asked me.

“I tried to deck him. Missed and fell out of the chair,” I admitted.

He stopped and gaped at me. “You tried to hit Dr. Cameron?”

“Well yeah. He’s a dick and an asshole,” I defended.

“He can also have you dissected and not wait for you to be dead when he does it.”

“I’m worth more alive than dead,” I said gloomily.

He finished smoothing the large Band-Aid on my knee. “What’s your name?”

“Lakan Strongbow.”

“Your real name?”

“That is my real name. My mother was Lakota Sioux.”

“No shit? I thought you were some relation of CIA Director Sarah Hamilton?”

“She’s supposed to be my grandmother,” I admitted candidly. I went on to explain but he held his hands up.

“Don’t tell me any more, I don’t have the clearance for this shit,” he said.

“Will you help me escape?”

“Are you nuts? Do you know where you are? Besides, he fixed it so you can’t walk. You going to crawl out of here on your hands and knees or do you fly?” He stared at his wound care. “You hurt anywhere else? I can give you some pain meds.”

“Just take me back to my room,” I said. He did, stopping just short of Rachel’s door. I put my hand on the glass and tried to reach her but her thoughts were barred from me. I knew Blue wasn’t sympathetic enough to let me talk to her. He helped me back into bed. I turned my back to him, pulled the covers up and forced myself to sleep so I could dream of her.

Rachel was sitting on the big chunk of quartz that resembled a roughly cut yellow diamond. Her long hair was down and braided into four plaits, not the traditional two. She wore a red shirt and blue jeans when I had been expecting tanned and beaded buckskins. On her feet were moccasins and white bobby socks. She wiggled her toes.

“Don’t look at me. I wouldn’t have picked these socks and shoes, it’s your dream.” She jumped down to stand next to me, I seemed insubstantial somehow. “You figure out a way to escape yet?” She asked me.

I walked around and studied the dreamscape we were occupying. There were elements of the Nutcracker Suite with tin soldiers holding back the gloomy trees, faint images of sugarplum fairies holding bows and arrows, and the huge crystal sitting in the middle of a sandy clearing. It was wound around with Christmas garland and red ribbons. I couldn’t see any sky overhead; it just faded into a dull mist. In that darkness, I heard soft and eerie rustlings, the hoot of an owl and the thumping beat of a nervous heart.

“You’re frightened and worried, Lakan. Me, too. That nasty man Chase has threatened me and some of the things he wants to do are just... if I was a warrior, I would show him about torture.”

“I planted a suggestion or two in the Senator’s mind,” I said. “He supposed to come back and help me but I don’t know if it’s strong enough to override his plans for me.”

“And those were?” she prompted.

“He has access to where it is I’m being held. From what I can see and read about it’s the super-max lab in D.C. called the Complex, run by a joint committee of the NIA and NSA.”

“And how do you plan on leaving this SuperMaxx prison?” She climbed back on the crystal which reformed under her like a chaise lounge. I crawled up and joined her. Curiously, her flesh had the same hard, cool consistency as the rock.

“He was bringing handcuff keys and his access card. Clothes from his secretary but that was before I found out Cameron had re-programmed my own nervous system to be paralyzed,” I said unhappily. “I think he’s done something to my brain, too. I can’t quite grasp his thoughts like I did with the others. I can’t find the door to the spirit realm, either.”

“You can’t walk?”

“No. The minute I try to stand, all feeling goes and my legs just won’t hold me. I’ve tried to bypass the obstruction but I can’t reach my own nerve center.”

“When are you going to initiate this escape?” she asked.

“You’ll be the first to know,” I said. “Do you think you can try to bring me in now?”

She grabbed my hand and concentrated. The door appeared floating above our heads and both of us could hear the growling, snarling, claw-scratching of the Soul Hunters behind it.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to open the door,” I said shakily. As soon as the words left my mouth, a mournful howling picked up with an eagerness that let me know I was definitely on something’s menu.

“Rachel, you go through, they’re not interested in you.”

“Yeah, right. Besides, I can’t hold the door open and pass through without your help, Lakan,” she denied.

“Can we open the door, let them pass into this world and trap them here while we race through theirs?”

She hesitated. “I don’t know if they can leave the Spirit Realm, I don’t think letting monsters into our real world is a good idea. What if they attacked and killed waking people? How would we stop them? How would you prevent them from finding and killing you here?”

The door cracked as something huge hit it a resounding blow. Rachel screamed and jerked me by the hand blowing my concentration. We were catapulted out of the dream world and back into the waking one. I woke to find myself in my room belted in with restraints and an orderly seated in a chair this side of the door. It wasn’t Blue or the other, Red. This one was

clearly a guard with muscles the size of beer kegs and a brain to match. He possessed no curiosity and in fact, had so little going on inside his head that it left me nothing to work with or influence.

I had no way of knowing how much time had passed while I was in the dream state. It could have been the same night or days later. One thing I did know, my thoughts were sluggish and my reactions diminished. Which meant I was back on Thorazine.

“You awake?” the orderly asked in a voice that surprised me. It was soft, beautifully modulated and cultured. Which only went to show that no one should be judged on first appearances.

“Yes,” I managed but it was an effort to speak.

“Just listen,” he said without moving his lips and he told me what to do.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The orderly’s name was Michael Roan Horse and even though he looked like a muscle-bound stereotypical jock, he wasn’t. Owning a degree in Physics and the medical field, he had taken the job in the government for personal reasons, the least of which had been to spy on the white lawmakers of the BLM. Under his ‘roid exterior (which was entirely genetic and not enhanced) rested the keen brain of a political activist and Native American radical. Yet his brain was one of those closed to my influence making me think that he had been one of those unfortunate developmentally delayed brain.

He had done something to the cameras in my room so that they were rerouted showing an image of me sleeping in the bed but it wasn’t me or my room. It showed the room next door to mine so whatever Mike did in my room wasn’t recorded or fed to those that were observing me.

First, he untied me, propped me up and then dressed me in women’s clothes. Pantyhose over lace panties which chafed uncomfortably. A linen skirt in navy blue with a matching jacket blouse that he filled out with a sports bra. He put the soft stretchy material around me and stuffed the cups with water-filled latex gloves. Arranged a short blonde spiky wig on my head and proceeded to carefully paint my lips, eyes and cheeks with feathery touches. Held me at arm’s length and admired his work.

“Damn but you make a pretty girl,” he said as he scooped me up and stuck me in the chair.

Slowly, he opened the door and peeked outside. “No one wandering the halls yet.”

He put me on my feet, my arm around his shoulder and half-carried me down the long sterile corridor.

“Where’s Rachel?” I asked. He hushed me. “She’s waiting for us. Keep your mind on walking.” We reached the end and there was an elevator; his keycard opened it and we stepped inside. He nuzzled the side of my neck and I wrinkled my nose.

“Ewww,” I said. “Man, I don’t swing that way. Gross.”

“No but the cameras are watching us so act like my girlfriend who’s drunk,” he returned. “Guards smuggle chicks down here all the time. It turns them on to be romanced in the government nuclear disaster bunkers.”

“Romanced?” I raised an eyebrow, one muscle that didn’t require much effort to move.

“Sounds better than laid,” he grinned and stuck his tongue in my ear. I tried to punch him but he grabbed my hand and tucked it around his waist.

Once the door opened, we were surrounded by men and women in uniforms, congressional pages, dudes in three-piece suits who stayed close to Senators and Congressmen. I

saw men wearing those ear wires that denoted Secret Service and guessed which ones were CIA types. They all followed the same pattern---a certain look. Six feet give or take an inch, average looks, and good looking in a bland way with normal haircuts not too long or short and no three-day scruff. I did see some that must have been DEA or Narcs because they looked scruffy and dirty.

“Don’t talk and don’t stop,” Mike whispered as he swiveled me towards a set of gates standing between us and the lobby doors. Metal detectors. The guards were more focused on those people coming in.

“Wait,” I squeaked. “I’m tagged. I might set off the metal detectors.”

“Can’t be helped. We’ll just have to risk it,” he decided and we stumbled through it together, knocking the frame with a ping almost as loud as the alarm as I passed beyond it to sprawl on the floor. My linen skirt hiked up to reveal the tops of the pantyhose he had made me wear.

I pulled it down before anyone could see the bulge that no girl every had behind the lace panties. Mike helped me up, apologizing to me, the approaching guards and the curious lookie-loos.

“She’s a wee bit loaded,” he confessed as he flipped out his ID. I was amazed, he no longer looked like a mindless ape but a sharp dressed aide.

“She has to go through the scanners,” one of the guards said eyeballing my chest. Luckily, the water balloons hadn’t burst when I’d mashed them on the floor.

“Why? We came through with no problems,” Mike protested. “Look, she promised me a special surprise if I showed her the Vaults.”

“You brought another secretary to the Vaults, Roan Horse? You dog. That’s four this week,” said the guard. His tag read Brian Volker.

I slapped Mike, rose to my wobbly feet and marched out in indignant silence. Behind me, I heard hoots and wolf calls.

I exited onto a subway platform white tiled with black and white floors and brilliant lights everywhere. No gloomy, depressing underground here, clearly millions had been spent on this special rail system.

There were no exits, no stairwells out to the streets and I dallied on the platform waiting. Mike came at a run, grabbed my elbow and dragged me towards the approaching lights which turned out to be a train. Electric, small cars with enough room to seat twenty people and connected to each other by a sort of airlock. We went all the way forward to sit in the carriage behind the conductor. There was a man sitting behind the conductor in jeans and a jacket. He gave us a brief glance and I tried not to stare. He was Native American, one of the Southwestern tribes. Navajo or Hopi.

The train slid smoothly forward into a dark tunnel interspersed with lights every hundred feet or so to reveal brick and cement walls free of graffiti; doorways or access points. There weren’t even walkways for the maintenance workers.

We traveled in silence until we reached a station and pulled into a huge terminal that was broadly lit by an open skylight and wide arches. People dressed in everyday clothes with heavy coats were rushing back and forth. From their clothing and their packages, I was able to ascertain that it was near Christmas time for many of them carried brightly wrapped presents while others wore seasonal garb. I saw two women that would have won hands down ‘the world’s ugliest sweater contest’. In the far corner out of the wind but in an exit way, a salvation army clerk was ringing her bell by her kettle.

My eyes saw everything; down to the smallest detail as if the entire scene was at the end of a microscope. The doors of our carriage opened, the tall man exited. Mike touched my elbow and we followed him out of the train merging into the crowds. He was tall enough to follow and Mike tall enough to see over the crowds.

The stairs up brought us to streets that I knew from my programming memories that Hamilton had given me. We were in downtown Washington, D.C. near the Nations Bank building, minutes away from the Capital and White House.

Police were everywhere. The man we followed walked past them without giving any a second glance and we trailed behind unnoticeable as the holiday shoppers were thicker than thieves.

Ahead loomed a mall, one of those giant ones with Sears, Macys and the like. Both the train passenger and Mike headed for the entrance, up the escalator to the food courts. We found a table at a Steak 'n Shake where he ordered a meal for both of us.

I ate slowly, the drugs easing off in my system so that I could hear the chatter of busy minds if I concentrated hard enough. If I wasn't careful, the incredible din of it would overwhelm me.

So many people, so much information coming in. I had sudden access to the computers in the stores, the banks, ATMs and a veritable unlimited data stream lay at my fingertips. Accessible to my thoughts. I could have anything I wanted merely by tweaking numbers in my head and through the net. A whole new world was opening up before my eyes. That is until Mike thumped me on the forehead.

"Pay attention, Lacey. You can't space out like that in public," he said gruffly. "We still have to get you out of the city."

"Bus, train, car or plane?"

"They're watching everything as soon as your absence was discovered which would have been--" He looked at his watch. "Approximately 12 minutes ago. I guarantee you wouldn't make it by bus, airplane or train."

"Car? Is someone driving me out of the city? And when do I meet up with Rachel?" I asked. I scratched at my thigh where the pantyhose pinched and he snatched my hand away.

"Ladies don't do that," he hissed. "Keep your elbows off the table and your hands off your crotch."

"Okay, dad," I sniped. "Cuz, technically, I'm jailbait to you. I want to see Rachel."

"She'll meet us at the safe house, later," he promised. Leaning over, he kissed me on the lips and I fought the urge to wipe off my lips on my sleeve.

"Wait here. Leon will pick you up and take you home," he ordered and left me.

"Who's Leon?" I asked nobody in particular. I could watch his progress through the crowds until he dropped from sight on the escalator. Leon must have been nearby because as soon as Mike left, the man from the train approached my table carrying a box of pizza and an orange Crush.

"Hi, Lacey," he said and his black eyes twinkled. "I'm Leon DeCarlos." His pupils were dark and unfathomable in his tanned face with its outdoor squint lines. He had that long lean look of the Navajos and not the squatter barrel shape of the Hopi. His hair was short, bristle stiff and black, his age could have been anywhere from 25 to 50.

He had the serenity and confidence of an older man but the athletic movement of the younger. He sat down and ate his pizza without talking to me; I knew that waiting for me to begin was Navajo courtesy but I was part Indian too. I could play the silent game as well as he.

Finally, he spoke but it was not what I expected. "I love the pizza here. They cook it in a brick oven."

"Really? That's all you have to say?" I sputtered.

He lifted his eyebrow. Did it better than me, both of mine went up together no matter how I practiced it. "What is it you want me to say? Hello, is the US Government spy culture after you? Seen any spooks lately? How do you feel about genetic manipulation or water boarding? By the way, you're a pretty half-breed."

I told him a nasty word in Anglo-Saxon and he laughed. Wiped his hands on his napkin and stood up. "Ready or are you going to finish massacring your burger?"

"I'm done." I rose too and nearly fell over on my short heels. I could feel a general weakness in my limbs and worried that Cameron would re-activate the chip that took away my ability to walk. He had obviously turned it off trusting in the Thorazine to keep me sedated and compliant. I had no idea how soon he would use his tracers to pinpoint me. The sooner I made it to a location with a computer and electronic parts, the sooner I could make something that would neutralize anything still in me.

I looked around. "There a Radio-Shack store in here?"

"Probably. Why?"

"You have a credit card?" I asked instead of answering.

He nodded. I dragged him off to the small store sandwiched between a Payless and Gertrude's Chocolates. When I was finished shopping, I placed everything on the counter waiting impatiently as the sales associate totaled the bill. Surprisingly, it came to less than \$400 and that was including the miniature soldering gun.

Loaded with packages bearing the store's logo, we hit the CVS next where I had him purchase a pre-pay cell phone. I told him I had to use the restroom and he steered me towards the WOMENS when I inadvertently headed for the MENS. Luckily, it was a one seat toilet and I dragged him in with me. Locking the door, I stripped the back of the phone, exposed the motherboard and reconfigured the whole thing with the parts that I had picked up at Radio Shack. A little bit of soldering, a quick charge in the bathroom plug and I had an electronic jammer that was capable of masking any signal that I could put out. I called it a quipp. Unfortunately, the power it used drained the quipp in an hour if I left it on that long.

"Now, no one can track me," I said. "Once we get to the safe house, I can make something that will blow most of the tracers' electronics."

"Most of the tracers?" he questioned.

"Yeah. I can't do anything about my tagged blood except for a total transfusion. You have access to a dialysis machine?"

He gaped at me before I opened the door and gestured him out. There was a line waiting to use the bathroom. I smiled sweetly at the old lady in the front of the line. "Always wanted to do it in the ladies' room," I said and sashayed off.

Chapter Thirty

Leon caught up with me in a few strides. Besides being 8 inches taller than me, he also had legs like a giraffe. Kind of moved like one, too. Graceful and yet with a touch of youthful awkwardness. I revised my estimate of his age down ten years.

"How old are you?" I asked as we passed the perfume counter. An improbable redhead smiled at me and held up a spritzer. I shook my head but she squirted me anyway. I was

enveloped in a mist of sandalwood, jasmine, musk and vanilla that made me sneeze. Gagged. She looked offended as I waved the air in front of me.

“Phew! That stinks!” I complained and moved on as he took my elbow dragging me by store counters and displays back out into the mall’s open walkways until we exited on the opposite side of our entrance.

The parking lot was huge, filled with cars and tour buses sandwiched between a few trucks and SUVs. This wasn’t farm country where trucks were commonplace. There were so many men dressed as casual shoppers that it made my hackles raise and I wondered if all these undercover agents were here because of me.

One of them accidentally bumped me. Wrinkling his nose at my scent, he excused himself and walked towards one of those big black Navigators. I saw him look down at a cell phone but it was more than that because the jammer in my pocket was vibrating like crazy telling me that he had a tracking device.

I pulled Leon away from the vehicle in a detour. He didn’t say anything as he steered me towards a non-descript Ford Taurus, one of the thousands in the lot. Silver gray, the most boring color and one of the most common.

I sat in the passenger seat and buckled in as he drove smoothly away. Craning my neck around, I watched to see if any of the big SUVs followed but so many cars were coming and going, I couldn’t be sure if one was shadowing us.

“Relax,” Leon said. “Those agents haven’t a clue as to who I am nor are they looking for me.”

“You know they are agents?”

“Of course. They had a reading on you 12 minutes after you escaped and enough of a trace to know you were heading this way. The only thing out here where you could be heading to is the Mall. So they blanketed it with agents. Good thing you make a pretty girl.” He wrinkled his nose. “Stinky, too. It made the one asshole not even look at you.”

I sneezed. In the close confines of the car, the smell of the perfume was really bad. My eyes watered and he handed me a box of tissues. “How can you stand it?” I asked and he answered.

“It smells kind of nice. Sexy,” he grinned as I scooted further towards the door. “Don’t worry, little Chiquita. I have a beautiful lady that takes care of all my needs,” he said. “Your virtue is safe with me.”

“Where’s Rachel? Is she waiting for me at this safe house? How did she get out and who helped her?”

“She’ll meet you later,” was all he said. My stomach did flip flops because I felt something was wrong. I put it down to the near accident he just avoided as a garbage truck plowed through a red light and rear-ended the car in front of us. Then to my horror, it literally exploded into shrapnel with a major portion of it hitting the windshield and knocking our vehicle into three others like a mad ball in a pinball machine. And us with it. Blood spattered the windows as both of our heads cracked the glass. It knocked me silly for a moment. When I opened my eyes, I watched in delight as the sun caught individual shards floating effortlessly in a scintillating rainbow of jeweled colors. Time moved in microelements.

Leon’s groans brought me out of my reverie and time resumed its normal speed. I looked over and he was bleeding copiously from a hideous gash in his chest where a large piece of metal had impaled him pinning him to the seat just below and to the right of the xyloid process. Puncturing his lungs, liver and just missing his spine.

“Leon.” I spat out a mouthful of blood but I thought it was just from biting my tongue. Unhooking my seat belt, I leaned over and touched the metal spear.

“Don’t,” he said faintly. “Bleed out.”

“Leon, you’ll die either way. This is gonna hurt.” I concentrated and felt the warmth run through me, down my fingers and into the metal. He screamed as it cooked his insides and I pulled free the spear as it loosened. Only a trickle of blood followed. I concentrated on healing the huge lacerations inside his body; he coughed and expelled a veritable flood of oxygen-rich blood in my face. His went from pale grayish tan to a rich bronze, and his eyes widened as he took a deep full breath of air.

When I took my hand away, the hole in his chest was gone and with it, all the other scrapes and dings. His eyes closed and he slipped into shock-induced sleep.

Moving like an old lady, I punched at the crumpled door but it wouldn’t open. Screaming at the top of my lungs, I kicked and the whole thing flew off to land in the street at the foot of a pedestrian who was on his cell phone. I ignored him and pushed my way towards the other cars involved in the accident. There were five counting the garbage truck but I didn’t check on them as the drivers were wandering around shocked but unharmed. My goal was the remains of the car that they had totaled.

The front half was smashed into the front of a bus kiosk and nothing was left of the stand. If anyone had been inside it, they were gone. When I looked inside the car, I nearly gagged at the mess of what had been a driver. The steering wheel had sheared off crushing her rib cage, the door had crumpled in amputating both legs and one arm. The only reason she was still alive was that the airbag had cushioned some of the impacts and was keeping her from bleeding out. She was unconscious, her pulse so faint that I could barely feel it.

As my hands touched her, she blinked her eyes, stared into mine and spoke. “My kids.”

I couldn’t even tell if she was white or Afro-American, she was that bloody and bruised. Her internal injuries were so vast that I was amazed she was still alive.

“How many kids?” I asked urgently.

“Three. Two boys. Girl.”

“I’ll find them,” I told her and was able to stabilize her. Removing the parts holding her in required no more energy than healing her but I could feel it draining me faster and faster. Reattaching the limbs was child’s play compared to healing her internal organs.

Someone behind me shouted, “Oh my God! There are kids in here!”

I tried to run but my legs felt like Jell-O as I stumbled over to a bizarre sight. The back half of the car stood impaled on a broken light pole like a giant lollipop. Kids’ hands hung from what remained of broken windows; blood dripped steadily down the fingers. I knew some were alive; I could hear faint moans above the ominous creaking of metal tearing. People gathered underneath taking pictures but I knew my jammer was still working and would prevent them from posting anything on U-Tube.

“Call 911,” I said and put my hand on the pole’s base. Heat flared, the metal softened and slowly, with infinite care, I directed the angle of descent until both wreckage and pole were on the ground. One of the onlookers stepped forward and offered to help. Together, we examined the remains and pulled on the doors. The rear left side flew off and a pre-teen boy fell out at my feet.

“You know first aid and CPR?” I asked and he nodded. “Good. Take him over there and assess him.” I’d already scanned him and other than a broken ankle and sprained ribs, he was uninjured.

“His back or neck might be broken,” he said. “You’re not supposed to move him.”

“This wreck is going to fall any minute and crush all of us,” I replied. “They’re not safe in there. He has a broken ankle, bruised ribs and maybe a lung so it’s safe to move him. But move him by supporting his head and neck with his shirt.” I showed him how and he agreed. I watched until he had dragged the boy out of the way.

Crawling inside, I found the other two and swallowed back nausea. The girl was bad, maybe dead and the boy broken in so many places that moving him was too risky so I did what I could inside the car. This time, the heat took longer and made the interior light up like a Christmas tree. I heard voices outside over the strident sounds of sirens and helicopter blades.

Carried the boy out and laid him on the piled coats that the crowd had put down. Another covered him. There was complete silence as I brought out the girl. She hung limp in my arms, so gray and white that they knew she was dead. Her head fell backward and from the angle, I knew she had broken her neck. Death must have been instantaneous and painless. I laid her down on a red wool jacket and looked at the crowd, tears running down my face.

“No,” I said. “*No. Not on Christmas Eve!*” Pouring myself into my hands, I *willed* her to live, I gave everything left in me; saw the crushed and mangled spinal cord and piece by piece, cell by cell, I rebuilt her spine, fused the bones and made her *better* than before.

I found that precious, unmeasurable spark that poets called the soul and gave part of mine to her so that it kick-started what had been slowly fading away. She met me there and I knew her, her family, her mother, brothers, and father. I became a part of that family. Her grandparents were there and gently pushed her towards me saying it was not our time to walk their path.

Under my hands, I felt the faintest tremor of a shiver, a beat of an unbroken heart, the shifting of tiny muscles. She opened her eyes and whispered my name. Around us was a cocoon of indrawn breaths, a silence of hushed cathedral shaped immensity. She sat up, drawing the wool coat around her even as I knew that she was allergic to it. I had no need to tell her about the family, she knew what I had done. I tried to stand up but fell over. It broke the crowd’s stillness and one of them, a woman reached down to grab me.

“Honey, are you alright?” she asked and I smiled lopsidedly.

“I will be.” Now, photos of me were popping everywhere. I staggered up with her help and everyone wanted to touch me. I shrank back. “Please. I gotta throw up.” I begged and a lane appeared just as the first Paramedics arrived at the scene. I slipped through the crowd and as they turned to look at Life Flight, I headed for a back alley where I could rest. I wanted to go back and check on Leon but the minute I took two more steps, a crushing blackness swept over me. I never even felt it when I landed face first on the sidewalk.

Washington General was known for its Trauma Center especially for GSWs. It was informed that Life Flight was bringing in multiple victims from a multi-vehicular accident involving a garbage truck and cars. They braced for severe trauma and readied the ORs.

As the first victims arrived, they were shocked. Not by the injuries but at the lack of major ones. No one had anything more serious than bruises and scrapes, even the child one first-aid trained witness had vowed was dead.

Curiously, one driver had holes in both the front and back of his clothing consistent with a through and through impalement but the only evidence was a bruise on both sides of his torso. His blood pressure was low and he showed signs of shock as did all the victims.

The worst case was a teenager who had administered first aid to all the victims according to eye witness reports. She had been found unconscious with deteriorating vitals, on the sidewalk

behind the crowds. Paramedics intubated her, put her on IV fluids and a cardiac monitor but it wasn't until the nurses stripped her in the ED that they realized it wasn't a teenaged girl but a young boy in a wig.

"Transgender?" they wondered but continued with their care.

"BP is 60/42, pulse 32, respirations 30 rapid and shallow," the nurse reported.

"No blood in his rectum," the ER doc said. "Let's get X-Rays and an ultrasound of his belly and CAT scan of his head. Let's see if he's bleeding inside." He opened an eye and stared at the brilliant blue orb, flashing a penlight in both. "Right pupil is blown. Looks like we're dealing with a subdural hematoma. Let's go, people. Our golden hour is ticking."

"Anyone know his name?" one of the nurses asked the Paramedics who had brought him in.

"Asked and someone said he'd come out of a Ford Taurus with another victim. Name of Leon DeCarlos."

"His... son?" He looked at the dark red hair that was almost black.

"He's not married. Girlfriend works at Bethesda Hospital. We've notified her and she's on her way over."

"This DeCarlos conscious?"

"No. He was in shock, we transported him by ambulance."

"Okay. He's J. Doe until we learn who he is," the doctor nodded as they whisked him up to CAT scan.

Chapter Thirty-One

My eyes opened but they didn't open physically. I was floating in the Spirit Realm and my soul shriveled in terror as I waited for the Soul Hunters to attack me yet they were strangely silent. I wandered for a while, creeping softly and trying to leave no trace of my passage. Finally, I found myself back at the giant crystal where I had met Rachel in my dreams. I climbed the rock but couldn't feel it under my hands and knees.

Stood up and gazed as far as I could see yet I saw nothing. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted movement, whirled around and there they were. Tungasila and Rachel. Both were dressed in ceremonial robes and wore an expression of sorrow.

"Rachel!" I jumped down and touched her. She did not move away nor did the old grandfather.

"Lakan," he said and I saw that he was crying.

"What?" I was confused. "Rachel, how can I touch you?" I was terrified.

"We're all dead," she said frankly.

"You're dead?" I could barely get the words out. "How? Rachel, I'm so sorry. You can't be dead."

"That man Chase. He tried to get me to tell him your secrets and he killed me."

"He tortured you?"

"No. He used drugs. I was allergic to the Sodium Pentothal and died before he could use something else to bring me back. He tried but it didn't work. It was the diversion you needed to escape, Lakan. You're more important than me, anyway." She hesitated. "You don't belong here, Lakan. You belong to the whole world. You have to go back."

"But, I'm dead! You said I died," I cried out. "I don't want to go back, not if you're not with me! I remember everything now that I'm here. Grandpa---."

“Lakan, you can’t die. Your body won’t age or break down like ours did. Only your mind can stop your survival. You’re willing yourself to die. You need to wake up and run before the agents learn who you are.”

I didn’t want to listen to him, all I wanted to do was mourn and wallow in self-pity. They would have none of it, badgering me until I had no peace. Even the Soul Hunters would have been preferable to their carping. Rachel told me that as long as I was on the strange border between life and death, they could not hurt me. Reluctantly, I explored the passages back into my body and found it strangely alien, almost as if I were pulling on a suit that didn’t quite fit.

Everything ached. But especially my head. I had a headache the likes of which I’d never experienced before. Even the light on my eyelids hurt, I was nauseous with vertigo that made me question whether I was vertical or prone.

I had a tube down my throat that was breathing for me. Panic set in. I fought it, setting off alarms as I struggled. People in scrubs rushed into my room and flashed lights in my eyes. One was a doctor with green eyes and he pressed his hand down on my chest.

“Take it easy, son,” he said gently. “I’ll take the tube out.” He did so and the relief was enormous. “Better?” I nodded, tears filling my eyes. “Don’t try to talk, your throat is going to be sore. Can you sit up?”

At my nod, he raised the bed. I tugged on the restraints tied to my wrists; they were only gauze. “What’s your name? Why were you dressed as a girl? What’s your relationship with Mr. DeCarlos?”

My first question to him was to ask about the Jacobi family. “They’re fine. A few minor cuts and bruises, we released them yesterday and they went home. They left you flowers and thank you notes.”

“Leon?”

“He’s fine, too. Slept 16 hours straight through. We were a bit concerned, he wouldn’t wake up until then. He says he’s your...boyfriend.”

“No. Costume party. Name’s Lacey.”

“Lacey what?”

“Lacey Hamilton.”

“You’re not transgender?”

“No.” I closed my eyes, the healing had taken more out of me than I’d suspected I could handle.

“People said you did something. We found some strange metal in your X-rays and ultrasound. You had a bad subdural bleed in your brain, Lacey. Lacey, can you hear me?”

I mumbled something. All I wanted to do was go back to sleep. They wouldn’t let me. Someone kept slapping my face or running their fingernails down the soles of my feet. Finally, I yelled in outrage and a warm feeling of righteous anger settled in my belly. I opened my eyes and complained bitterly.

“Lacey, you can’t go back to sleep,” the doctor told me. “You’ve been in a coma for a week. We’re afraid you’ll slip back into it. You have to stay awake.”

I looked around the room. It was private, nicely appointed and filled with flowers, cards, gift baskets and balloons. “Where did all this stuff come from?”

“The people you helped save. The Jacobis, Mr. DeCarlos, the Waste Recovery Company, Mr. Anderson and Mrs. Spinelli. The drivers you rescued.”

“Oh.” I was quiet for a moment and then my stomach growled. Hunger pangs hit me and he smiled.

“Hungry? I can have something brought to you.”

I looked at him with suspicious dread. “Not Jell-O.”

“Something lite. You haven’t eaten solid food in a week.”

“Tomato soup? Grilled cheese?” I countered.

“That’ll be okay. Don’t be surprised if you’re full before you can finish it.” His voice faded and I shook my head.

“My head hurts. Can I have an aspirin?”

His response was to examine my eyes with a penlight and it speared all the way to the back of my brain. It hurt. Instant nausea.

“Lacey? Can you hear me?” His voice came from far away. It had a smell like citrus and brass. My bed tilted and I watched dreamily as the ceiling lights went whizzing by overhead down a hallway that was as long as a train ride. They took me to a place that was really cold.

Buzzing on my head and tufts of hair fell in slow motion. They were shaving my head. After that, I heard voices talking but none of it made any sense.

I

“Lacey?” The air smelled of crisp fall leaves and Lysol. I moved and crinkly sheets moved under me. My feet hit the top sheet and I kicked at the tightness as it rubbed on my toes. I was thirsty, my throat and head hurt.

Faces slowly coalesced in front of me. Serious faces that I didn’t recognize. I tried to speak and my lips felt like those rubber ones I’d played with at Halloween. When I tried to talk, the sounds coming out of my mouth were gibberish.

The man wore a surgeon’s cap, his eyes light brown and serious as was the expression on his tanned face. He wore green scrubs with muscular hairy arms. The woman had bright red hair and freckles with emerald green eyes. They watched me expectantly.

“Lacey, do you understand me? Just nod if you do.” I nodded slowly, my head pounding like a kettle drum. It felt empty and hollow. “You had another bleed in your brain, this one caused massive swelling; we had to open your skull to relieve the pressure. Understand?” Again, I nodded. “We’re not sure how much damage the injury caused to your brain. We’ll be doing tests to determine what, if any.” I agreed. “What’s your name? Lacey Hamilton?” I nodded. “Where were you born? Who are your parents?”

I shrugged. “Is the year 2015?”

Yup. Another nod. We went through the standard questions used to determine intelligence. Most of them I could answer with a yes/ no, T/F but it was tiring. Finally, I put my hand to my head, felt the bandages and the short buzz cut. I managed to ask a question of my own.

“How long me here?” That wasn’t what I wanted to say but that’s what came out.

“Three weeks, Lacey,” he said quietly. “Two in a coma after your surgery.”

“Who pays?”

“Your medical care is being covered by the Waste Recovery Company until we can locate your parents.”

“Orphan.”

“Who takes care of you?”

“DeCarlos.”

“He’s been here to see you, along with the families you saved. I’ll be happy to tell them you’re awake.”

“Police?”

“What about the police?”

“They see me?”

“I’ve not allowed anyone in to see you, Lacey. We weren’t sure if you’d wake up. I didn’t want anyone disturbing your chances of recovery. Still, they come every day. Do you want to see them?”

“Just Leon.”

“We’ll call him. You rest now.”

“Sleep?”

“If you need to.”

“Me hungry.”

“Good.” He smiled. “That’s a great sign. What would you like?”

“Ice scream. For brain freeze,” I said and they laughed at my feeble joke. Both of them left but another nurse remained in the room bustling about.

“Where me?” I asked her. She came over to my side and raised the bed higher so I could see the room and her more clearly. I was in a sort of suite with a hospital bed, table, chairs and a lounge area. Bathroom, TV and closets. It looked more like a hotel room than a hospital. She was a pretty blonde, no more than 5’4” and petite. She looked around twenty-five and kind.

“Pine Valley Rehab Center, that was Dr. Albans and his nurse, Regina. I’m Annmarie, your day nurse. What would you like to eat?”

“Ice scream?”

“Vanilla or chocolate?”

“Both. Water?”

“That I can do right away.” She poured me a glass, stuck a straw in it and I drank as she held it to my lips. Some dribbled down the side of my mouth and into my gown. No matter how careful I was, I couldn’t swallow without some leaking out of my lips.

“Don’t worry about that, Lacey,” she soothed. “It’s just some residual....”

“Brain damage,” I said. “Stroke symptoms.”

“Therapy and rehab will help you regain what you lost,” she said.

She didn’t leave me but hit the call button and asked another nurse to bring two things of ice cream to my room. She fed me slowly and carefully but I couldn’t manage to eat more than half of one cup before I was full and sleepy. This time, no one woke me up but let me sink into that deep slumber where not even my dreams carried me.

The nurses woke me every two hours, explaining that they were concerned I might slip back into a coma but once 24 hours went by where I remained easy to wake, they would stop bothering me. I was grumpy at the interruptions in my sleep yet I was able to deal with it. Okay, mostly deal with it if you didn’t count the complaining and whining.

Annmarie brought me ice cream or toast with PB every time she woke me---the ones taking my vitals collecting blood, urine or checking the drain in my head were the ones that bothered me the most. Probably because they brought the pain. How curious to think that fluid was leaking from my brains into a little bag to be collected, analyzed and deciphered.

In the morning, the doctor called Albans came to see me and inspect his handiwork. He seemed pleased at the rate of recovery as he checked my reflexes, strength, comprehension and speech. He sat back and studied me seriously.

“You have some aphasia, Lacey but it’s not too profound. Your cranial pressure is almost normal and your EEG acceptable. There is some damage to the right temporal lobe which is causing your speech difficulties. There is a 3mm area which is dead in the spot we call

Wernicke's. We can do extensive speech therapy to reroute your brain and you can relearn how to speak."

I knew all that. "Police book me?" I tried again. "Look?" I interrupted him.

He hesitated. "They were. We, that is, I told them that you expired."

That explained why I wasn't recuperating in some secure facility buried underground.

"Why do that?"

"Because of what the witnesses say you did, Lacey. I want to know how you did it. Can you teach other people to do it?"

I knew to what he was referring "Nearby kill me."

"Yes, but it didn't. In fact, you're healing faster than I would believe possible. How?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Didn't shave Rachel." A tear made it down my cheek and despite my resolve, I bawled like a baby. He attempted to console me but I pushed him away with an angry shove.

"You use me just like NSA want," I accused. "Not for sale."

"I'm sorry, Lacey but for your own safety, we can't let you leave here." He spoke to the nurse and once again, I was restrained by heavy canvas straps at my wrists and ankles. I ranted and raved. When I chafed myself raw and bloody, he ordered a muscle relaxer that took away my strength and made me lie there like a stunned flounder.

Some time later, Regina entered with a tray of food and fed me. I thought about refusing but I was hungry. After I was finished, she cleaned off my mouth and sat me up so that I could see the room.

"Who is Rachel?" she asked. I struggled to explain and when I was finished, both of us were teary eyed. I asked about the people in the accident; she told me that Dr. Albans had informed all of them that I hadn't survived the brain bleed. So everyone thought I was dead.

"Yes, Lacey," she said and I realized that I'd spoken aloud. "Your words were perfect."

"Regina, will you help me escape?" I looked her in the eyes and she looked back.

"Do you know where you are, Lacey? This isn't a regular hospital, this is a private mental health facility that is run by Dr. Albans' family and a consortium of other doctors. He has you registered under an assumed name; he even supplied a corpse that the Jacobis buried under your name."

Lacey was an assumed name, too, I thought but didn't tell her. I wondered if Hamilton, Chase or Cameron would mourn or look for me. I resolved then and there that I was going to escape and track down those responsible for Rachel's death if it was the last thing I did.

Chapter Thirty-Two

A year passed. A year of intensive therapy and schooling. They moved me to a private suite in this mental institution. I had all the comforts of home minus a TV, computer, radio, or anything electronic that I could possibly use to force an escape. I had a bathroom much like in a prison cell, a toilet with no seat, handle or water tank. Nothing I could use to create a weapon.

I had a kitchen minus a microwave, stove or oven, no knives or utensils other than a plastic spoon and fork but they allowed me a small dorm sized refrigerator.

My bedroom had no windows and only a mattress on the floor. No exit except for the one door out onto a hallway. The door itself was steel and worked not on a key code or punch but an old-fashioned Klieg lock that I could have picked had I a fork, pen or paper clip. Sadly, they were vigilant about leaving any such devices with me.

My time wasn't spent idly; one of the doctors and Albans provided me with books so that by the end of the year, I had accumulated the equivalent of a college degree from a university on par with MIT, Harvard or Caltech. In fact, Albans presented me with a diploma and told me that he had submitted all my work, papers, and tests online and I had earned a Bachelors through MIT in Advanced Computer Microelectronics. I held the certificate and diploma in one hand staring at the name in Old English Script. **Lacey Hamblin Bachelor of Computer Science**

"That's not my name," I stated. I had never told them my real name.

"It's your real name now, Lacey. I've applied for a Social Security card and ID in that name for you and have a birth certificate too. Your date of birth is January 12th, 2000."

"What day is this?" I had no way of knowing, without TV, radio, telephones or computers, I could not process the date or the seasons.

"March 15th, 2016," he said and watched my eyes. I was in shock. My real birthday had passed, I was 16 years old and two years I had spent in this prison.

"What do I look like?" I asked. They didn't allow me a mirror in this place nor had I anything reflective where I could see my face or judge my age.

"Older. More mature. Quite handsome. You've grown, too. You've hit the six-foot mark. Surprisingly, considering that you've been in this room for two years, you're in good shape, not too fleshy."

"A year," I was in shock and denial. "You've taken another year of my life!" I went to him and the guards who were orderlies easily restrained me. I had learned early on that any attempt to attack one of the personnel brought instant retaliation and a dose of Thorazine. This time was no different except that Albans was frightened of me. He nearly dropped the syringe on my belly and caught it before it could bend the needle. He stuck me in the hip. It burned going in but its effect was immediate. I melted in their arms and was thrown on my couch. One of the goons arranged my feet on the cushions and placed my arms at my side.

Albans sat next to me. "This time has come to test your abilities, Lacey. My tests have shown your brain has healed and is sufficiently mature to handle the stress of healing someone else."

"No."

"Yes. I can keep you in this state and in this room as long as I wish. Or, you can go into one of the quiet rooms in the basement."

I shuddered. I'd been there once after an episode where I had punched one of the orderlies and attempted to bribe a nurse to help me escape. It brought me a week in the dark, no food, no light and only enough room to lay curled up like a shrimp. The quiet didn't bother me as much as the close confines and the dark.

Later that evening, just as the Thorazine wore off, Albans, two of his orderlies and a male nurse entered my room pushing a wheelchair. Without speaking, the nurse dressed me in jeans, t-shirt, winter jacket and boots, lifted me into the chair and tied my wrists and ankles. I was strapped in, a lap robe put over my knees and left the room for the first time in two years.

I tried to ask questions but the moment my first words came out, Albans ordered the nurse to gag me. Worse, they put a hood over my head that caused instant panic as claustrophobia attacked me. I fought furiously, kicking, screaming through the gag and almost managed to flip the wheelchair over backward. There were so many hands trying to hold me that they got in each other's way. I heard Albans say in a high breathless gasp that he wanted to sedate me but he'd dropped the syringe and one of them had stepped on it.

Inevitably, one of them succeeded in stabbing me with a needle and instantly, I became limp under the mass of their bodies. In fact, I couldn't breathe until Albans screamed at them to get off me before they suffocated me with compression strangulation.

I had already passed out from lack of oxygen and wasn't aware of anything until someone lifted my ribcage off the ground forcing air into my lungs. That and another man had O2 going into my nose. I could hear their hushed and frantic discussions around my body on the floor so I hadn't been out for long.

Albans checked me over looking for broken ribs, anoxia of the brain and only when he was satisfied that I hadn't been injured (beyond nearly suffocated to death) he ordered the nurse to pick me up. Instead of being taken out of the hospital in a wheelchair, I was carted out on a gurney into the back of an ambulance with two EMTs, a nurse/guard, and Albans. The security guards followed in an SUV which I barely saw through the back door windows of the rescue unit.

I could see only a small portion of the route; I felt the twists and turns more and once we entered the highway, the thrumming of the steel-belted 17in radials and diesel engine made me even sleepier than the shot. I drifted in and out of consciousness catching snatches of conversations over my head.

"Vitals?" asked Albans.

"Stable. Heart rate went over 200 but it's down to 66. Temp is normal, BP is 112/68. O2 levels are 98%," the EMT said.

"I gave him 50mg IM of Thorazine 20 minutes ago," the doctor said.

There was a blank period. I jerked awake as the ambulance applied the brakes making my cot slide forward. Mumbling a question, I waited for an answer but no one responded. Licking my dry lips, I asked for water and someone held a bottle with a straw to my mouth. I drank slowly letting the fluid swirl in my mouth before swallowing. Fell away again before I could drink more than a few swallows.

Highway 319, six miles, Albans said. Puts us downtown, the Marriot Hotel. Someone will be waiting for us. Senator---

Red light.

Not going to the hospital?

There's a space to pull up out front. Unload here.

Cold air roused me as the back doors opened. A big bump as the gurney hit the end of the truck bed and unlocked the wheels to drop to the ground. I looked up at the concrete rotunda of a fancy hotel entrance where uniformed valets and bellman held open the doors.

We entered the lobby. Two other men dressed in nice suits, armed and with that vague military air of retired Special Forces met us. Both wore ear mics and barely glanced at me as they escorted our party into a special elevator which the two men allowed only me, the doctor and nurse to enter. It went to the 15th floor.

More armed and wired men met us and I saw Albans and the nurse were subjected to a full body pat down. Then, it was my turn and I did nothing to stop them. The EMTs had not come up with us. Albans and the nurse pushed the gurney down a nicely decorated hallway to a pair of double doors which opened before we reached them.

Standing inside was a handsome older man with slicked back black hair, dark eyes and a Latino complexion. Only, there was a grayish tint to his skin. He looked tired and lines of pain bracketed his mouth. Another man stood up and approached, his hand out to Albans.

"Dr. Albans," he greeted as he stared at me.

“Dr. Taylor,” Albans said. “Senator Lourdes.”

“This is Lacey?” the Senator asked. “Is he ill?”

“No. Sedated,” Albans answered briefly. “He wasn’t cooperative.”

“Will you be able to use him if he doesn’t want to do it?” Taylor asked. “I didn’t give Jaimie his morphine and he’s hurting.”

“It’ll work,” Albans promised. “Once you have the blood tests for proof, you can release the funds and you’ll be all set for your Presidential campaign.”

Senator Lourdes said softly, “I had my resignation speech all prepared for next week. There are rumors about my health and speculation whether I was going to withdraw from the race.”

“Senator, after today, no one will ever guess you had Stage III liver cancer,” Albans boasted.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Albans had the nurse and one of the Secret Service agents prop me up on the couch. I was as cooperative as a doll; a puppet being manipulated by its strings. He tied off my arm, drew up a vein and popped an IV port into my elbow. First, he took a pint of blood from me which had the effect of making me even more light-headed than I already was. He hooked me up to fluids giving the Senator my pint of blood.

We were tied to each other like a bizarre set of conjoined twins, our tether the lines and fluids going from me to the other. “There are markers in his blood, Dr. Taylor that will destroy any carcinomas in Senator Lourdes’ cells but the amazing thing is this.” He taped my hands to the Senator’s upper arms so that we were literally joined face to face, an uncomfortable and repulsive position for both of us.

Unwanted and uncalled for, the glow from my body brightened the room and bathed both of us in its brilliance. I felt my consciousness slipping away and into another man’s body. Traveling at the speed of a neuron’s flash, from the brain to nerve cell, I was in his blood and system before I could blink. A blink was a snail’s pace, an eternity.

His cancer had metastasized and was invading everywhere except for his brain. Curiously, I could not breach the blood/brain barrier and I wondered idly if Albans knew that. My blood entered his bloodstream and ate the cancer cells and tumors with a voracious appetite, hunting them down to the last defective gene. We waited at the gate to his brain until my blood cell warriors signaled the all-clear before the WBCs dissipated from his body. As the last one died, so did my connection to him.

I looked out of my own eyes and shoved him away from me. The tape holding us together had melted leaving only a residue of glue. He fell onto the carpeting and his agent hurried to help him up, at the same time shoving me away.

I was already sinking back into the cushions, more exhausted than the drugs had made me. Nausea assailed me and I vomited, just missing their shoes. Albans quick action pulled a small trash can in front of me just in time to catch the puke.

Taylor checked Lourdes out while Albans ministered to me. Taking the sample vial of blood from Lourdes, he then proceeded to give him a physical exam palpating the Senator’s abdomen.

“Any pain?” he asked.

Lourdes shook his head. “I feel funny.” His face twisted and he gasped. Albans stepped in and helped the man over to a plush lounge, taking his vitals.

“It’s normal,” he said hastily as the agents became agitated. “It’s a shock to the system. He’ll sleep and when he wakes, he’ll be fine.”

“And the boy? How is he?” Taylor questioned.

“Don’t worry about him, Dr. Taylor. He’s my little golden goose and he’ll be treated like the treasure he is. It knocks him back, too but takes only a day or so to recover.”

“Jackson,” Taylor spoke to the agent still inside the room. “Take this blood vial to the lab on Clinton St. They’re expecting it and know what tests I want to be done. Tell them again it’s STAT and to deliver the results to you.”

“I’m to wait for it, Sir?” the agent asked.

“Yes. It’s a rush job, shouldn’t take more than a half hour. Till then, we wait for the results.” I heard the door open and close but I had closed my eyes and opening them again seemed to be one of Sisyphus’ chores.

Albans had chosen to use me to make himself rich off the diseases of the wealthy and powerful. “How munch?” I asked quietly and both of them heard me.

“Munch?” Taylor looked puzzled.

“He’s aphasic when he’s tired. It takes a lot out of him to do this.”

“How often can he do it? How does he do it? Produce that blue light? Is he... human?”

Albans laughed. “I’m still not sure. His DNA is human; he has 23 pairs of chromosomes but he has markers I’ve never seen before. We know nothing about his family history; even his name is an alias. We only know that he is of American Indian extraction and Anglo/Saxon heritage from the British Isles.”

“Red hair and blue eyes are Indian?”

“Red enough to be seen as black sometimes. His eyes---we tested them. He can see at night as well as an owl.”

“Where did you find him?”

Albans shook his finger in the other’s face. “That would be telling. But his exploits have him saving the lives of several accident victims, one of which was clearly deceased with a broken neck from eye-witness reports.”

“He can raise the dead?” His voice sounded terrified.

“I’m the second coming,” I said loudly enough so that both of them heard me. “I won’t spare you in the Apocalypse.”

Albans taped my mouth shut. “That’s enough out of you, goose.”

I couldn’t move, spit in his face or even moan. I let my mind drift and where there was once a rich internal landscape, now there was only a gray mist.

It was closer to an hour before the agent returned with a large manila envelope. Taylor opened it and swiftly devoured the results. He gently shook the Senator’s shoulder. “Jaimie, wake up.”

Lourdes woke easily, his dark eyes sparkling and his skin had a healthy bronze glow as if the sun had kissed him. “Your blood tests have come back negative for the carcinoma markers, Jaimie. No sign of any elevated PSATs but to be absolutely sure, I want X-Rays and ultrasounds of your liver.”

“Release the money, David,” he said. “I feel great. Better than I did when I was 18.”

“Are you sure, Jaimie?”

“David, most mornings when I got up, I could barely stand, my guts hurt so much. Even the pressure of my waistband hurt. Now---,” he pushed hard on his belly and then proceeded to

thump himself. He grinned, did a few deep knee bends and then an athletic flip over backward that jarred the floor.

The door flew open as his other agents hurried in because of the noise. Lourdes waved them back. "It's okay, guys. I was doing backflips." And just to prove he could, he did a series of them across the carpeting.

"I need to get my patient back to his hospital room," Albans said. "If you'll excuse us?"

Lourdes helped lift me back into a wheelchair holding the IV bag over my head. I still had my eyes closed so I didn't see the look from the Senator to his doctor but I could sense that something was out of place.

I went down the elevator in the chair surrounded by their agents and Albans' guards. Once they put me back on the gurney and locked me in place, I heard the doctor softly warn the men to take a different route home as he did not trust the senator or his men.

As the diesel engine started, it covered the sound of the doctor's cell phone conversation yet I knew he was checking to see if his money had been transferred to his offshore bank account. I knew that he had started it years ago scamming money off Medicaid fraud but it was small potatoes to the scheme he had running with me. I could almost see his brain working and picking out his next customer. There was a huge pool of old rich people with health problems who would pay dearly for what I could give them.

"You're scum," I said and he sneered at me.

"Rich scum, something you'll never be."

"I was rich," I said and stopped before I said too much. "Where are we going?"

"You'll find out when we get there." He turned away from me and sat in the front with the driver. It was not the same pair of EMTs that had brought me---these were the hospital security staff that had accompanied me to the hotel. I looked out the windows and saw that we were heading north, not back west towards the hospital.

I tried to question one of them but no one would speak to me. Eventually, I let my exhaustion carry me into a nap where my dreams frightened me. I woke up as two things happened. The first was that a particularly ugly demon thing was eating me piece by piece and I woke to scream as his teeth bit into my groin just as the security guard called Brian Murray dropped the gurney onto the sidewalk. It was warmer here but still had the chill of late winter. Everyone wore heavy coats. We were in the driveway of an older nursing home set back in the woods which surprised me. Anyone wealthy enough to pay Albans for the use of me couldn't be living in such a dump. It was drab and rundown.

I was sweating and shaking in the aftermath of the dream; aware enough to feel the weakening of the last dose of sedative. I pretended that I was still under its effects.

"Nightmare?" Murray asked and locked the legs so he could drop the head part. He pushed me inside under the portico towards the automatic doors even though an aide stood there and held them open. We entered a dark, dreary lobby with the receptionist's desk on the left. It smelled like pee and disinfectant but the pee was winning.

A woman sat behind the circular desk, her hair pulled back off a face that had been severely burned but made somewhat normal by plastic surgery. She had been beautiful once yet she made no attempt to hide her scars or deny them. Her eyes were a sparkling hazel and they lit up when she saw the doctor.

"Dr. A, how are you?" She stood up and came around the counter to hug him. Only then did she look at me. "This is your patient? We have a room ready for him on the first floor of the Hoboken Unit, F Wing. 121."

“Thank you, Mary-Margaret. It’s good to see you, too. You look wonderful.” He sounded sincere and she smiled. Her muscles pulled her lips up and it *was* a lovely smile.

“You’re blind as usual, Dr. A but thanks anyway. You want me to show you the way? It’s a bit of a mess, been closed down for ten years.”

“I remember, Mary-Margaret. Thanks.” Albans led the way down a wide corridor, the walls covered with artwork done by the patients. Some were childish, others exemplary and some the product of a deranged mind.

After a five-minute walk, he turned right down a series of other hallways. This part of the home was nearly empty; the rooms needed painting and plastering, water stains marked the ceiling and the linoleum cracked with missing sections. Plywood closed off some of the doorways to abandoned rooms yet he pushed me deeper into the wing’s heart turning into the corridor after corridor until we were lost.

The room he chose was once a large private one and it must have housed a severely deranged individual. The walls were padded and there wasn’t any furniture in it; just locking stanchions on the floor and wall where handcuffs could be run through and bolted. Nothing removable that a patient could tear off and use to assault staff or themselves. No windows, and bars across the doorway with an intercom next to that. I was sure there were cameras in the room but I doubted that they still worked.

Albans shoved me into the center of the room and locked the wheels of the gurney. He ran the belt restraints from me to the anchors on the floor. I tried pulling and he’d left me no give at all. Ordering his men to follow, they exited.

I shouted. “Hey! Are you going to leave me here alone? What if I get loose?”

He turned at the door. “Try. Murray and Jason will be just outside the door which I am locking.” He slammed both bars and steel door. I heard the distinct clunk as the locks engaged yet I heard nothing from the other side. The room was sound-proofed. No one could hear me screaming nor could I thump hard enough on the gurney to make any noise that would travel. I tried. After an hour of fruitless straining, twisting and hollering, all I had to show for it were sore wrists, throat and some pulled muscles.

I was sweaty, too but that wasn’t a problem in the dry, dusty room. Although it wasn’t heated, my exertion kept me warm. I was ravenously hungry which made me more exhausted than before my tirade.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Waiting for me was hard. I’d spent almost two years of my life waiting for something and to lose even an hour now drove me crazy.

The only clue I had that someone had returned was when the door opened. I raised my head off the flat pillow to see the doctor pushing a young man seated in a wheelchair. He had that blank-faced frozen look of someone with a traumatic brain injury. From the scars on his head and face the accident must have been horrific. His arms and legs were drawn up in contractures, he was perched in the chair more than sitting in it.

He wore hospital scrubs in a dark navy with booties on his feet. His forearms were bare so that I could see his tattoos. He had been in Afghanistan with Special Forces.

“He’s one of the SEALs, isn’t he? Let me guess, someone’s rich and famous son? Won’t that bring you unwarranted scrutiny, Dr. Albans? When he shows up on two feet and completely recovered?”

“I see your aphasia has disappeared. I knew it would. You’ve healed that part of your brain. You’re amazing, Lacey. I foresee a long and profitable relationship between the two of us. Say hello to Michael Faraday, Master Sergeant. His father is CFO of Black River Pharmaceuticals.”

“Who supplies drugs overseas to third world countries, I know. How did he get hurt? IEDs?”

“Suicide bomber on a motorbike. Rode over the hill into the ravine where the men were patrolling. Right into the middle of Faraday’s squad and blew himself up. Six men and women died. He was one of the lucky ones.”

He went on to recite the litany of the sergeant’s injuries which included total destruction of his spleen, most of his bowels, part of his liver and amputation of his genitals. I winced. He would definitely have wanted to die along with his team rather than live like that.

“Bring him over here,” I said and Albans looked surprised at my cooperation. I ignored him as I pulled at the restraints impatiently. The doctor released my arms and the security people stepped closer, one closing the door. They held Tasers at the ready.

I took hold of his contracted arms, my palms cupping his elbows. Slowly, his head turned towards my face but there wasn’t anything behind his green eyes. Warmth spread from my hands and bathed both of us yet I was careful not to let the glow touch either of Alban’s men.

His brain was open to me; my blood did not need to circulate through him to heal these injuries. I started with the organs first, a relatively simple task of forcing his own cells to replicate and regrow new tissue. Every human has the ability stored in their lizard genes but not the knowledge to turn them on. I repaired his genitals making sure that I did not turn on the gene that would open his ability to do what I did or to make it inheritable. I kept him wholly human, homo sapiens, not homo superiors.

The last thing I tackled was his brain because that was the hardest. So much was blank and dead, many memories lost and gone forever. He knew his name, rank and the faces of his buddies. He knew they were dead. He knew he was gravely injured and wanted to die. He knew his mother and his childhood address. The name of a bar in D.C. and a girlfriend named Ivy. He remembered BUDS training but not that he had passed. A field of bluebonnets in the spring. A cotton candy cone of clouds out of an aircraft’s window. Wearing his dress blues to a funeral but not whose funeral it was.

I knew him better than he knew himself as I slowly retreated reiterating that all would be well, that he was well and not as he remembered.

I slumped onto the gurney in a faint so missed seeing him explode out of the chair and nearly take out both men before they tasered him to the floor. He was handcuffed and watched as Albans picked himself up, rubbing his chest and jaw where Faraday had punched him.

Albans slapped me gently on the cheek, bringing me around. I blinked weary eyelids. I couldn’t see through him so I wasn’t sure how the Sergeant was.

“Mickey?”

“How do you feel?” His fingers were at my pulse. “Jacobs, get my bag,” he ordered and the man left the room at a trot. He left the door open. “Lacey, your heart rate is 32!”

“I’m tired.” I closed my eyes. “Go away.” He slapped me again and I felt my heart skip a beat. Pain radiated in my chest and spread down my arm. Sweat beaded instantly on me, soaking my clothes.

Things got hazy after that. Albans stuck me with several needles but they didn’t hurt. The first one made my heart jump like a frog stuck in an electric socket. It raced and it hurt. My brain

calmly told me that I had gone into bradycardia and with a shot of adrenaline, I was now experiencing tachycardia, the end result of which was heart failure and death. Although I wasn't sure if I could die that way. I thought only the complete destruction of my brain would ensure death. And maybe not even then.

"Goddammit!" Albans cursed. "Don't you dare die on me!" He was about to stick this enormous needle in my heart and I reached up with my left hand to hold his away from my chest.

"Stop." He did. I sat up, lines and leads trailing. He had found an old EKG machine and had hooked me up to it. I slowed my heart beat to 66, my BP to 112/68 and raised my core temp to 97°. Then, I looked over at a wide-eyed Mike Faraday who was now sitting in an old, dusty folding chair. In handcuffs and sandwiched between two of Albans' men.

"La---," he started and finished. "cey." He had been about to speak my real name 'Lakan' but had changed it with my subconscious warning. That connection would slowly fade but right now, he could almost read my thoughts and me, his.

He knew I wanted to escape and his eyes promised he would try to help me. He moved his arms and legs tentatively, gaped his mouth to ask the doctor who he was, where he was and what were they doing to the both of us.

Albans answered him patiently, explaining that Faraday's father had arranged for a new treatment for wounded veterans of which he, Mike Faraday was the first to be experimented on. With spectacular results. He was now heading home after a short physical. Mike knew that Albans was lying but he also knew that he had to go along with it as he was almost powerless. No clothes, no money and two big dudes with Tasers beside him. He had no clue where he was or what direction he could run.

Faraday looked at me. "My team?" he asked with an audible thickening in his throat. He knew my answer but he wanted to hear it, like picking at the scab even when you knew it would hurt.

"The bomber. All six and the Major, too," I said. He closed his eyes, remembering the flash as the bomber exploded and pieces of human flesh, bone, and metal sheared through him and his friends with the force of a hurricane's wind. And then, the flames as his flesh caught fire. The smell of roasted pork and sizzling blood.

He was wheeled away and such was his sorrow that he didn't object as they removed him. Immediately, Albans restrained me in the ties bolted to the floor and we waited for the guards' return to repeat the process with me.

Parked in the drive next to my ride was a brand new, state-of-the-art ambulance manned by paramedics and more security guards dressed in three-piece suits. There was also a stretch limo with blacked out windows. I watched as the sergeant was helped into the car and the fancy ambulance drove away empty. No one said anything, no comments on Mike's changed looks or status. I wondered if they thought he was someone else but that changed when the back window rolled smoothly down and a distinguished white-haired man leaned out. I recognized him, Charles M. Faraday, CFO of Black River Pharmaceuticals. I couldn't believe Albans was stupid enough to let them see me. He studied me with an appraising eye, speaking quietly to the doctor but I could hear every word.

He promised Albans that a million dollars had been deposited to the Bahamian bank of his choice as of five minutes ago, matching the good faith deposit earlier in the week.

Albans replied that Senator Lourdes had recommended his case and had asked him to look into it as a favor to him.

“Someone will call you later this week,” the senior Faraday returned. “He has a son that OD’d and is brain damaged---on life support. The doctors told him to pull the plug but he refused. His son can’t leave the facility. Can you do your treatments there?” His eyes swiveled to me waiting on the gurney. “Is he another one of your patients?”

“Yes,” he lied smoothly. “Automobile accident. He’s recovering nicely but I have to get him back before he misses his PT.”

“Thank you again, Dr. Albans. You have no idea how much this means to me, to have my son back whole and sane.”

The window closed and the door opened as the CFO stepped out. He extended his hand and they shook. Albans waited for him to return to the seat and drive off before they loaded me like cargo into the ambulance’s bay. We followed the drive out to the state highway and back towards Pine Valley. The drive took several hours and drove through two states. I dozed most of the way, waking only when they stopped for bathroom breaks and twice to eat at rest stops. Murray brought me MacDonalds and fed me Big Macs with fries and a green shake. St Patrick’s day, he said. I ate until I polished off every bite and he went back for seconds, bringing out three more full-sized meals. I ate those too. My caloric requirements after a healing must have been astronomical. He told me if he ate like that, he’d weigh four hundred pounds.

“Help me,” I said softly so that only he could hear me.

He hesitated. “Can’t. He owns us.”

“It isn’t right, what he’s doing to me. I’m no better than his slave.” The rest of them climbed in and he shut up, roughly wiping the salt off my face and sitting back against the steel wall of the unit. We rode in silence into the afternoon and night. The only break in the monotony were the lights bouncing into the back of the rescue bay.

Chapter Thirty-Five

I was tied in a chair in the room I’d come to learn was called the “Special Treatment Room”. In the basement hidden away at the end of a long maintenance tunnel, it was an eight-foot square box with padded walls and a cement floor with a drain. The only heat inside was what leached in from the furnace and boiler room next door.

I didn’t know why I was down here; I hadn’t done anything wrong or refused any of Albans’ requests. I’d been out of my room three more times performing miracles for him and each time, I was laid low from the energy drain yet I bounced back within a day or so. He was careful to keep the healings to one every two weeks, afraid that it would burn me out. By my closest guess, he had made nearly twelve million dollars. How much money, how rich did one man need to be? I’d also heard that Senator Lourdes had taken the four more states he’d needed to win his party’s nomination for the Presidential race. Rumors of his ill health were just that---unfounded rumors.

I knew my continued health and well-being was of utmost importance to the doctor so I couldn’t understand why he had brought me down to this spare room. It was damp, dark and depressing. The cement floor stained an ugly blotched gray paint, the walls padded with old mattresses and the only illumination was a pull light ten feet above the center of the room on a steel beamed ceiling joist. He had dosed me with a stiff shot of Thorazine so I sat like a lobotomy patient as he locked the chair in place and handcuffed my wrists to the armrests and my ankles to the frame, not the leg rests. Those came off, resting on pins that allowed them to swivel.

The door slamming shut and locking echoed with the same ponderous note of doom as the one in the Indiana Jones movie. Only I wasn't the intrepid archeologist and I didn't own a trusty bullwhip.

It seemed hours later that men returned. These men were none I'd seen before, dressed in chinos with heavy parkas covering their torsos. Armed and serious. They unlocked my chair and one pulled out a handcuff key, removing the cuffs from my limbs but he replaced them with zip ties. As he brought out a black hood, fear made the drug's hold ease back a little. I groaned and tried to speak but all I could manage to do was drool all over myself. He put the hood over my face and I panicked. I couldn't believe that they were doing this to me *again*.

A curious thing happened next. Sound disappeared except for the rapid pounding of my heart. I no longer felt anyone's hands on me, nor smelled the acrid scent of our sweat. I rubbed my face on my shoulder and was able to lift the hood over my eyes. What I saw made my fear escalate. Everyone around me was frozen in place as if time stood still. I stared only for a second and began furiously throwing myself against the back of the chair. It didn't move at all, stuck in the same special stasis as the men. I turned my attention to my wrists. Pulling against the ties hurt but they stretched until they broke; it was like pulling taffy. The plastic made no sound as they fractured.

I had no idea how long this strange cessation of time would remain so I hurriedly unbelted my waist and tore the ties holding my ankles to the leg rests.

Standing took as much energy as wading through deep mud; I could see my blood descending from my wrists as if the drops were floating rather than falling yet I moved faster than the droplets. I was down the hallway and out of the main entrance before the blood hit the floor.

I didn't spare a glance back or study my surroundings. I headed for the tree line I could see along the long driveway instinctively cataloging the various trees. Sweet gum, magnolia. Dogwood, pine, Catawba and cedar. Somewhere south then. It wasn't until I heard red-eyed vireos chirping that I realized that time had resumed its normal pace.

Behind me, I heard strident alarms and shouting voices. I ran deeper into the woods, tearing off my coat and reversing it so that its bright blue nylon was now a dark gray that would blend better in the shadows.

I ran on a carpet of leaves that rustled and crackled as I scanned for the best route through these woods heading for the deep heart of the forest where I could elude pursuit. I ran on trembling legs that drugs and inactivity had made weak but as I looked at my back trail, I was gratified to see that I was leaving no trace of my passage on the trail.

There were trails through here---dirt bikes and horse hooves had torn up the ground and I followed some for the first mile or so until they crossed a wider jeep trail marked by Forest Service signs. There, I left the trod-upon ways and worked my way uphill towards a ridge thickly covered with hemlocks where the red clay was slippery and wet. Cattails trembled softly around the edges of small bogs and late season berry bushes where long thorns snagged my clothes. I was grateful for the jeans as they stopped most of the damage from briars but they tore at the nylon of my jacket and my exposed face. I turned around to make sure I hadn't left any material on their voracious points to give away my position.

The slope became almost a 60° incline and slowed my progress even further than my exhaustion. In some places, I had to use my hands and knees to pull me up using tree trunks and rocks. More and more rocks broke the ground until I was on an escarpment too sloping to be called a cliff but it sure came close.

Two hours later, I had reached the crest without skylining myself. From the top of the ridge, I could see down into the valley where the institution lay in a small cove of woods near a winding road that went southeast towards a highway. I saw flashing lights on vehicles parked in the driveway but was too far away to make out the ant-sized figures. I assumed the doctor had told the State Police and Rescue that a mental patient had escaped.

I looked beyond the ridge and saw a vast expanse of forest laid out before me. In that wilderness, I saw no roads, no houses and precious few patches of open land. I had no supplies, no weapons, and no means to survive on my own outdoors. On the plus side, I was clothed, warmly dressed and highly motivated to stay free. I began walking with a sense of determination and an eagerness that I hadn't felt in years, walking downhill aiming West towards the setting sun. I knew that the searchers would stop when it became too dark to track me unless they brought dogs. That was the one thing I feared, I knew I could break my back trail with men but dogs were harder to fool.

I reached down and grabbed a handful of red clay and squeezed, it went through my fingers like very wet Playdoh. Georgia clay. I was willing to bet that I was in Georgia.

Sliding down the steep slope on the other side of the ridge left more sign than I wanted but it was too steep to walk down in places. Still, I disguised most of my passage by using the available deer trails. I saw where they had taken advantage of the easiest route and followed in their path. I passed spots where the big bucks had rubbed the velvet from their horns and other places where the black bear had scraped their claw marks 8-eight foot-high up on the tree trunks.

Coyotes followed me as I made it down into the hollows at the ridge's base but backtracked when my feet stepped onto a well-traveled hidden road.

Cautiously, I followed it, emerging in a clearing of ten acres of young plants that stood only a foot or so high. At first, I thought it was corn planted in neat rows to attract the deer but then, my eyes caught the glimmer of nets overhead. Camouflage nets.

Skirting the edges of the clearing, I saw booby-traps laid out. Knew then that this was one of those illegal marijuana patches hidden on state or federal land and was probably guarded by big dogs and/or armed men.

When I heard the click of a trigger pulled back, I froze. I raised my hands slowly and spoke. "I'm a fugitive! Don't shoot!" I felt a barrel touch the back of my neck and did not move as another pair of hands searched me.

"No ID but he's wearing a hospital bracelet from Pine Valley Mental Clinic," a cracker voice whispered. "Ain't that down in Georgia somewhere?"

"You escape from the loony bin?" Definite southern with its corn pone twang. My mind raced trying to decide what to say. For me, it was an eternity, to them it was only a second that I hesitated.

"Yes, but I'm not crazy. My parents put me in because I have a drug problem and won't quit."

He guffawed. "What kind?"

I didn't look like a meth addict, my nose showed no sign of coke use but I did have a collection of needle marks on both arms. "Heroin."

"Well, fancy that. How old are you?"

"Sixteen. What are you going to do to me?" I didn't have to put the quiver in my voice, it was already there. "I haven't seen your faces, I don't know where I am or where your plot is and besides, no one would believe an escaped mental patient anyway."

“You know that nuthouse is 40 miles over the ridge from here? How did you make it that?”

“Desperation,” I answered honestly. “I followed the deer trails.”

“Who’s lookin’ for you?”

“State Cops. Search and Rescue, the hospital staff.”

“They’ll follow your tracks and find our patch.” Now he sounded ominous.

“Bro, I looked. He didn’t leave no tracks. Cain’t even find where he came down the road,” the second voice said. “I ain’t stiffen’ no kid, especially if the state pigs want him. What are we going to do with him?”

“You always was too squeamish,” the one holding the gun said and pulled the trigger.

Time stopped. Again. I threw myself sideways and down, saw the bullet leave the barrel where my head had been seconds before. I saw the slender doughy-looking redneck with a twenty-two Ruger in his large well-calloused hand. He wore camouflage like his brother. And like his brother, he was 5’8” tall, sandy-haired and blue-eyed, none too clean. Neither man would have stood out in a crowd of country people but if there was ever a description of a shifty character, it was this pair. I would have drowned them at birth.

From the looks of his camos, I probably wasn’t the first one he’d shot in the head. They were blood-spattered and filthy. I watched the bullet slowly make its way along its trajectory and realized that it would hit a steel shed on the tree line that was barely visible under the hemlocks. One of those kit ones you put together with a hex lock and screwdriver.

Trig equations went through my head instantly and I calculated that the bullet would ricochet off that and hit the second brother in the belly. I hesitated, the second man hadn’t wanted to hurt me. The other had been going to kill me and still might if I didn’t leave before time resumed.

I tried to move the bullet and found that almost as hard as moving the wheelchair had been. I could move freely in the stasis but objects required massive energy to shift them. I did succeed in moving its trajectory enough so that the twenty-two bullet went straight through the shed and impacted a tree behind it.

I searched their camp and came up with enough gear to help me survive. A drop cloth, cooking utensils, hunting knife, fish hooks and line, sleeping bag and a backpack in which to stuff it. It all in. I took some of their food – stuff I could carry easily like the MREs. Even so, the pack weighed close to 40 pounds by the time I was done. I sort of hesitated over the sleeping bag. I was afraid it was crawling with lice after having seen the two’s hygiene arrangements. They had none.

As I took my first steps out of their camp under the hemlocks, I heard the sounds of the forest come back. That and the screaming. I ran. As quietly as I could through the brush, not following any trails but taking an easterly direction away from them and back towards the Institute. Within minutes, I had lost them and when I continued at a jog until it was so dark that even I couldn’t see. Night had finally claimed the woods and I needed to find a hiding spot.

In a small gully where water collected and ran off below me into a stream, I made my way down. I could hear the water trickling so I followed it as best I could. The footing was terrible, rocks rolled under my feet and I was afraid that I would turn an ankle. Or worse, fall in and soak my clothes. Of course, I could raise my metabolism so I didn’t freeze to death but that would make me stand out like a supernova on FLIR helicopters. I was positive that they would use choppers to track me. I wasn’t sure how far Albans would go to recapture me; I was more afraid that his search would bring Chase’s attention to the affair.

Ash began drifting slowly and settled on my lashes and hair. I smiled. I had set fire to the pot patch before I'd left knowing that both men would try to rescue what they could rather than chase me. When the authorities checked, they'd find the burned area, maybe the two if they were stupid enough to stay there but nothing to indicate I had been there.

Now the ravine opened up to a small clearing on the edge of an escarpment. It was only a drop of 20 feet yet it offered a spectacular view and a place to camp. A small crescent moon had risen, providing just enough light so that I could see. Endless miles of trees, giant pines and firs spread far into the darkening distance. To my right, the sky was brighter indicating the glow of some big city. To the left, more darkness but I could see winking lights of amber and white with occasional blue ones. It must have been a major highway for that many headlights. What I did not see were any search or aircraft lights.

Once I spread out the drop sheet, I unrolled the sleeping bag. I couldn't stand the thought of lying on it so I risked a ten-second flare of intense heat that literally fried whatever was living in the down and nylon folds. Then, I shook it out and was amazed at the microscopic debris that fell off.

Satisfied that I wouldn't become infested, I crawled into the subzero bag and fell asleep in minutes as it held the warmth of my body. I didn't dream or I didn't remember any of them.

It was the sun climbing through a gap in the mountains that woke me. Which meant that my traveling had turned me from west to east. I poked my head up and watched the sunrise. Not having seen one for two years, I was especially appreciative for the ever-changing display. I whispered a prayer for Rachel and my great-grandfather and then blessed the morning.

I turned my attention to my wrists where I'd torn them breaking the zip ties. Both had already scabbed over with nearly healed lesions beneath. Another few hours and they would be totally gone.

I was starving. Opening three packages of MREs, I bolted down the first two before the growling in my belly quit. After the third, I was satisfied but thirst began to plague me. Digging through the pack, I found the canteen I had taken from the drug growers. It was full but I wasn't sure if it was water or booze. If it was booze, I was going to dump it out and refill it from the stream I could hear nearby.

Pouring a little into my palm, I stared dumbstruck as my hand turned blue. A cautious sip and I was tasting blueberry Kool-Aid, the drug duos' drink of choice. It was sickeningly sweet but my body took it in with happy abandon.

Doing your business in the woods took a lot of careful planning. You wanted it far enough away from your camp that the smell didn't hit you but not so far that you might get lost or hurt in the dark. You didn't want to leave any sign that you had been there and a big stinking pile of human feces was a dead giveaway that humans were in the area.

I hadn't thought to bring a shovel but there were plenty of rocks available. Digging a latrine was out of the question but I could scrape out a small ditch and cover it when I was done. Some leaves kicked over the disturbed soil and no one would notice it before they ever stumbled onto my campsite. If they ever found it.

The escarpment didn't offer an easy way down, not without ropes and climbing gear. I did find a narrow trail along the cliff's edge made by deer that I could easily follow. Clever creatures, they had descended the ridgetop in a ravine that brought them concealment, water and an easy escape route up to the places where they yarded for the night. Grass lay flattened in a small series of open patches, too small to be called clearings. I found plenty of deer pellets scattered about; I didn't linger. Kept going down the trail.

It was midmorning when I stepped on a small berm above the highway hidden by Cherokee Rose bushes and massive thickets of oak leaf hydrangeas. Live oaks were scattered around, huge trees that formed enormous umbrellas of leaves. Some of these covered acres with their low hanging branches and offered an easily accessible hiding place if I wanted to climb. Not much of an escape route once up in the tree and I would have to share my perch with fire ants. They weren't kind neighbors. Over the top of the mound of sand and dirt, I was looking at I-20 which went from the Georgia coast to Texas. Not where I wanted to go but then, I was heading back towards the east coast, not Colorado.

Traffic was pretty heavy, especially the 18 wheelers. I saw so many of them that it made my mind ache. I was pretty tired from the forced activity I'd done in the last few hours. After all, I'd been stuck in a room for a year while they experimented on me. Once again, I wondered if I was tagged like a piece of luggage or a lost pet.

An occasional State Police SUV or car whizzed by yet the one thing I didn't see were choppers. They were conspicuously absent from the sky, I did not even see a local news one.

Hitchhiking was definitely out. I knew that the minute I stepped onto the pavement, I would be on every trucker's CB and the cops would pick me up. Same thing if I attempted to walk on the shoulders; pedestrians weren't allowed on the interstates. No sense heading for the next exit; I had no money to get a bus ticket, train seat or rent a car. Not that anyone would rent me one---my age, lack of credit resources and no ID were all against that happening. I didn't know how to steal one and although I knew the theory of hotwiring the ignition, I wasn't sure if I could.

I looked at the next rest area and for once, my luck was with me. It was only a few miles up the road and I could walk on the edge of the wood line where no one could spot me.

A brisk twenty minutes through the leading edge of the tree-line brought me to the off-ramp leading into the next town of Poplar's Bluff. It was a village of some 35,000 people, small enough to get around on foot but large enough to not be immediately noticed as a stranger. Unless, you hitchhiked in. I timed my arrival with a school bus, mingling with the teenagers as they disembarked, flying off the bus and down the street towards a Burger King. My stomach chose that moment to decide it was hungry and had no qualms about letting the entire world know about it. I dug through the backpack and found a hidden slot cut in the lining. Inside that was a wallet from the brother who had wanted to shoot me.

To my surprise, he had four IDs inside, along with credit cards in eight names with addresses in GA, TN, and NJ., and a wad of fifty and hundred dollar bills. The only driver's license that looked like the brother was the one with the name DWAYNE DAVID PEEBLES. The others probably belonged to the people unfortunate enough to stumble on the pair. They were most likely dead. I had been lucky not to be their next victim.

I shivered with excitement as I sidled up to the counter and ordered my first ever take out meal on my own. A giant Whopper, large fries, salad and a large black coffee. Sat down at a table near the back doors and ate in slow contentment as the dining room erupted with the noisy and cheerful chatter of fifty teenagers.

I was aware of them studying me but their attention was diverted when a State Trooper strode in and ordered at the counter. He turned around and stared at the kids, grinning as a dead silence fell over the raucous group. I was with them, my hand froze at my mouth with a dripping burger running down my arm.

When he left carrying a bag and a coffee, talk resumed. A pretty girl with white blonde hair and cornflower blue eyes stood up, dumped her tray and walked over to my table.

Chapter Thirty-Six

She introduced herself. “Hi. My name is Kelly. Kelly Macintosh. Like the apple.” She had a soft accent that was sweet and slow, almost as if she had learned English as a second language. There were some that suggested southern drawls were a second language.

“Andrew,” I said using one of the names I’d seen in Peebles’ wallet.

“Haven’t seen you around here before.”

“Naw. Just moved in last week. We’re staying at the motel down the street,” I lied after having seen the Clarion Suites.

“Looking for a place to rent? You and your... family?”

“Just me and my dad. Yeah, he lost his job and we moved away where he could find work.”

“The chicken processing plant? My mom works there. Maybe she could get him in.”

“No. He’s into construction.” That’s what I remembered from the stuff in DeCarlos’ car.

“You gonna be in Poplar High School?” She looked down as her phone played the old country tune, Hillbilly Rock. “Gotta go.” She wrote her phone number on my napkin and scooted off to join the crowd of teenagers as they left en masse. All I could see was Rachel’s face, her dark eyes and black as midnight hair. I wanted to put my head down on the table and bawl, I didn’t want any girl to think I was fair game or interested in them when my heart was still reeling over her death.

I picked up my garbage, dumped it unnecessarily hard into the can and went out the back door to wander aimlessly down the street. Two avenues over was a strip mall and a Walmart. The parking lot was well-lit with video cameras at the tops of poles. I watched them swivel as they panned the lot but most were too high to record more than general impressions of a face. The cameras inside the store were a different story but I saw and avoided them whenever I could.

Walmart had a good selection of pre-paid phones that didn’t have to be registered. I bought the cheapest smartphone, a 200 minutes’ card and spent an hour in the bathroom charging and re-wiring the cell so that it did more than take photos, make calls or text. In short, I made another quipp that I could use to do any number of illegal things.

I used the browser to look up DeCarlos’ phone number which gave me access to his e-mails, his home PC and his work’s. He was not just in construction, he owned the company. One of the tenth largest in the South called Cherokee Engineering and Construction.

I typed, *Leon, your girlfriend misses you. Can we meet? I need money for a new dye job, a funeral suit and flowers for an empty casket. Omikiya yo.*

Sent it to his work PC and waited. I didn’t know if he was in his office, on a job site, on his phone or even back to work after the accident. I couldn’t wait in the men’s room much longer, I’d already had two irate men pounding on my stall door and demanding I get out. I gathered up my gear, slung the backpack over my shoulder and wandered through the men’s section picking out a change of clothes.

I bought new jeans, underwear, socks, sneakers, two flannel shirts, t-shirts, long underwear and a rain jacket. Then, I had to purchase another backpack to carry it all as the sleeping bag took up most of the room in the other pack. I wanted to get a new sleeping bag but I was afraid to spend more money as the clerk was already eyeballing the roll of bills in my wallet.

After that, I wandered down the street to a coffee shop called Java Joe’s that had free Wi-Fi and computer stations. I sat near one with a large mocha latte which cost a cheap two bucks and surfed the web, checking out the NSA, CIA, and HS sites. Googled Albans and found out that President Hamilton was no longer in office and his ex-wife was not the Director of the CIA

anymore. Instead, it was Allan Chase and Dr. Cameron was listed as one of the scientists on his staff.

There was no mention of Rachel Little Bear's death and nothing on Yahoo about the Casinos or its CEO. I did find several articles on the accident, scores of news blogs on Senator Lourdes and only a bare mention about Michael Faraday returning home to his family estates in Vermont.

My phone vibrated and I touched the screen to open an e-mail from horseofadifferentcolor@gmail.com.

Who is this? How did you get my e-mail address?

I texted back *Meet me at the place where sorrow begins. E wang oh ma nee yo. Your kisses suck.*

Doha, he texted me. I grinned. For the first time in a long time, I felt a lift of optimism.

Long shadows followed me as I scuffed my feet through the litter and debris in the street gutters. This small town had sidewalks and the businesses that comprised the downtown area were mostly chain places like Rite-aid, dollar stores, and Piggly-Wiggly. Most of the mom and pop places were gone and what remained were Insurance agencies, a few knick-knack places, thrift shops and a hardware shop. Liquor and quite a few bars were next to the empty store fronts.

I didn't see a police station but that didn't mean there wasn't one. There were a few people walking around and the usual crowd hanging around outside the bars smoking in the chill air. A few looked like they could be Dwayne Peebles cousins. One of them wore mechanics' coveralls. I suspected I seemed a likely target for them with my two backpacks and rough appearance. I looked like I had spent the night under a bush. A perfect mugging victim or bait for chicken hawks.

Time to find a place to hole up until I could get a ride to my meet with Leon. I went inside the Rite-aid, bought myself a cold Pepsi and used the smartphone to find the bus station, its schedule and pay for a ticket to the town of Hartford, Tn. It wasn't far, just about an hour's drive upstate, over the border into Tennessee. I then set the phone into GPS mode so that it worked just like a Garmin in a car, although once I had seen the route, I had memorized it and didn't need the map. Walking through the coming dusk staring at a phone screamed 'tourist and victim.'

I walked past the bar again on my way back to the bus depot. Three of the smokers got up off the bench, threw out their cigarettes and started to follow me.

"Hey, kid," one called. He was over six feet, greasy gray long hair in a ponytail with an acne-scarred face. Worn jeans none too clean, Carhart jacket and boots held together with duct tape. "You got any money on you?"

"No." I kept walking.

"You a runaway? Hey, stop!" He started to come after me. I ran, both packs thumping against my back and knee slowing me down. After a few yards, he stopped, bent over and gasped, his wind gone between the smoking and booze. He cursed me and I threw him the finger until I heard the loud chortle of an unmuffled car behind me. An old rust bucket Firebird in a two-tone orange and gray primer stopped to pick him up and come after me. I ran. Skidded around a corner and nearly fell on the hood of a Mini-Cooper in white and blue racing stripes. The door opened on the rear driver's side and that girl Kelly yelled to get in. I didn't waste time, I bailed in head first and she was stomping the gas pedal before my legs had cleared the door.

I landed on another kid's lap, a lanky boy with spiked brown hair, brown eyes and rings in his lips. He pushed me off his lap and shoved me into the empty seat behind the passenger side.

"Bit of trouble, Andy?" she asked accelerating down a straightaway with old warehouses interspersed with apartment buildings. I caught a few street signs, enough to let me know where I was. We weren't heading towards the bus station but out of town towards Route 8 where I wanted to go. I turned to watch the back view and didn't see any muscle car headlights following.

"Relax, those drunks won't follow us for long," the boy shrugged. "They can barely remember the way home."

"Yeah? How do you know?" I snapped.

"Cuz one's my dad."

I drew up the image of the group on the bench, compared the facial structure of all and picked out the one closest to the boy's features. The blocky man in coveralls with **Thom's Garage**.

"Thom's Garage?"

"That's my hero," he sneered. "Thomas Healey, mechanic, stock car driver, and weekend alcoholic."

"It isn't the weekend," I said stupidly.

"His weekend starts on Monday morning and doesn't end until the following Sunday evening. His buddies drink 24/7. Actually, I'm sure old Bernie doesn't have a license anymore. Those plates on the Firebird must be stolen."

Just then, I spotted the car and they must have seen us, too because the roar of his muffler doubled as the car leaped forward. He was going to catch us in seconds.

"Oh shit," Kelly said and twisted the wheel to the right, running a red light and nearly clipping a park bench as she barreled down an alley clearly not designed for an automobile. I saw the street sign. Culver Avenue.

"Turn right on the next road. Pearson St.," I said and she did as it came up quickly. "Left on Ames. Right on Anderson, right on Jackson, right on Stillway," I said, the map of the town in my head. She obeyed without question and it brought us to a car lot's front gate that was unlocked and hanging open. The boy jumped out and opened the chain-link, Kelly drove in and he latched it behind us. She parked in the second inner row of cars where a passing vehicle could not spot her Mini-Coop. the engine ticked as it cooled, the springs settled as he returned to the back seat.

"Andy, this is Rake. Rake, Andy," she said.

"Rake? What kind of name is Rake?"

"Nickname," he answered briefly.

"You know your way around pretty well for a dude that just got into town," Kelly observed. "How'd you know where this place was?"

I showed them my phone with a map of the route I had just downloaded. "How did you find me? Were you looking for me?" I asked her. "Why? Why did you come back and help me?"

"You're a runaway, aren't you?" she asked instead.

"No. More of an escapee."

"Juvie?" He sounded sympathetic.

"Sort of. Mental institution." I waited to see if that made them nervous but neither blinked an eye. "Look, I need a ride to the bus station. Can you drop me off there?"

“You just got here, Andy. What’s your hurry to leave our beautiful little town?”

Before I could blink, Rake stabbed me in the side with a Taser. The electrical storm that seized my muscles also disrupted the nerve impulses in my brain causing a massive seizure, unlike anything I had ever felt before.

I came awake slowly, my body sore and aching, my brain sluggish and unable to come to grips with what had happened. I remembered a car chasing me and then...a lightning storm. I was tied up, that I recognized. I thought I was back in the special room with Albans but this place smelled different. Almost like a...garage. I groaned and struggled to lift my head. As I opened my eyes, I was stunned to see that I was in a garage and chained to one of those lift things, hanging halfway from the ceiling.

An old Chevy Impala was on blocks in the next bay. On its hood stood the boy named Rake and next to him on the oil-stained cement floor was Kelly.

“Why?” I asked, painfully, memories flooding back into my head. I remembered him tasing me.

“You’re on the Net,” she shrugged. “Big reward for info on your whereabouts, a million bucks if you’re caught unharmed.”

I was silent. “The office of Homeland Security and the NSA are after you. What did you do? You some kind of terrorist?”

“NO! I’m no terrorist! Please, you have to let me go,” I begged.

She held up my cell phone and my wad of cash, the IDs, and Peebles’ wallet. “You kill all these people to get their stuff?”

“No! I stole it off a drug dealer in the woods. Please, let me go,” I repeated.

“Can’t. They’re on the way to get you,” she returned.

“You think they’ll pay you? They’ll snatch me, stiff you or worse---you’ll just disappear,” I said. “They’ll kill you to get me back.”

She snorted in derision. “We’ve got you hidden where no one will ever find you.”

“His dad’s garage? The first place they’ll look for me. Your house, his house and your parents’ places of business. Your friends and your hang-outs. These people are covert spies,” I said with scorn. “You think you’re smart enough to fool spies?”

She spat, turned and walked out slamming the lever that raised me another eight feet into the air so that my nose was only a foot from the insulated ceiling. From the looks of the roof, Thom the Mechanic had raised a few cars too high before. They turned off the lights and I watched the moonlight filter through small cracks in the ceiling.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“Hah! Gotcha!” Harry Hamblin shouted and the other programmers seated in carrels shook their heads, rolled their eyes and declared that ‘Harry Houdini’ had done it again. This time, however, was different. He actually left his cubicle with his tablet in hand, ran to the bomb-proof glass doors and slammed them open before they could do so automatically. This urgent breach of protocol had Harry’s workmates following his escape with raised eyebrows as he reached the Assistant Director’s office. He burst in without waiting for the enter command.

Calloway looked up in astonishment as his chief programmer broke in without a word of apology or warning. He was on the phone with the Secretary of Defense, chatting about the lack of credible info coming through on certain phone taps.

“Call you later, Tim,” he said and frowned at Hamblin. “Let me guess, you finally found Elvis?”

“No. Better. Remember that incident in western Colorado three years ago that Director Hamilton was involved in?”

“Yes, so?”

“It just came on-line. Someone accessed that IP address. I traced it to Northern Georgia, near the Tennessee border.”

The assistant director’s eyes brightened. “Go, Harry, do your Houdini stuff and get me an address.” He dialed the Director’s cell phone.

“Uhh,” the programmer stuttered, his face turning an ugly shade of embarrassment. “I lost the trace.”

Calloway stared, his mouth hanging open. The world’s self-proclaimed best hacker of all time had just admitted failure?

“Whoever this dude is, he’s written one beautiful piece of software,” he enthused. “His trace disappeared as soon as my worm tickled its tail.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I’ve never seen a program like this---it’s part cell phone, part PC, tracker and hacking device. All in a cell phone package. You catch this dude, I want to meet him and pick his brains.” He stopped, thought for a moment and then smiled. “This is the same dude that designed those Spybot’s that came out of Dir. Hamilton’s lab? Cuz they smell just like the genius who did them and that portable Wi-Fi unit the size of a matchbox.”

“You’ll have first crack at him, Harry. Right after Chase and the President,” Calloway promised. “But first, you have to find him.” He shooed the Intel officer out and left a Priority One message on Allan Chase’s cell phone. He rang back within five minutes.

“What’s up? Terrorist attack? Bomb threats? Another school shooting?” Chase demanded.

“That signal you’ve been looking for just popped up in Georgia/Tennessee. Hamblin caught it and got a partial trace.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes,” the hard voice returned. “Scramble three teams from both Domestic and Foreign. I want the area blanketed with every available agent we have on the east coast. Within the next two hours.”

“Yes, sir.” Neither said goodbye but went straight into high priority mode.

Aiken sat in the Ops Briefing room checking out his gear. All he had heard was that something big was going down in the Georgia/Tennessee area and that every available agent was being called in. Raylan sat next to him and looked through his own warbag. “Hey,” he said. “I’m on your team. Hear anything about the target?”

“Not yet. It’s a Red-One hit but not a terrorist attack. We’re looking for someone,” Aiken said.

“Any ideas who?” Raylan queried just as the room filled up with the operatives that were in the area. It was a surprisingly large group, over fifteen men and women. The duty officer was a man called Ben Jolson. He was short, built like a Navy SEAL with dark hair and eyes. Already going bald, he had been in Desert Storm I.

“Listen up, folks,” he said in a normal tone that caused the general hum to die down so that they could hear him. “We’re here because one of our pampered programmers has caught a trace we have been looking for these last few years. The subject is a 16-year-old boy named Lakan Strongbow, he uses the aliases, Blake Hamilton and Lakan Hamilton. He is a computer genius and can access the Net in ways a black hat hacker would kill to possess. We’re to locate and apprehend. This comes from the director’s own lips---anyone harms a hair on this kid’s

head, well, don't plan on seeing your retirement. We have pictures and packets for you before you leave the building."

One of the other agents passed around the folders. Aiken opened his to stare at the face of the boy he had tracked years earlier. Lakan was older, a wariness in his eyes that hadn't been there before in a face that would stop any teenage girl in her tracks.

His partner murmured, "good looking boy. Never seen red hair that dark before. Says he's half Amerindian. Got the nose, cheekbones and skin tone. He looks familiar, too."

"His mother was Rachel Strong, an FBI agent," Aiken added.

"That's right. I met her once on a detail, had the hots for her. She was one fine redhead--- she was seeing Mike Hamilton, wasn't she?" His mouth gaped open. "This is Mike's kid?"

"Does it matter? We're here to track him down and bring him in."

"That'll be a piece of cake," Rogers snorted. He was from the NY office and was more used to dealing with drug scum.

Aiken said, "Don't underestimate this kid. I tracked him for a week in the Colorado mountains. He almost got away from us. We were a team of six when we started. Only three of us came out."

"How'd you catch him?" Raylan asked.

"Circled around and drove him into Chase's arms."

"The Director was in on the chase, out in the field?" Rogers asked in surprise.

"Surprised me, too. He can ride, hunt and track pretty good for a civilian," Aiken admitted. He picked up his overnight bag with two changes of clothing. "We issued a bureau car?"

"Naw. A pickup truck with a camper top. They're less conspicuous in the country. Talk about Deliverance, those crackerjacks down there will skin you alive in a heartbeat. I've been closer to death there with moonshiners, backwoods weed farmers than any gangbangers in the city," Raylan returned. "You ready?"

Aiken led the way outside to the Bureau's parking lot but it was his partner, Raylan that got into the driver's seat of the Dodge Ram 2500. It was a cherry red, a crew-cab monster of a truck, a drug seizure with chrome wheels and 4x4, power everything and must have set the dealer back a cool fifty K. Aiken didn't say anything but pulled out his cellphone as the agent drove off. He dialed a number he hadn't used in two years.

"Hey, doc," he greeted. "You heard?"

Dr. Cameron's voice came through the speaker and the encryption made a hum in the background. "Aiken," he said flatly. "Some geek in Computer Analysis picked up a data stream from the boy in southern Georgia/Tennessee."

"What are the odds that it's not him?"

"With the kind of technology, this program required? One in a million. There's hi-tech stuff coming out of China but it's nowhere close to his code. I have some other reports I want you to look into."

"Sorry, no can do. I'm on a job for Dir. Chase," Aiken returned. "I just called to see if you had any pointers where he might be holed up or heading to?"

"Michael Faraday Senior's son came home from an institution for severe brain damaged veterans, Aiken," he interrupted and a photo came up on Aiken's cell. It showed a severely injured man with obvious traumatic brain injuries, contractures of his arms and legs. There was no way the man could stand, let alone walk. "He walked out of the hospital and into his father's limo, Aiken. They did it late at night so no one would notice but a photographer from the Boston

Herald was there on another story and caught the pic.” It showed the handsome, solemn-faced son of the billionaire minus any scars, contractures or wheelchair, striding forward on two sound legs. He was dressed in jeans and a heavy leather jacket reminiscent of the old bomber coats with sheepskin linings.

“There was a solid rumor going through Washington that Senator Lourdes was about to resign his campaign bid for President and step down from his Seat. Terminal cancer. One of his aides had already typed up his resignation speech and e-mailed it his editorial staff at Campaign Headquarters. It was pulled six hours later. Six hours! I’ve examined the Senator’s appearances and they showed a man high on heavy-duty painkillers but still in pain. Not now, he’s in the peak of health. I accessed the lab where his blood test was done and the first labs clearly showed the markers for terminal liver cancer. The latest one done shows nothing.” Aiken was silent. “There’s more. I’ve found over seven cases like this in the last six months, all centered around a day’s drive from a central point in southern Georgia. There are twelve towns in that area, it’s called the Pine River Valley. I would check there first. Look for private clinics, nursing homes and mental hospitals.”

“You looking for a common denominator?” Aiken returned.

Cameron snorted. “I’m a researcher, it’s what I do. It started with an accident involving a garbage truck and five passenger cars. Several eyewitness reports said the injuries were horrific, amputations and dead kids yet when I pulled up their medical reports, all I found were bruises and scrapes. They treated one child for shock and a cerebral hematoma but she died. The doctor’s name in the ED is Arvin Costanza. Right here in Washington, D.C., Aiken. He was here! I’m sending you the files on it.”

“Okay, doc.” Aiken’s heart accelerated. “Have you told Dir. Chase all this?”

“He’s flying down as we speak and we’re running through the hospital database and Costanza’s phone records, home PC, and work files. Any cross references we find, I’ll e-mail you.”

“Okay.” He turned to Raylan. “Change of plans. We’re heading for Pine Valley, GA.” Raylan shrugged and slid the truck over two lanes for the Interstate ramp joining the other vehicles in the search team.

He merged onto the Beltway and because the traffic was so bad, it took them nearly two hours before they were humming along at 80mph on I-95S. It was a nine-hour drive, nearly six hundred miles to their destination, heading for the area around Savannah. Aiken let Raylan drive; he came from a long line of men that had outrun everything that life had thrown at them. Cars and racing were a part of his makeup.

“You want to switch halfway there?” he asked the driver and wasn’t surprised at his answer.

“Naw. I’m good.”

They drove straight through, reaching the area around 3.30 p.m. The first thing they did was establish a base of operations which was a safe house in the neighborhood near the warehouse district; a place where multiple vehicles coming and going would not arouse suspicion.

Chase had arrived earlier, coming in on the agency’s private Lear jet and was based in Savannah, a half hour’s ride away. He had already assigned people to track down the information provided by Cameron on the ED doctor and had come up with several names in common with all the incidents. He had a list of nursing homes, clinics and mental hospitals still in business. When Aiken mentioned Pine Valley, Chase told him that a Dr. Albans tied the hospital in Washington

with a Psyche Hospital and nursing home with the town of Macon Springs in Pine Valley. Just inside the circle that they were investigating.

The two teams of Aiken and Andrews met with Chase before they would spread out to track the target.

“You want us to show his picture around?” Andrews asked the director. “If so, what cover story do you want us to use?”

“Witness in a drug shooting,” Chase said. “But only if you attract attention from local law enforcement. Remember, this kid likes to hightail it for the woods. And he’s trail savvy, years older and smarter. He makes it into the Smoky Mountains, he’s history.”

It wasn’t until they were on the way to one of the doctor’s hospitals that the call came from HQ. A girl had phoned in a tip stating that she had information on a teenage boy wanted by the authorities and wanted to claim the reward. She had called from a payphone in a town called Poplar Bluff. They turned around and were headed that way in less than a minute. The GPS told them that it was only twenty-five minutes from their safe-house.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

With my nose pressed nearly up against the ceiling, I had a bird’s eye view of the garage. Quite a few items on the floor would be definite aids in my escape if I could just get on the ground. Raising my body temp wasn’t an option I could use---if I could even get it high enough to melt the chains on me, I’d probably burn my hands and feet clean off. I didn’t have X-ray vision or whatever it was that allowed Superman to melt metal.

I could reach up and touch the insulation so I pulled down what I could rip off. Plastic and fiberglass fell in chunks to the floor exposing the sheet metal roof, screws, and electrical wiring. Now that, I could use.

Carefully, I pulled a piece towards me tearing it loose from underneath the insulation until I could trace its path to the fuse box prominently displayed on the wall near the garage doors. I wrapped it around my foot and gave it one swift jerk that the amount of play in my chains allowed me. It ripped loose from the fuse box with sparks flying.

The lights flickered, fizzled and died. The garage doors started to raise and then fall shut but best of all, the lift slowly started to come down as the hydraulics failed. Nobody came out to see why the power went out so wherever this garage was, it wasn’t well used or even open. From the looks of the inside, it had been empty for years.

My chains loosened as the lift hit the ground with a thud. I had enough play to reach over and drag the nearest tool box towards me and up end it. Scrabbling through the jumbled mess of rusted metal, I pulled out a set of bolt cutters that had seen better days. It wasn’t easy holding them one-handed and closing them but I managed to cut the links between my feet. Once they were free, I heated the links close to the handcuffs threaded through the other chains; just enough to soften the metal.

My wrists burned but healed quickly once I sat up, the handcuffs dangling from both hands. I looked at the cement floor and saw that the hydraulic fluid had leaked out causing the lift to come down; not from my damage to the fuse box.

I found a stiff wire and piece of metal in a tray on the counter where baby food jars filled with nuts, bolts and old spark plugs lay in disorder. That was enough for me to pick the lock open and in minutes, I was free of all restraint. Peeking out the garage door windows, I saw a dirt yard littered with abandoned cars, weeds, and sparse grass. An old trailer with barrels strewn about rested like a drunk under an old oak tree. Garbage was piled everywhere. It was obvious

that the neighborhood had used this place as an illegal dump and I had my pick of old clothes. and I had my pick of old clothes. I took a ratty sweatshirt and a stocking cap of blue with white stripes on the rim.

It was late afternoon by the shadows coming off the wrecks. I couldn't see any power lines or poles nor could I see down the dirt lane. I did see an old land line hanging on the wall and that I could do something with.

Twenty minutes later, I had re-wired the phone and dialed Leon's cell phone. I didn't get an answer but then, I suspected he was already on his way to the rendezvous. I couldn't encrypt the message or disguise my voice but the circumstances justified the risks. Or I hoped it did.

I had no idea who the girl Kelly had called to arrange for my pickup and reward but I could guarantee it wasn't the FBI or John Walsh's CMEC. No, it had CIA and NSA all over it.

I pulled the door open and took a quick peek outside. No one was in sight and there weren't any fresh tracks in the dirt around any of the doors. I didn't hear any traffic, lawnmowers or any of the busy sounds of suburbia. I did smell fall leaves, wood smoke, and animals. Cows and horses, mostly.

Skulking the brush, I weaved my way towards the smells to come up against a ramshackle fence behind the garage. In a five-acre pasture, two horses stared back at me. Both were geldings, both unremarkable bays with the look of Walking horses. I whistled softly and curious, they sidled closer eventually coming to my outstretched hand. I had vague memories of calling a giant humped beast to me and climbing on its back.

This horse let me do that, too steering off my heels and seat taking me to the gate. His pasture pal followed but I led the one horse through the hanging gate, not the other. He tossed his head, whinnied and ran the fence line until I told him to chill out.

The pasture led up to a small barn with a doublewide a few hundred yards beyond that. A gravel road wound around the barn and to the road. From the amount of hoof prints on it, someone rode down it frequently. The bay horse waited for me to hop back on and willingly took me down the road. This one was hard pan and oiled like many country roads; fairly empty of other homes with no close neighbors.

I was right, the horse was a Walker and he boogied right along. I wasn't sure if the house belonged to the garage if that was where the girl, Kelly or Rake lived. I sure didn't want to take the chance of finding out. I especially didn't want to meet up with Thom the mechanic or any of his barfly friends.

The road came to a four-way intersection and the horse turned to the left towards a wooded area. I let him go, confident what he was aiming for trails in the forest where his rider took him frequently.

We entered a State Forest fire lane with a 4x8 hand painted sign in the name of the tract, South Hill, the acreage 5888 and pictures of the local flora and fauna. White-tailed deer, raccoon, red and gray fox, speckled geckos, lady's slippers, and ginseng.

The moment I stepped foot on the trail, an invisible weight lifted off me. I felt at home and comfortable, more than I had ever felt at Hamilton's or the hospital. We walked for a couple of hours on well-defined trails finally emerging on a gravel road that went south and east. I followed that for a while coming to farmhouses that might have been there since before the Civil War. Made of mellow rose colored brick, they fit into the bucolic scene with eye-pleasing results. Many had pastures stocked with nice looking Herefords and Black Angus with an occasional regal TB behind four board rail fences.

There were trucks parked in the driveways and as I passed by, I saw curtains pulled back but that was the extent of the interest paid to me. We continued down the road and it eventually became a series of small two-lane highways with signs denoting the distance to the next town. A town called Pershing Corners was next up and my mind instantly brought up a map of the state and the towns nearest my location. I had traveled only about 15 miles from the town where Kelly and Rake had captured me. I needed to be at least another forty miles before I could meet up with Leon.

The horse continued clip-clopping on the road. Here, the streets were paved and I looked for a barn off the road, set back from it or from the casual view of the road. Once I found one, I dismounted and led him by his forelock inside to one of the empty stalls. I gave him a small scoop of sweet feed and a couple flakes of orchard grass hay. Thanked him and searched the barn. I found an old Schmidt coat, barn boots and a collection of baseball caps. I took the one labeled BLUE SEAL FEEDS and mashed it down over my hair. Hanging on the wall next to western saddles and bridles was an old 3-speed mountain bike with flat tires but the bike pump hung neatly beside it.

No one paid any attention to me as I pedaled lazily down the side of the highway towards the State Park dedicated to the Cherokee Nation where the survivors of the Trail of Tears had ended.

The air was crisp as the sun finally went down and darkness fell. There was a full moon so I could clearly see where I was going but I was nervous that the cars passing me wouldn't. I tried to stay far enough off the shoulder that I wasn't spotted by passing traffic or risk a hit-and-run. I knew that there were sick people out there who thought it was fun to run down bikers or pedestrians. There weren't any reflective lights on my wheels to protect me, either.

I could do forty miles in two hours if I didn't stop and if I didn't faint from hunger. My body told me that I hadn't eaten in over 24 hours---not since I'd had a Whopper at Burger King. I was starving, hadn't found anything in the barn except horse feed. Not even carrots or apples for the horses. Nothing in the pockets of the jacket except a few oats and some pellets. I did find some change and a few ones so if I came across a convenience store, I could buy something.

The ride under the full moon, bright stars and clear sky was quiet, I had time to think. At least until the flashing lights and sirens broke the quiet of my reverie. I pulled up in a flurry of gravel and pushed the bike almost into the ditch watching as a whole slew of emergency vehicles passed me heading back in the direction from which I had fled. City cops, Staties, and unmarked cars that the Feds favored. My throat tightened and I was instantly dry-mouthed.

Someone in Washington had finally put together my escape and Kelly's call. Even though I had been expecting it, I was still frightened by the speed of their response, planning to be a lot further away by then. I waited in the dark, my breath pluming in the cold air until every speeding vehicle passed me before I got back on the saddle and pedaled furiously towards Leon and freedom.

Another half hour went by and the moon was high overhead, almost as bright as the lights in the parking lot of the Circle K. I could see the gas pumps and only one clerk standing behind the counter idly wiping the top clean. Every so often, he would sip at a Big Gulp of piss-yellow something. Probably Mountain Dew.

I was so hungry that I was seriously tempted to walk in for a handful of hot dogs and chips. With a 32 oz. drink for \$1.79. My empty belly overcame my sense of caution and I hid the bike behind the bushes, avoiding the cameras. I removed my coat replacing it with a sweatshirt and stocking cap I had taken from the garage.

The front door had a bell on it and my appearance startled the clerk. He was only a few years older than me---maybe 18 with ginger hair, a scraggly goatee and reminded me of someone. I realized he looked like the dude from the Scooby cartoon, Shaggy.

“Where the ef--did you come from?” he yelped.

“Car,” I headed for the rotisserie and helped myself to two hot dogs with everything, a large Pepsi with ice in a Big Gulp cup and a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos. Handed him four ones and he rang it up as the special.

“Help yourself to the dogs,” he said. “They’re like 8 hours old, I was gonna throw them out.”

They were wrinkled and dried out, like an old guy’s peter. Suddenly, I wasn’t so hungry but I took them anyway. For later. The Doritos tasted like ambrosia, the salt satisfied some dietary requirement I was lacking as my teeth crunched away happily on them.

His name tag spelled out ‘Coosie’. “What’s Coosie?” I asked, crumbs spilling down my sweatshirt but no one would notice with all the other stains.

“Nickname. Where’s your car? I don’t see anything in the lot.”

“Parked out by the air pumps. Low tire. My dad’s waiting. Gotta go. Thanks for the extra dogs.” He gave me a plastic bag to carry the franks and I scurried out of the door before he got any more curious. I could feel his eyes on my back all the way. Once in the lot, I circled around so neither he nor the cameras could spot me returning to the bike and pedal off.

Feeling lubricated and full, I carefully stowed my garbage in the bag he’d given me for the frankfurters.

It was midnight before my weary legs pedaled onto the Federal lands were given over to the Cherokee Nation. The building housing the Park’s Museum and Ranger Station was closed with a sign stating the hours it was open at 6a.m. until 5p.m. for camping permits. Primitive sites were \$12 a night and electric, \$25 per site. Hot showers and stalls were available at the Equestrian section, private cabins \$45 a night and required reservations from Apr.15th to Nov.15th. The rest of the year it was on a first come-first served basis. Overnight patrons were advised to find an empty spot and fees were due by the next morning.

It was eerie riding the bike down to the campsites. I had no idea where Leon might be; if he had even stayed to wait for me. There were very few people still in the park, it was before camping season officially opened and pretty much too cold to do much riding even for southern Georgia. I didn’t find either out of state licensed cars or rentals so I finally rode back to the station and picked the lock. Once inside, I opened the back door by the trash bins, wheeled my bike inside and went to sleep on the big leather couch in the Ranger’s office. It was heated, had a water cooler, coffee pot and snacks tucked away in his desk drawer. I had found an emergency pack with a space blanket and once under that, fell asleep almost instantly, warm and toasty and unafraid.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

I must have been exhausted. I didn’t open my eyes until I heard a light switch come on and a sharp voice cursed as they stumbled over something and hit the floor.

“What the hell?” a voice shouted. “How the hell did a bike get in here?”

Other voices joined his and I leaped off the couch, rubbing at my eyes and wondering which way to run as the Ranger was helped to his feet.

“Loren, your office---.”

I looked around for an escape route but there weren't any---no windows so I did the only thing I could think of. I hid under the desk forgetting my coat, bag of franks and my garbage.

From my hidden bolt hole, I could see a shorter man in Park Ranger green uniform with a heavy winter jacket and those Smokey the Bear hats. He scanned the room with his pistol held firmly out in front of him. His hands were large, capable and heavily calloused.

"Come out, we know you're in here," he ordered and I remained under the desk. "There's no way out. Come on out, I won't hurt you. I can see all you wanted was a warm place to sleep, not to steal anything. Come on. Let me help you."

The kindness in his voice made me choke back a sob but my mind said don't trust anyone. Still, I really had no choice so I slowly pushed the desk back and poked my head above the desktop.

I saw an older man with blue eyes and steel gray hair cut short, in a Ranger's uniform. He saw me and lowered his gun, replacing it in his holster. Behind him were two other Park police, one a young woman. She looked Indian. Dark haired, eyes and red skin tone.

"*Oma key you!*" I said to her, holding my hands up.

"Well, son. Is that your bike I tripped over?" he asked me. His patch spelled out J.R. Krumm.

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry. I was just looking for a warm place to crash. I'll just get my bike and be on my way." I stood up and attempted to head for the door but all three of them barricaded it.

"You can stay for breakfast, surely. Can we call your parents for you?"

"Don't have any. I'm meeting someone later today," I offered.

"What's your name?"

"Andrew. Peebles." I stepped back before any of them could touch me, trying to spot a hole I could wedge myself through and escape. All three of them blocked the doorway and someone else pushed my bike out of sight.

"Please, just let me go," I begged to stare at the clock. Behind them, I heard someone call out.

"Hello? Anybody here? I need some information." I recognized the voice and yelled back.

"Leon!"

"Lacey?"

Ranger JR raised an eyebrow. "Lacey? Thought your name was Andrew?"

Leon pushed his way past the three of them, grabbed me by the shoulders and hugged me. "Lacey! I thought I'd lost you!" He turned to the startled Rangers. "He ran away a year ago---just called me yesterday saying that he wanted to come home. Did he do some damage here? I'll pay for it."

"He broke in but there's no damage to the locks or the doors and he didn't steal anything, Mister---?" Krumm stated.

"Leon DeCarlos. I'm Lacey's uncle, his mother's brother. I promised to take care of him when she passed," Leon said. He spoke to me in Siouan asking me what they knew and I replied nothing but I wasn't sure if the woman spoke it or Abenaki.

"She's Mohican, not Cherokee," he returned. "So you're safe. We need to get out of here, the Federal agencies have roadblocks going up for a hundred miles north of here."

"Pine Valley?"

"Yes."

“They found Albans, then.” I turned to the Rangers and pushed them mentally. Not something I liked to do and not that it always worked but my suggestions were enough to relinquish control of me over to an obvious authority figure of a relative. Leon paid him a hundred bucks for any damage I might have done, picked up my bike, personal belongings and marched me over to a fairly new SUV. He threw my stuff in the back and told me to lie down on the middle seat as he sat on the driver’s side.

Before they had time to protest, he had stomped the gas and headed down the main road through the Park. He didn’t stop until we had exited the Parks’ boundaries and were on a state highway that went up a saddleback into the Appalachians. The road hummed under his tires until we changed from paved roads to gravel, gravel to dirt and roads to jeep trails. Only then, did he allow me to sit up where I could watch the scenery.

Trees. More trees and then for a change, more trees after that. Old trees that must have been second growth and uncut. Some of them were as big around as the car. It smelled wonderful, pine and cedar, the scent of old rocks, pine needles and moss, the living breathing odors of the forest. It was the scent of the mountain’s wild places and almost home.

“Where are we going, Leon?” I asked noting for the first time that the cargo bed of his SUV was piled with camping and hunting gear.

“My friend’s hunting cabin,” he answered briefly, switching on his headlights. It felt like dusk in this forest even though my stomach said it was too late for breakfast and too early for lunch.

“Blue cooler has sandwiches. Not allergic to anything, right?”

“Nope.” I dug through the aforementioned cooler, pulled out PBJ and ham and cheese, eating one of each. I handed him a pair and he told me he was still full from breakfast. I shrugged and ate them myself.

“So, tell me what happened?” he prompted. So, I did. When I was finished, he didn’t know what to say and the rest of the trip we spent in silence until I told him I needed to go to the bathroom. He stopped in the middle of the trail and opened his door, preparing to get out. I told him to wait.

“Why?”

“Because there is a black bear standing not ten feet away and she looks pissed.”

He looked but couldn’t see anything until he slammed the door shut. That’s when she charged, hitting the SUV hard enough to make the vehicle rock and nearly tip over. He hit the gas but let off when I said he couldn’t outrun her on this trail, not without tearing off the oil pan.

“She probably has some cubs nearby,” I said. We watched as she slapped at the driver’s side door, leaving gouges from her claws and dents from blows powerful enough to knock off a man’s head. “Go home, mamma bear and play with your babies,” I said. She reared up on her hind legs showing me the white spot on her chest. Glared at me to make sure I was respectfully in awe and lumbered off, disappearing into the trees without a whisper of trembling leaves. My breath puffed out and brought a sigh of relief from Leon.

“What did you say to it?” he asked shakily.

“She. I said to go home with her babies. You don’t speak Siouan?”

“Abenaki. French, Spanish, and English. You still getting out to piss?”

“Sure. It’s safe. She wouldn’t have hurt me, anyway,” I shrugged as I hopped out. Shadows of the lowering afternoon sun barely made it through the dense foliage but you could tell it was getting darker as the sun went down. I wouldn’t have wanted to drive here in the dark, not with a newer vehicle even if it were the 4-wheel drive.

I stood at the edge of the road and whizzed for what seemed like a long time. The relief was enormous and the sound of my zipper the loudest noise in the forest. I looked up but the canopy was too thick to catch a glimpse of the stars or the sky.

He had shut the SUV off while I'd peed and gotten out to inspect the damage with a flashlight. "Holy cow," he said softly. "I'd hate to see what she could do if she was pissed."

"She was pissed." I got back into the front and leaned over the dashboard noticing the On-Star buttons. My heart sank. "Leon, do you use this?" I pointed to it.

"Nope. Never signed up for the service. Why?" His eyes widened. "I ditched the cell phone, picked up a burner. You think they can track me by the car?"

"Got Lo-jack?" I asked grimly. He nodded. I went to the hood, opened it and with my bare hands pulled the wires out that fueled any tracking electronics of his car. If the NSA had found Albans, they would find Leon. If they hadn't already. "Is Leon DeCarlos your real name?" I asked working on the ignition sequence. Without the On-star and Lo-jack working, the computer wouldn't turn the engine over. I tweaked the carburetor too so it would get 60 mpg. Had quite a loss of power, though. Not that SUVs were known for their speed.

"Start it up," I said and he did. The engine sounded rough so I fiddled some more, raising the rpm's until it smoothed out.

"Where did you learn auto mechanics?" he asked.

"I didn't." I sat in the front seat as he shifted into granny gear. He drove about 5 miles an hour for the next 45 minutes.

We reached the cabin at one in the morning. He woke me by pushing my head off his shoulder and opening his door. Cold air rushed in and I shivered as I got out. Looking around, I saw that we were on a small hilly outcrop. Tucked at the bottom of a hollow lay a small cabin built of native stone with a rusted tin roof. There were bars on the windows and doors with tin sheets nailed at the bottom of the cabin walls. An outhouse stood some twenty feet away. Hemlock and pines provided shade and a backdrop. I imagined the view in the daytime must have been very pretty, especially in the winter with snow coating everything. There was a faint shimmer below us, the barest hint of moonlight on a small body of water. A lake.

"There's a spring behind the cabin. We pipe it in for running water," he said. "Help me bring in the supplies."

I opened the back of the car and grabbed an armful carrying it behind him as he opened the solid oak door behind steel bars built like a prison gate. I knew it was to keep bears out, not burglars.

It was dark inside but I could see. I placed the gear on a surprisingly soft leather couch and while he started gas lamps, went back for more stuff. By the time he had the cabin lit, a fire made in the stone fireplace, the car was empty. I saw the interior and was impressed. The walls were honey pine tongue and groove, the floor wide planks polished to a soft shine and made from old growth trees. Some of them were over 14in. wide with no knots, a quality not seen in the marketplace for a hundred years.

There was a window on each wall with bright cheerful curtains of green gingham, throw rugs of braided fabric and handmade pine furniture. The fireplace was native rock with a wide slab of cedar for a mantelpiece. The mellow light came from kerosene lamps hanging on wrought iron swinging arms.

The sink was a dry well with a working spigot. When I pumped the lever, pure crystal spring water gushed forth. I cupped my hand into it and drank from my palm. Pure ambrosia.

His stove was an old fashioned wood run model with an oven and provided both heat and cooking.

Two bedrooms came off the back end of the cabin and looked odd. Until I realized that they were built into the outcrop and part of the rock itself. They each had two twin beds, a dresser, and clothes closet. The floor was a floating platform of oak planks covered with plaited oval rugs made from material scraps.

“Let me guess, there are tunnels through the closets?” I asked grinning.

He nodded. “It was an old moonshiners and smugglers’ hole. Runs down to the flats and comes out on the river. You can take a canoe down to town in a pinch. Fastest way back to civilization. You hungry?”

I shook my head. “Tired.” I eyed the twin bed and he waved his hand. Without any fanfare, I dove and landed belly first on the soft fuzzy wolf designed blanket. I think he pulled off my shoes and covered me with the other comforter but that was the last thing I remembered until I heard the birds next morning.

Chapter Forty

The smell of fresh roasted coffee and pancakes was the real reason I woke up. I had flopped over on my back, dragging the cover with me. For a moment, I couldn’t figure out where I was until I heard Leon’s voice.

“You gonna get up or lay there like a dead fish?”

I grunted and rolled out of bed, heading for the outhouse. I snatched a cup of black coffee and a pancake before I let the door slam on my backside. The sun was just coming up over the outcrop of rock and bathed everything in a scarlet coat of fire that turned golden. I stopped to admire it, hardly noticing that I was barefoot or that the ground was cold.

When I was done admiring the view, I used the facilities and hurried back to the food. Leon had set me a plate of chipped blue metal and piled it with pancakes. Blueberry, bacon and walnuts. He even had real maple syrup and butter.

“There’s a cold cellar back in the mountain,” he said watching me eat. “There’s hard cider stored there but I wouldn’t recommend you getting into that. It’ll knock you on your ass. The rest is stuff I don’t want to spoil. The food that will spoil, we’ll eat up right away. One of my buddies is a survivalist, he has enough food stored in here for a year.”

“Whaffheffinktheworlffgonnand?” I said around a huge mouthful.

“What? Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“He thinks the world’s gonna end? That if it does, he’ll actually make it up here?”

“Yeah. Crazy. Would you wanna survive if your whole family was killed, civilization and the world ended in an apocalypse?” he asked. His face blanched as he realized that was what had nearly happened to me. “Sorry.”

“Where did they bury Rachel?” I asked instead.

“They found her body in her car at the airport. The autopsy said she died of a cerebral aneurysm. Fake, of course. Even her uncle hasn’t made waves but quietly arranged for a Christian funeral.”

“I want to pay my respects,” I said quietly expecting a big fight but he only nodded.

“How will we get there?” he asked. I was grateful for the ‘we’.

“I need some money to get a suit.”

“Why? You can just pop into a store and lift one,” he pointed out.

“Shoplift?” I raised an eyebrow. “You condoning theft and breaking the law?”

It was his turn to shrug. “What are you going to do, Lacey? How long do you plan on hiding out here?”

“What was the big plan before I was kidnapped from your custody?”

“Smuggle you north into Canada and disappear onto the reservation up there. We still could, if we can get past the road blocks.”

“Roadblocks aren’t a problem anymore,” I argued. I explained how I could freeze time and use it to get past trouble and had an idea how I could use it to travel the spirit realm and go where he suggested.

“What is this? Some kind of magic?”

I gave him one of those looks. “No, quantum physics.”

“Hey, I’m in construction. I don’t know nothing about physics.”

“Anyway, I’ve never been to a real department store.”

“Never? Your parents didn’t take you shopping?”

“I have memories of my grandmother but I’m pretty sure most of them are implanted and not real,” I mused. “By the way, my real name is Lakan. My friends call me Lake.”

He shook my hand. “Nice to meet you, Lake. Do you think this thing would work with me?”

“Dunno. Why don’t we try it? Where did you have in mind?”

I grabbed him around the waist and froze time, at the same moment that I stepped into the yellow realm. Taking giant strides, I followed the images in Leon’s mind to the place he was thinking about without dwelling on the idea that the soul stealers could be just outside the bubble we were traveling inside. My ears popped and I staggered forward onto concrete floors in a small restroom stall. I heard a toilet flush and called out for Leon. He came out of the stall next to me looking stoned.

“Man, do I have a headache,” he complained as I ran over to the sink and washed my hands.

“Where are we?”

“If we’re where I think we are; the Brooks’ Brothers store at the Galleria in Chesapeake Mall.” He popped his head out the door. “Yup.”

“You can’t use your credit cards,” I said.

“I thought you were just going to---.”

“Oh. Yeah. Let’s go. You know anything about suits for a funeral?”

“Yeah, but there’s usually a very nice gentleman who’ll help you out,” he snickered and flopped his wrist. I stared at him suspiciously. He dragged me into the men’s shop and the salesman was a fashionista who picked out a dark blue suit with a pale cream shirt, narrow blue tie, dress shoes, and socks with an overcoat suitable for a funeral. It was no effort to alter the electronic cash register and charge it to someone else’s credit. I made him think we had paid cash. The total came to just over six hundred and thirty dollars. He thanked us and I gathered the bags, walking out to the main concourse on the second level.

“Now what?” Leon asked and I dragged him back to the area of the restrooms. It wouldn’t do to let anyone watch us disappear. Back at the cabin, I hung my new clothes in the closet and took a nap. All the running around had made me tired.

“The boy was riding in the SUV with a Leon DeCarlos,” Morrell said reading the hospital records. “He’s the owner of Cherokee Engineering and Construction, one of the largest

contracting companies on the east coast. His office said he's on vacation---he goes fishing and hunting somewhere in the Appalachians."

Chase said, "Get me his license plates, make and model of all his vehicles and does it have lo-jack?"

"His main vehicle is a Cadillac Escalade with everything," Morrell returned. "We're tracing it now. Albans is in our custody: the team is bringing him to the safe house for questioning."

"Let's go visit the good doctor," Chase grinned but there was no humor in his smile.

The safe house was already crammed with most of Chase's teams and they had been busy. On the conference table were piled surveillance reports and files on both the doctor and the two teens who had called in the tip. There was another pile on Cherokee Construction and Leon DeCarlos, including his friends and associates.

In a small room in the basement of the main warehouse, two men stood at the door while Albans sat in a metal folding chair zip-tied to its frame. He looked dazed and frightened; he had not come up out of the Taser's effects used to subdue him. He kept saying something about the 'Senator'. In another room at the opposite end of the basement warehouse, a young girl and her boyfriend were lying on the cement floor. They were tied and unconscious, being watched by Cameron and two of that team.

Chase walked into the room with the doctor and slapped the man in the face until coherence came back into his eyes. "Dr. Albans. I'm Allan Chase and you have something I want."

"Allan Chase---the Director of the NSA?" he sputtered. "What do you want with me? Did the Senator send you?" His eyes looked wary.

"Senator who?"

"Lourdes. I know some important people."

"Ah," Chase drawled. "I'm beginning to see a pattern here. Where is Lakan Strongbow?"

"Who?" Albans asked frowning. He shook his head and Chase saw that he did not know.

"You might know him as Lacey Hamilton. The boy you claimed died in your hospital from a subdural hematoma."

"You mean the girl? She did die and was cremated. I paid for the services myself," Albans protested.

"You mean the child dressed as a girl. The people might believe that, Dr. Albans but you and I know better. What did you do with the trackers implanted in him?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he retorted and Chase stepped back. He turned to his agents. "Bring Cameron in, Morrell. Tell him I need everything he can wring from the good Dr. Albans."

"Yes, sir," the agent left quietly.

"You're going to torture it out of me?" Albans sneered. "What about my constitutional rights?"

"Oh, we don't use torture," Chase laughed. "Dr. Cameron has lots of synthetic drugs he's developed in the last five years, one of which will make you tell me everything you hold most secret and dear. Things you even keep from yourself. Unfortunately, it does fry your brain."

The door opened and the tall, handsome man in jeans and suit jacket entered carrying a medical bag. He had the coldest blue eyes Albans had ever seen. Behind him, another agent pushed into the room a wheeled table and a light. Efficiently and quietly, the doctor set up a sterile tray and drapes for his instruments. Needles, vials and IV ports.

Albans gasped as he recognized him. “You’re that geneticist that was kicked out of hospitals for experimenting on humans!”

Cameron looked up. “You’re about to reap the benefits of that research, Dr. Albans.” Deftly, he wiped off the man’s wrist with alcohol and inserted a butterfly into the vein, injecting 20cc of a pale blue liquid. Immediately, Albans felt a heat race up his arm and center in his chest. From there, it pinged in his joints and his head had an instant ice cream headache.

“So, Dr. Albans, tell me about Lacey,” Cameron prompted and for the next hour, he did. When he finally stopped, blood pooled from his eyes, ears, and nose. He screamed a thin bleat that dwindled as if he had forgotten why he was crying. Liquid brain matter dripped from his ears. After that, it was only a matter of minutes before his vital functions ceased as the master computer that ran the body was no longer functioning.

“You have what you need, Chase?” Cameron asked.

“Yes. Except for the present location of Lakan.”

“He didn’t know?”

Morrell interrupted. “This DeCarlos has a hunting cabin near Bloodroot Mt. We can chopper in almost to it.”

The door popped open and one of the techs stuck his head in tentatively as if he were afraid of what he might see. “Director? Cameras have picked up a feed in a mall in Chesapeake. It looks like DeCarlos and he was with a teenage boy matching the subject’s description.”

“Chesapeake? How the fuck did he get there?” Chase snapped.

“He bought a suit for a funeral,” the tech added helpfully.

Chase’s eyes narrowed. “Little Bear. He’s going back to her grave. When was the funeral?”

“Six months ago. She’s buried in Red Rock, near Otseno’s ranch,” Cameron added.

Aiken came in, stared at the crowd, the dead doctor and added that they had found the garage where the two teens had stashed the boy. They had also found his backpack with stolen IDs, cash, and camping gear. One of the IDs processed belonged to a Dwayne Peebles who had been forensically tied to a burning marijuana patch and meth lab near Albans’ mental clinic.

“So he escaped and ran through the woods coming up on the dealers,” Chase mused. “Where is he now? When was he sighted in this mall?”

“11:30 am today,” Aiken answered.

“It’s not possible,” Cameron muttered. “Unless he’s...slipping. Slipping through time and space. Chase, we have to get this kid back before he falls into somebody else’s hands and before he can be hurt. He’s too valuable to be loose.” Cameron’s eyes were frantic. “What if he’s killed in a car accident? Or drive-by shooting? We’ll lose something worth billions!”

“How? How do we track him down without his implants?” Chase demanded.

“He’s going back to visit Rachel Little Bear’s grave,” Aiken cut in.

“We need to set a trap for him there,” Cameron agreed. “And then, we need to find DeCarlos’ cabin.” Chase nodded and the team set about doing both.

Chapter Forty-One

Since I’d never been to the gravesite where Rachel had been laid to rest, I couldn’t time slip to it. But I had been to Redline Pete Otseno’s ranch house. In particular, his huge porch overlooking his pastures. When Leon finally unscrewed his eyes, he gawped. The sight of the magnificent towering snow-covered Rockies could only be truly experienced when you were

standing under them. No photo prepared you for their brooding intensity. It was like having a suspended tsunami waiting over your shoulder.

The meadows below the porch were just coming off the snow cover. Patches of barely green were the grass poking their delicate stems through the frost. The first flowers were still a month away and overhead, a falcon cried an eerie whistle that echoed off the slopes. I heard the chittering of ground squirrels and the bark of the first marmots.

The house was empty of occupants. No one was in residence yet the caretaker's place was lit up and busy. They took care of the stock and horses but that house was far enough away from the ranch headquarters that they wouldn't see us standing on the huge second-story porch.

To the east, we caught the dim glow that signaled the lights of town. I led Leon down to the first floor and the door out to the garage. Parked on spotless concrete in a four-bay garage were two Dodge Ram trucks, an Escalade and a Range Rover. The keys were in the ignitions and each vehicle had a mounted garage door opener. Both trucks were fire-engine red with all the bells, whistles and chrome a gearhead could wish for. He got into the pick-up and I slid in next to him.

"Not exactly low-key, are they?" Leon asked. "What is it with Injuns and red cars?" He grinned.

"I don't know. I've never been into cars, never even driven one."

"Didn't you have a childhood, Lake?"

"My childhood was...different, I think. I don't remember it. They took away my memories of it," I said bleakly.

"What are we going to do about them?" he asked soberly.

"I'm going to kill them all," I snarled as he stared at me. I opened the garage doors and he drove out onto a black-topped driveway that was ten miles long before we hit the highway.

Redline's truck had GPS and Leon used it to navigate the forty miles to the town of Red Rock. We passed herds of Black Angus and colored horses---paints and Appaloosas. I remembered the colorful paint that Redline had ridden. One of the pastured horses looked like him. We rode in silence as I contemplated those memories, especially the ones of Rachel and me together.

"Who is Rachel?" he asked and I jumped, startled and wondering if he had read my mind.

"Redline Pete Otseno's niece. She helped me escape from Dr. Cameron," I said slowly, dwelling on Rachel's long, clean limbs, her expressive black eyes and delicate scent. Her exquisite grace as she walked barefoot on the sand, gathering weeds and flipping her raven's wing locks across my naked shoulders as we lay like spoons. "My love," I whispered.

"Lakan, I'm sorry," he said and began a chant that I knew from its cadence. I joined him and we sang the Death Chant for Rachel; he in Abenaki and me, in Siouan.

We found the cemetery; it was a non-denominational one. We passed graves with angel and others with the Star of David, and many with native American motifs but we had no idea what section she was buried in. Nor could we stop and ask because I was almost certain this place was one where I would have set a trap for me. To ask for her grave plot would bring them down on me.

"How will we find her grave, Lakan?" he asked and I had no answer. The best I could come up with was to drive around and look for recent excavations.

The cemetery was on a gentle slope among aspen and poplar trees with one main road that circled twice in a spiral with a center park and parking. A small building rested there and

from its design, it was a depository for cremains. Better yet, it had a directory listing the occupants back to the 1850s.

Rachel's name wasn't the last one listed, five other people had passed since she. Her final resting place was in the far corner, lot 356, next to her parents and grandparents. We found it without too much trouble and someone had been there before us. Fresh flowers stood in front of her stone in a crystal vase. Columbines, lilies, and roses with a card that read, 'I miss you and love you' from both Darren White Deer and her uncle Otseno. I knelt and touched the granite stone engraved with her name, date of birth and death. Tears fell freely from my eyes and bled into the disturbed soil.

"I promise that he won't get away with this, Rachel. I'll avenge your death a thousand fold," I spoke through a thickening lump. I wanted to rail, to throw myself down on the grave and scream at the unfairness of life that had taken my parents, my childhood and my first love from me. I don't know how long I remained there on my knees. It was long enough for me to notice that I had soaked through my pants and to feel the cold. Long enough for Leon to get nervous especially when other cars started arriving and there wasn't a funeral service scheduled.

"Lakan," he said from the driver's seat of the red pickup. "We need to go."

I lightly rubbed my fingers across her name and stood as multiple car doors opened. It wasn't mourners who exited these vehicles but men in suits and sunglasses. Federal Agents.

"FBI, Mr. Strongbow! Freeze!"

I didn't. I ran around towards Leon and wrapped my arms around his waist. "Sorry about your truck, Mr. Otseno," I muttered. Before the agents could approach or fire on us, I jumped back to the cabin. Leon staggered out of my grip and shook his head in amazement. "Is there anything you can't do? Can you fly? Can you turn into a hawk or a wolf?"

"I'm not a skinwalker or a werewolf, or even a shaman, Leon. You know what I am---a genetically modified human. I started out just like everyone else born on this earth." I paused. "Are you afraid of me? Or what I can do?"

He didn't answer and that was answer enough. I felt broken and unwanted that even he who I thought trusted me and had saved my life was unsure of my humanity. I took off down the trail heading for the edge of the bluff looking for the way down. I found one that required some climbing skills and concentration which was exactly what I wanted. Not to have to think but simply to move.

The bottom came up quickly, choked with brush and rock fallen from the escarpment. Still, some animal, most likely deer had made a narrow 12-inch-wide path through and down to the lake.

The banks were shallow, gravel and some sand but mostly clay. The wet areas nearest the water sucked at my dress shoes so I pulled them off, tossed them into the water where I watched them sink. The mud crept up between my toes and through my socks. It was ice cold. I shifted my metabolism and warmed my feet watching in amusement as the mud dried into little cracks. I kicked at the rocks and debris, asking God or fate or whatever why did Rachel have to die? Why did everyone I loved die?

I would have run if I'd worn boots and if the trails hadn't been narrow and rocky. Instead, I walked. Walked all day and into the night until I was miles from the cabin. I was lost but I could still see the escarpment against the moon.

Eventually, hunger brought me to an end of my wanderings and I circled around to find Leon's parked jeep Cherokee on the road that led up to the hunting cabin. The doors were open but no annoying ping accompanied them. Nor was the dome light on. I stuck my head in the

driver's side, keyed in the electronic code to start the engine and the dashboard readouts didn't light up. When I opened the hood, the spot where the battery rested was empty, the distributor cap was removed and the wiring harness ripped apart.

I looked up towards the cabin in a panic. Couldn't freeze time and walk there because I'd only planted in my head the memory of the inside room, the escarpment, and the front yard. All too open for safety if Chase's people were already there.

I heard a strange noise; the flapping of a bird's wings and translated it into a far-off helicopter rapidly approaching my hiding spot. Saw it bank into a turn over my head and aim for the cabin. I ran up the road keeping to the center where the grass was thickest and the stones buried deeper. I ran as fast as my legs could carry me yet I couldn't outrun a chopper and I couldn't do ten miles fast enough to save Leon.

I reached the edge of the tree-line coming out on the east side of the clearing where the cabin sat. It was quiet except for the helicopter sitting smack center of the open space in front of the porch. I had to admire the pilot; there was less than six feet clearance from the end of the trees to the blades still slowly turning. As I watched, figures emerged from the house dressed in jeans and camos. I gritted my teeth when I recognized several of them. Dr. Cameron and Chase. Aiken, Morrell, Jacobs. Names that went back to the time before Sarah Hamilton, faces and names I thought I had lost forever. Yet, I still could not say I remembered the man called my great-grandfather or any of my childhood memories.

"Any sign of him?" Chase demanded, his cold eyes scanning the trees. I held my breath afraid that he could see the heat signature of that exhalation. I froze, afraid that one of them had brought FLIR, forward looking infra-red radar. I had heard or read somewhere that a portable handheld model was available to covert agencies. I dropped my body temp to that of the ambient area but that brought a corresponding thickening of my thoughts and reactions much like a lizard would be in the cold. Making my temp too cold was just as obvious a sign as that of a warm body.

"No. And DeCarlos isn't here, either," Aiken reported. "Yet, his coffee is still hot and sitting on the table."

Leon must have heard them coming and ducked into the tunnels before they had landed. Silently, I retreated to the trees where it was thicker cover and made my cautious way to the base of the cliff, this time searching for the exit to the tunnels.

It was Leon who spotted me first; I felt a pebble hit me in the back. Whirled around to see him poking his head up from a hole between two rocks. When I looked closer, I saw that it was a piece of plywood with rocks glued to one side painted to look like dirt and a handle on the other. He was standing on iron rungs of a ladder bolted to the bedrock. At his feet, a kerosene lamp lit the ground so I could see two backpacks, two compound bows and a bundle of clothes that he told me to put on.

He passed the stuff up to me. I slipped off my suit and threw it down the hole, dressing in jeans, sweatshirt, and buff-colored Schmidt coat. Wool socks and hiking boots. A Case knife, and a quiver of twenty arrows with broadhead points. It took me seconds to strip off the suit and get into the other clothes. With it went the feelings of helplessness and sorrow, as if I were shedding that along with my mourning suit. I was ready to go after those men that were hunting us.

"We can't stay here," Leon whispered. "They'll find the tunnels eventually. We should head back to the jeep."

“We can’t, they found it and fixed it so it won’t start.” I shook my head. “This is our world, our forté, Leon. We own the woods.”

“I’m no blanket Indian, Lake. I can’t track or live off the land.”

“Don’t worry, I can.” He closed the cover and unless you knew exactly where to look, you’d never find it. In fact, I had walked over it twice and not suspected it was there.

“Follow me,” I said and took him down the deer trail I’d walked earlier the night before. Twice, I had him stop to listen before we continued on. I thought I’d heard voices and once, the chopper came at us from the west but blew on by without spotting us. I looked at the undercarriage and there wasn’t an FLIR camera mounted below.

“They’re searching by chopper,” he said.

“Yeah, but only by line-of-sight. I’m sure they don’t have IFR to pick up our body heat and Albans revealed to me that he had removed all the tracking chips Cameron had implanted in me. Including the radioisotope in my blood. He gave me a transfusion.”

We reached the bottom of the escarpment and were walking quietly between a ravine overgrown with choke cherries and raspberry vines, a thicket so dense that you couldn’t penetrate it. The deer trail through was just wide enough for the width of our shoulders and backpacks. In some places, we had to turn sideways.

Leon took the lead from there, explaining that he knew these trails having hunted extensively on them. We slid slowly and surreptitiously through the brush while men almost as skilled tracked us. Several times, we had to freeze as their voices came close enough for us to overhear their conversations. Chase must have put fifty men in the woods and unless we could break out of their perimeter, we would be cornered.

We crossed the road a few miles uphill from the jeep and I held him back with a hand across his chest. Men in blue windbreakers with big white letters on the backs of their coats were coming up the road single file. They found the jeep and went over it, confirming that it was Leon’s. Their conversation was not happy, they realized someone else was up here tracking us besides their agency. They speculated who else was involved and mentioned the Senator’s name. These agents had radios and some kind of hand-held scanners.

Leon whispered into my ear. “Are they tracking you?”

“I’m not tagged, not anymore,” I whispered back. “How far are we from the river and that canoe?”

“Twenty minutes, forty if we have to sneak,” he said.

“Head for the river,” I said and we slowly backed up to crawl into a stand of willows that lined the banks of a dry wash. Leon moved almost as stealthily as I, as if he were crawling on glass. It took us closer to an hour to reach the trail to the water. He showed me where the tunnel exited the bluff in case I needed it and he wasn’t with me.

The canoe he’d hidden was an aluminum one painted in camouflage patterns and lying under a brush pile. Carefully, he pushed it into the brackish green water and we slid in, the sound of the metal striking against the bottom bouncing back at us. Water lapped at the boat and around my feet soaking through to the wool socks. Sound carried a long way over the water and we froze, waiting to see if anyone had heard it.

When we were certain no one had, he pushed us off the bottom. Both sides of the river were visible but heavily forested. Only if someone was standing on the edge could they see us. Softly, he slid the paddle in and stroked us out into the current. I watched behind us to make sure we weren’t spotted.

Chapter Forty-Two

I warmed up my feet and Leon was amazed as the steam rose off them in visible clouds, drying both my socks and my boots. He had me do the same to his but in his case, I had to remove them so I didn't burn him.

"I'm sorry about the other night," he offered when he was sure we'd paddled far enough from the cabin not to be overheard and to outrun the pursuit. "I'm not afraid of you, Lakan. How could I be? You saved my life when I was seconds from being dead. What scared me was just the residual memories of ghost tales my grandmother frightened us with when we were kids. About skinwalkers and the Wendigo and all that other folklore."

"Wendigo, isn't that the Indian spirit that eats its victim and then that becomes the next creature?"

He nodded. "It's very real in mid-western and eastern Indian culture."

"As real as the chupabaca and Moth-man," I sneered but he looked at me sadly.

"You're real, Lakan."

I shut up and watched as we glided down the river towards what he said was a small outpost that sold some food, ice and fuel to the hunters that came through the area. They had a dock where we could tie up but there wouldn't be a vehicle waiting for us like the other hunters who came through. The early moon hit the river's surface and made silver highlights that twisted our eyes and painted everything in white frost.

The river still wound its way between a narrow gorge but for the most part, it was passive, its current no more than two miles per hour. The rapids, he told me were downstream after the store, where the river met another in a curve between two ridges and was funneled through the narrow gap. It took only a few seconds to pass but it was so rough that no canoe had survived it. We would have to portage around a narrow footpath cut through just for that purpose. Or abandon the canoe and retreat back to the woods to climb over the ridge and lose a day.

Leon didn't know this section of the mountains. He did know that the people here were suspicious of strangers, clannish and not afraid to make someone disappear. Fugitives had spent years hiding from the law and some were never caught. There were snake cults operating in these hollows, moonshiners and marijuana growers. All of them would cut our throats in an instant if we rubbed them the wrong way.

We pulled up to the dock and used one of the ropes to tie the canoe. Leon stepped out first, sat on the edge of the weathered boards to pull on his dry socks and boots.

"You got any money?" I asked and he nodded.

"I grabbed my wallet and emergency cash. Hid my credit cards and ID back in the tunnels."

"Let's get some food. I'm starving." My belly growled in agreement but that wasn't the worst part about being hungry. When my reserves were low, I wasn't capable of performing some of my...tricks. I followed him up the dock, gray, weathered and made of cypress logs which were odd here in the mountains of Georgia. It must have cost a fortune to trailer them up here.

The store was surprising in the moonlight. It was a log cabin of honey-colored pine, a double-wide sitting on a pretty curve of the river with a backdrop of pines and dogwood. Whoever had driven the house in and set it up had cut down only the bare minimum of trees to do so. It looked as if it had grown here. The front was all glass doors and windows with the usual steel bear bars. A huge porch ran around all four sides and held tables and chairs made of pine as

well. An equally huge river-stone fireplace and chimney bisected the middle of the building. My nose caught the whiff of cooking meat and my feet hurried towards it.

“Damn,” Leon admired. “Don’t know how she does it but she’s never wrong.”

“She? What are you talking about?” I asked, not missing a step.

“The cook inside. She knows when a camper’s coming and always has food cooking when you get here. Even this late at night.” The moon was just coming up overhead.

He pushed the door open and we entered the interior. The place was spotless and spacious yet it held everything a camper might need or could want. A long pine counter divided the room into merchandise and a dining area. I saw a girl standing at a flaming grill flipping hamburgers. She had a kerchief tied around her head and an apron tied in a bow at her waist. She was tall and slender, the tips of her hair were light brown.

“Have a seat,” she said without turning. “These will be done in a minute.”

We sat at a small table with a plastic green gingham tablecloth. Already set were silverware, ketchup, mustard and pepper on the table. An older man in worn jeans and flannel shirt came out of the back. He had a lined face that had seen the years and the weather, blue eyes so light that they appeared crystal and a faint smile. His hair was thick, full and totally iron gray not white.

“Coffee with cream and two sugars,” he said and put down in front of me a huge mug filled with hot liquid. “Coffee black, one sugar.” For Leon.

She turned around and I froze. Her eyes were the same ice blue as the old man and the hair under the kerchief was nearly white blonde but her smile was Rachel’s and her face could have been an exact copy.

“Your name---it isn’t Rachel, is it?” I gasped. My heart pounded in my chest, my hands were sweaty and I felt as if the whole world balanced on the edge waiting for her answer.

“Maiara, it means sage.” She cocked her head. “Your burgers are ready. You have time to eat them, it won’t be until dawn for another three hours. They’ll find this place by six.”

“You know about *them*?”

She cocked an eyebrow. “I knew you were coming and that you like hamburgers and coffee. I just didn’t know your name. What’s your name, boy?” She had the most delightful drawl.

“Lakan, Lake. Strongbow. This is Leon DeCarlos,” I said not caring that she knew our real names. She would have known anything else for a lie, anyway.

“Are you Native American?” I asked holding the burger in my hand. I wanted to drop it and hold hers.

“Scotch, Welsh, and Cherokee. Fae,” she grinned and took the burger out of my grip. She placed it on the plate and wiped the grease off my mouth. “Eat up, Laky. We have a long road ahead of us.”

“Us? What’s Fae?”

“The Faery Folk. You think I’m going to let you go alone now that I’ve found you? Dad, you have everything ready?”

Her father nodded to the pile by the door, three new backpacks, sleeping bags, ground sheets, tents, coats, and boots. “Dad has replaced what you left with, better gear, newer things. Food, self-striking matches, clothes, compass, satellite phones that are encrypted. A small tablet laptop. Money and maps.”

She kissed her father and slipped the pack on over an expensive outdoor coat that was waterproof, insulated and rip-stop.

“You’re going with us?” Leon asked in disbelief. He looked at the father. “You’re going to let her go off with two strangers she just met?”

“I stopped telling Mairy what to do when she turned 12,” he shrugged. “She knows what she knows and she’s never wrong.” He shook my hand and his grip was hard. “You take care of her, Lakan Strongbow.”

I finished my food in shock while she went through our bags, taking out what she wanted to keep and repacking it into the new ones.

She kept out a pair of long johns, washed duck trousers and flannel shirt, wool socks for both of us and told me to change in the back room while she finished her arrangements. If we wanted showers, we could use the ones in the back of the cabin that was set aside for overnight guests. I hesitated, I would have liked to clean up but the thought of lying on a bed safely and closing my eyes won out over cleanliness.

Her dad told us his name was Charlie Kitwillie and he remembered Leon from previous trips up the river. He said he would take care of the canoe and showed us to the bedroom. It was done in rust tones with twin bunk beds and down comforters in geometric designs with big, fluffy pillows. I claimed the top bunk, kicked off my boots, pulled off my dirty clothes and was under the covers in less than a minute. Almost asleep in less time than that. Leon sat on the edge of the lower bunk and talked. His low, rumbling tones penetrated my tired brain for only a few minutes before I sank deep into dreams.

Rachel was there, sitting on Grandfather’s rock with her knees tucked under her chin. Her eyed gleamed over the white buckskin. She looked content. I stood at her feet and looked up, my heart heavy now that I saw her again.

“You like my gift, Lakan?” she asked, not smiling although I could see one tugging at her lips.

“She’s not you, Rachel. She might look like you but---.” She jumped down and put her hand across my mouth to hold back the complaints I might make. Her fingers were cool and ephemeral, the hand of a spirit, not a real girl.

“Lakan, you love me but I never had the time to discover what I could have felt for you. Besides, she is meant for you, she compliments the part of you that needs help.” Gently, I pushed her hand away so I could speak.

“I thought I was perfect,” I said sarcastically. “A perfectly created being.”

“None of God’s creatures are perfect, Lakan. Though some have come close. Where your heart is sorrowful, she brings you joy. Where you know many things, she knows everything. Where you are certain, she brings uncertainties.”

“She says she is part Fae. Fairy folk,” I sneered.

“Trust her, she sees the world of time beyond the veil. I came this last time to say goodbye. You don’t need me anymore.”

“No, Rachel!” I cried. “Don’t leave me! I love you!”

“I will always remember you, Lakan. Be safe and be happy.” She kissed me on the cheek and it burned with a lovely iciness that made me cry out.

I sat up in a strange bed and startled Leon. He got up, stood at the side and reached for me in the darkness. “What time is it?” I asked in a voice stuck on scratchy.

“Nearly 5:30 a.m. Bad dream? Do you need a drink? Something to eat?” His concern was stifling.

I slid down and retrieved my clothes pulling on the long johns first before I answered him. “I dreamed of her. She came to say goodbye.”

“Where’s she going?” He didn’t ask who, he knew I was talking about Rachel.

“I don’t know. Heaven, the next level. The spirit realm. Whatever. I won’t ever see her again.”

“Lakan, she died,” he tried to say it gently but it came out as harsh as its reality.

I buried my head in my hands. “I know. Too late for her, for us. For whatever my dreams could be.” I hurried out of the room before he could see my tears and ran down to the river where I could be alone. Behind me, I heard the girl tell Leon to let me be.

I walked along the banks on a narrow trail that had been used by both men and animals; I read their stories in the tracks that they had left behind. So, it was I that saw the first of Chase’s men breaking down the river in an inflatable boat. My first instinct was to turn around and run back to the outpost but I knew that if I moved, the movement would catch Aiken’s eye much quicker than if I remained motionless.

An agonizingly slow five minutes later, they had passed my position and were out of sight. I turned to backtrack my trail when the girl materialized out of the woods with Leon in tow. I hadn’t seen or heard anything until she was in front of me. She handed me my coat, backpack, the bow, and quiver. Told me to put them on and follow her. I did as she asked without question; she led us into the brush not on a trail but into a narrow ravine with a thin trickle of water in the bottom.

She left no marks on the ground and was as careful as I about ensuring that Leon did not disturb the leaves or the soil. The ground was still frozen and hard enough not to leave footprints but our boots could knock off edges of frozen clods and leave a sign.

I saw both doe and buck hoof prints in the frozen turf but nothing larger. I knew the area was rife with bears but hopefully, most of them were hibernating.

After we reached the end of the ravine, she motioned for us to climb to the rim and wait. I was first up and the climb was taxing; it required that I use my hands to pull me forward using the trunks to facilitate my climb. What I saw was a stand of hardwoods, so thick that I knew this area had not been logged in two hundred years. The trees were huge, oaks and maples as large as Volkswagens. Even black walnut grew within this copse. It was barely wide enough to squeeze through the openings between the trunks. It was more like trying to go through a massed army at parade attention.

Yet, Maiara flitted through with ease, warning us to stay close or we would get lost. We followed on her heels for an hour.

Chapter Forty-Three

Towards ten o’clock, she took a trail from the ridgeline down towards a rocky outcrop of granite and schist where the sun sparkled off the flecks in the layers. We were in a small valley between the ridges and there were patches where the rocks had split leaving nowhere for trees to grow. Usually with small cliffs marking the edges, we had passed many before she chose this one.

Scrambling down a trail I would have rappelled down, we hit the bottom. Under a cutout and a ledge hanging like an umbrella was a dark hole. A cave that once we crawled in a few feet, opened up to well over standing height. She flicked on her flashlight and pointed out lanterns stacked near a natural formation shaped as a table.

“We can eat and rest here,” she said, dropping her pack and I walked around checking out the cave. I found several other tunnels that went in quite far. Good, so we weren’t stuck with only one way in or out.

I smelled food cooking and that drew me back faster than anything she could have said. She had made packets of freeze-dried chicken and noodles with a pot of strong coffee. I had been expecting MREs.

“Lakan, eat,” she offered me a plate and I needed no other invitation. Leon waited until she had served herself before eating his.

“You can go home soon, Mr. DeCarlos,” she said. “They’re not interested in you so much, now.”

“I don’t want to leave Lakan in case he needs me,” he protested.

“You’ve done your part, Leon. And more. You should go home if it’s safe.” I looked at her. “Is it? Safe?”

“It is. Mostly. If they catch you, just tell them whatever they want to know,” she added. “We’ll reach Titusville tonight. One of my cousins will drive you home.”

“And you? Where are you going?” Leon asked. “Wait, don’t tell me. If I don’t know, I can’t tell.”

“We’re going to Washington, D.C.,” she smiled. “Where do you think?”

Titusville was in a narrow river valley, high enough on a small rise so that if the huge Wappanoc dam went, it would only take out half of the buildings and most of the infrastructure. There was only one road in, State Highway 48 but a dozen secondary roads out. Some petered out into seasonal roads through the State and National Forests. We came down off the ridge following part of the state trail system. It brought us to the stage head of the Equestrian park which was still closed until April 15th yet some die-hard horseman had parked a rusty old four-horse gooseneck in the prettiest spot under an old pecan tree. A small brook babbled beyond the picnic table under a thin coat of ice. Beyond that was a free standing grill.

A younger man was standing by the cab of an old Dodge Ram pickup in primer gray. The tires were good---new and the truck was clean on the outside. He wore shabby jeans but they were starched and pressed under an equally worn duck coat. The cuffs and collar of a red flannel shirt stuck out of the sleeves and neck. His head of hair was brown, bare of any hat and his cheeks pink from the brisk wind. He had the same strange icy blue almost colorless eyes that Maiara sported. When he spoke, his voice washed over us like the benediction of a saint.

“Mairy, Mr. DeCarlos, Lakan,” he greeted. She hurried into his arms and hugged him as tightly as he was hugging her. “Any problems?” he asked when she pushed back and he laughed.

“Silly me. I should know better. If my little sister plans something, nothing ever goes wrong.” He turned to Leon and held out his hand. “I’m Robin, Mairy’s youngest brother.”

Leon shook his hand and his worried frown smoothed out as if he had swallowed a dose of lorazepam.

“Robby, knock it off,” she said and he turned to her with an innocent expression.

“What? He looked worried. I helped him relax.”

“My brother,” she explained, “has a gift, too. His voice makes you feel mellow. His touch can melt your defenses and put you into REM sleep. From there, he can get you to do anything.”

“Let me guess, your grandparents worked at Oak Ridge testing grounds in Knoxville?” I rolled my eyes.

“He’s as quick-witted as you said, Mairy,” her brother grinned. “Robin. Call me Robby.” I took his hand and his eyes widened. He let go first and rubbed his palm. Didn’t say anything but drew in a deep breath before he pointed to the truck. It was a crew cab, the inside spotless. She took the back seat with me and Leon sat up front. The engine purred when he started it and it

was evident as he backed the 24' trailer that he was an experienced hauler. The trailer was empty of livestock from the way it bounced on rubber springs when we hit the highway.

Huge billboards advertising Spring Festivals, Trout Fishing, and the lumber industry lined both sides of the road. Deer crossing signs and Highway mile markers broke up the monotony of the straightaways. One read **Wappanoc Dam 5 miles, River Road**. Burger King, McDonalds, Arby signs competed for space with Walmart and Family Planning.

The air was crisp and clean, this part of the state did not mine or use coal, it received most of its power from hydroelectric turbines at the dam.

"Where are we going?" I asked, my hand on the front seat headrest.

"My house," Robin answered. "I live near the airport."

"Airport? This town has an airport?" I looked at the valley between two mountain ridges and imagined trying to land a plane on what must have been a very short runway.

"Titusville Regional Airport. Believe it or not, you can land a DC-10 here." He shrugged. "Mostly Cessnas and Beechcrafts. Puddle-jumpers."

"Why?"

"Hard to believe but the finest bass fishing in the east coast is done at Lake Wappanoc. People fly in for the fishing tournament. Which is in two days. A few hundred thousand will swell the town and makes it a bit more difficult to find you."

"Why can't we leave today?" Leon asked.

Maiara answered him. "Because the people chasing Lakan will catch us if you do."

"How can you know this?"

"She sees glimpses of the future," I cut in. "Enough to circumvent some events."

She gave me a grin. "Correct, Laky boy."

He drove downtown to reach his house. The area had quaint brick buildings from the Civil War era and three story Victorians converted into gift shops, eateries and boarding houses. There were five hotels, many bars, pool houses and Kiwanis on every corner. The strip was over ten blocks long with dozens of other side streets branching off it. The Walmart was on the other side of town built high above the town and out of flood danger. His home was tucked onto a small side street near the Walmart in a development of the same cookie-cutter houses on acre-sized tracts.

Yellow with green shutters, it was a small ranch with an attached two car garage and a paved driveway. He pulled the truck up on the flattened grass next to the garage and parked. Behind the house, I saw acres of fenced pasture that went uphill disappearing into the woods. A four-stall barn nestled into a protected cove near the house and four equine heads popped out whinnying.

"This all yours?" I asked.

"One hundred and sixty-five acres. Part of the family farm, dad sold most of it off to the developers when land was \$65 a square foot. He kept this part for the family. I built on a part and get to use the rest." He opened the door and walked to the barn, letting four horses out. Walking horse, Fox trotter, and two Kentucky Mountain horses by their looks and gaits. He threw them a bale of fescue hay and then returned to let us in the house. It was locked and he opened it with a key. We carried our gear and he told us to drop it in the hallway.

The kitchen was huge; a living/dining area open all the way from the front door to the four-season porch. There were three bedrooms, two full baths and a full basement that was finished and larger than the upstairs. The extra space was guarded by a steel door and an electronic keypad.

“This is my panic room, bomb shelter, and operations center,” he explained. “I keep my guns and stuff in here. It’s powered by a separate electrical, heating and air system, has three escape hatches, is stocked for a year’s occupancy for four. The code to get in is the time and date on the digital clock on the wall.” He pointed to a small digital clock face near the stairs. The numerals glowed red in the dim corner. They were in 24-hour military time format.

“You in the service?” Leon asked but I thought he looked too young to have served and come back.

“Four years in Afghanistan,” he said bleakly. “Medical Corps.”

“How did you sync the clock with the lock?” I asked interested enough to forego eating, bathing or sleeping. He started to explain and I finished, working out a way to make the combination unbreakable by any means. He looked excited as we went over the nuts and bolts of the design. That left the door and the walls vulnerable. I tapped the wall. Ferro-concrete. Thick.

“How thick?”

“Eight feet and re-enforced with steel plates and rebar. The door is titanium steel, I bought it from a decommissioned missile site and had it cut to size. It’s a blast door.”

“Why?” I asked simply.

“Because within twenty years, there will be a complete breakdown of the American society,” Maiara predicted. “Unless something drastic happens.” She stared at me.

“What happens?” both Leon and I asked.

“You have to kill the president of 2020,” she said flatly.

“Who? Who’s going to win this year?”

“That isn’t clear but 2020 will bring in a man who starts the next world chaos. It won’t be a war per se, but an economic crisis of global proportions. Billions will starve, anarchy, disease, cannibalism. The very apocalypse the ancients have predicted. We can stop it.”

“By murdering an American leader?” I shouted.

“You’re going to murder the men who killed Rachel and kidnapped you,” she pointed out. “You revenge one person, why not save a billion or more?”

At that moment, I hated her. I left the three of them in the basement and walked off into the woods. The horses followed me up to the fence but I climbed over it.

Aiken scouted around the house again looking for any sign that the boy could have left. It was as if he were a ghost and the other man, DeCarlos was almost as good as Lakan at masking his tracks. He found DeCarlos’ tracks near the foundation but it wasn’t until he went back inside to the bedrooms that he spotted a faint dusting of dirt drifting in a slight breeze.

He squatted on his haunches and watched the dust slowly eddying through the room. When he was certain where it was coming from, he entered the closet. It took him only a few seconds to find the entrance to a tunnel.

Chase stood in the doorway and watched as Aiken found the first entrance and then the second. They gathered flashlights and took both tunnels meeting up after a few yards in. Their voices echoed eerily in the subterranean corridor.

Here, there were plenty of footprints. Each was hiking boots with well-defined treads. DeCarlos’ were a size eleven and the boy’s a neat eight. He had surprisingly small feet for someone almost six foot tall. His father had been over six foot and his grandfather nearly 6’4”. The Sioux were known for their extraordinary height in a time when most men averaged 5’5”.

“Where do you think it leads?” Chase asked as he attempted to contact the rest of the team.

“It won’t work underground,” Aiken said. “No cell can go through solid rock. Not even satellite phones. You’ll have to go back and call them above ground.”

“You’ll keep after them?”

“I’ll call in when I get to the other end. It looks like it descends, probably to the base of the ridge. The rest of the team will only be a few minutes behind me. I’ll mark the way with blazes.” He opened his pack and took out a hatchet scarring the rock wall with white arrows.

“Follow the arrows. They can’t be too far ahead of us, that coffee was still warm.”

“Bring them back, Aiken. In reasonably healthy form. If you have to shoot the boy to stop them, you can. We don’t need DeCarlos alive. Or anyone else with him.”

Aiken nodded and disappeared into the earth.

Chapter Forty-Four

Aiken came out of the tunnel at the bottom of the cliff, pushing the hatch cover up. He was amused at the ingenuity of the construction owner in the design of the cover. The design of rocks glued to the plywood and steel hatch would have fooled anyone walking on the ground.

He saw the river and where the pair had dragged a canoe into the water. He took out his iPhone, googled up GPS and located the nearest landing area on the map. Then, he called Chase and had him arrange for an inflatable boat. There was one in the chopper. He had to wait another hour before the two teams met. One group would go down the river in the inflatable, the other would split up and come up from the store meeting at some point along the way.

Chase and the chopper would fly back to HQ and pick up the FLIR, then check the trading post for vehicles that might be waiting to pick up the fugitives. He met them at the river bank and told them that the FBI was involved, that they had attempted a trap and surveillance at the cemetery. Somehow, the pair had avoided a dozen agents. In fact, Chase reported grimly, nearly every intelligence agency was scrambling for info on the phenomenon. Including the President, the Secretaries of Defense and Homeland Security. Screaming for it. Any minute, he was afraid that the news media would pick up on Strongbow or that someone would connect Albans with the miracles of the Waste Management truck accident.

Aiken’s only comment was, “shit.” The team of four in his boat contained three of the men that Aiken knew the most and Dr. Cameron. He was working on his laptop with the speed and precision of a first-rate personal assistant; Aiken guessed that he was typing over a hundred words a minute. He seemed to completely ignore that he was floating down a river in the dead of night.

“What are you doing, Dr. Cameron?” Morrell asked. Cameron looked up before he answered.

“Morrell, right? I’m using a profiling program I wrote to see what Lakan will do next.”

“He’s running,” Morrell pointed out. Cameron and Aiken shook their heads.

“If he was running, he would have kept going out west. He didn’t. He came back east. Why? His girlfriend is dead, so something is drawing him this way. I suspect it’s revenge.”

Morrell snickered. “Revenge? A 16-year-old kid with no money, no friends and no resources? What can he do?”

“What can’t he do, Morrell?” Aiken returned. “He’s already proved he can do things no human can do. He’s thumbed his nose in the face of the NSA and FBI. We’ve been tracking him for two years and still haven’t touched him. Now, I suggest you shut your yap, we’re near the trading post and sound carries a long way on the water.”

They were silent as he paddled slowly towards a curve in the river with high banks on both sides. Aiken had the feeling that eyes were on them. He signaled with his hands and the three agents angled their guns upwards, scanning in the moonlight, using their scopes to target anything that might ambush them.

It wasn't until they passed the curve that he relaxed. A long, low building came into sight---a log cabin set in a pretty spot, especially as the sun was almost rising on the horizon.

As they steered for the dock, a light came on, a motion sensor lamp and illuminated them. Hastily, they concealed their weapons, stepping on the wooden planks. Moving furtively, they approached the cabin with the inside lights flickering. An older man in a windbreaker over worn jeans and long-sleeved insulated t-shirt came to the door.

"We don't open till sunrise but you're welcome to come in and wait. My cook's still asleep if you're wanting breakfast."

Aiken's eyes searched for a canoe, clothes, watermarks on the floor, anything that would indicate that the pair had been inside the store. A faint lingering smell of roasting beef made his stomach growl.

"Coffee sounds good," he agreed and stepped back inside. The room was huge with four bedrooms off the back and a dining area. Cameron took up his spot at the table nearest the fireplace and plugged in his laptop. The others sat at various tables, covering all four corners of the room. Aiken let his eyes roam the store and the dining area. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary or place, no sign of anyone in the last few hours.

"Name's Gregson," he lied smoothly. "We're with the Sheriff's Department. Search and Rescue. A pair---an older man with a teenager. He's been kidnapped and last seen somewhere in this area. Any sign of them coming this way? Might have been in a canoe."

"No canoe could have made it past Ouellette Rapids, they're just a mile downriver. Haven't seen anyone in the last week," the old man said easily.

He moved behind the kitchen counter and put on a pot of coffee, placing cups, cream and sugar packets between him and the agents. "They make it this far, they ain't lost. What makes you think they come this way?" he asked.

"You are?" Aiken returned.

"Charlie Kitwillie," he said and started up the grill. The aroma of maple bacon filled the air and before the clock hit 5:00 a.m., a sleepy-eyed teenager stumbled out of the back bedroom.

"Hey, Dad. We got guests?"

The boy was nearly full grown with ice clear eyes and light brown hair. Handsome and stalwart, not the typical redneck version as seen in the movies. He nonchalantly wrapped an apron around his middle and started cracking eggs on the griddle along with flapjacks and biscuits. To their gaping looks, the boy cooked each and every one of them a breakfast to their personal preference without asking a single question on how or what.

He finished up with two extra plates, one for his father and one for himself. Everyone ate in silence and only when their plates were slick clean did the teenager speak.

"I found a canoe downriver near the old sluice. Washed up in pieces near the trestle bridge. Some damn fool tried to go through the rapids again, I bet. I 'spect they'll be pulling some bodies out of the river bottoms," the boy said. "You folk lookin' for some'un?"

"Maybe," Aiken returned.

"Ain't no mebbe," he came back. "You lookin' for something. Ain't no fishing here and cain't go deer huntin' till fall yet you-all are carrying guns. You gov'mint people?"

Aiken sat back and Morrell started humming *Dueling Banjos*. The boy laughed.

“My name’s Kevin Kitwillie. I’d be glad to take you down to the remains. Of the canoe. We can hike to it.”

“How much?” Aiken asked. The boy’s eyes gleamed with greed.

“Fifty bucks. That’s the going rate for a day’s guide.”

“Deal.” Aiken pulled out a wad and peeled off a fifty, holding it out to the boy but he shook his head and pointed to his father. The bill disappeared into the old man’s pocket.

“Won’t your cook be missed?”

“Naw. Ain’t nobody comin’ down the river until late afternoon,” the boy said. He looked out the large windows that fronted the cabin. “Best take some rain gear if you got any. If not, Dad can sell you some. Gonna rain like a cow pissin’ on a flat rock.” He ambled back into his bedroom and they heard the sounds of him dressing.

By 8, all of them had washed up, used the facilities and changed into fresh dry socks. They met the boy on the front porch and he walked them down the trail through the dirt parking lot to the portage path where all of them stared at a Class V rapids; 45 seconds of utter hell. If one of them fell off the trail into the roiling rock-filled basin, he would be dead before he emerged into calm waters.

Kevin trotted across the narrow trail with the arrogance of the young and familiar. Once on the other side, he settled down to a brisk five-minute mile that the others had to hump to keep up. Aiken scanned the ground constantly and saw no trace of any footprints or drag marks.

He fell back towards Cameron. “Doc, this doesn’t feel right. Where does this come out?”

“Small town on the border called Oak Hollow. It’s not far from the Interstate, a four-way that goes out west.”

“You said he’s not headed west.”

“Our guide is being very helpful. Especially to government men. These people hate the government,” Cameron acknowledged. “You think the pair have been here and these people are covering for them?”

“One way to find out. We go on until we find the canoe. If there is one. If it’s there, we know they came that far down the river,” Aiken nodded. “Or at least as far as the store. I have a sneaking suspicion that they backtracked.”

He stopped and gestured Morrell and Jacobs over. Rivers stayed behind the doctor. They formed a huddle and Aiken told Jacobs and Rivers to follow the boy, while he, Morrell and Cameron would return to the store, question the father and try to spot any sign that the pair had gone east.

Kevin called to them and his face looked worried when the three turned around. “Hey!” he called. “Where are you going?”

Rivers and Jacobs pulled out their Glocks and told the boy to keep going. Kevin swallowed and nodded. “Where are they going?”

Rivers grinned and it was not a friendly one. “Back to your daddy to see if he’s lying.”

The boy stared and then, took off down the trail at a dead run leaving the pair dumbfounded and flat-footed. By the time they had started after him, the teenager was out of range and out of sight. Both men kept on the trail until it emptied onto a dirt road that followed the second branch of a slough. On one side was a railroad with a trestle bridge and stuck in the pylons of its supports was the battered remains of a camouflaged aluminum canoe. Painted on its side was the legend, **Cherokee Rose, Cherokee Construction** and a Tennessee ID number.

They dragged it up onto the grass and examined the inside. Three huge holes had ripped through the bottom, the seats were broken in two and both oarlocks were bent beyond repair. The

holes were clearly made from something hitting the bottom in, not someone bashing the bottom out.

“Well, he wasn’t lying about this,” Rivers agreed. He looked up as he heard the sound of a car approaching. Both of them were caught unprepared when the four-door sedan stopped, the doors flew open and men in suits and FBI windbreakers jumped out.

“Well, well, well,” the SAIC drawled. Rivers knew him, his name was Alex Mulder. “If it isn’t agent Rivers and Jacobs. What are you spooks doing out here in Deliverance country?”

“Looking for a teenage boy, same as you.”

“Where’s Aiken and Chase? We know he’s here, too,” SAIC Mulder asked.

“Why don’t you Fibbies go back and play in your pond?” Rivers laughed. “You don’t know the first thing about intelligence operations.”

“Enough to know you’re looking in the wrong place,” Mulder snapped. “He’s not here anymore.”

“Yeah? Where is he?” Rivers retorted and shut his mouth as his radio buzzed. Answering it, he listened as Aiken reported that he had found evidence where a party of three had slid down into a ravine and exited on the ridge above the river. The trio turned and before the FBI agents could blink, the NSA men held them at gunpoint.

“Keys,” Rivers demanded. “Or I blow your heads off right here.”

Mulder didn’t argue but tossed the keys. All four FBI agents backed up and let the trio get in the car. Rivers was last, not once taking his eyes or Glock off the Federal agents.

“We’ll leave the car at the fishing lodge. Have a nice walk. Oh, if you see a kid named Kevin, don’t let him take you for a walk in the woods.” Cameron drove off with Rivers remaining half out of the window until the car was out of pistol range.

One of the Fibbies asked, “Would he have shot us?”

Mulder swallowed past the dry lump. “In a heartbeat and our bodies would have wound up as cat food in a can.” They watched the receding taillights fade out of sight and only then, started walking.

Chapter Forty-Five

By the time Aiken and his men arrived back at the fishing lodge, no one was there. A sign on the door read ‘Family emergency. Will be back in a week.’ The bear bars were up and locked on all the doors and steel shutters had been pulled down across all the windows.

“Son-of-a-bitch!” Aiken cursed and notified Chase by cell phone. Cameron sat down on the porch steps and played finger music on his laptop.

“Charles Kitwillie. Has 12 kids---11 boys and one daughter. They’re spread out all over the Mason/Dixon line, six of them live fairly close. One in Titusville, the boy Kevin is a sophomore at University of Tennessee. Get this, all of them are members of the Cherokee Nations Tribe.”

“Where’s the nearest son live?” Aiken demanded. Before Cameron could answer, they heard the sounds of an approaching car. As they reached the gravel parking lot, a blue government sedan fishtailed to a stop and the doors popped open. His two other team members jumped out, guns readied.

“Rivers, Jacobs,” he greeted. “Nice car.”

“We took it off SAIC Mulder,” Rivers reported. “They’re hunting here, too.”

“Dr. Cameron has found a possible lead,” the agent in charge said. “How far, Dr. Cameron?”

“From here? By chopper, twenty minutes. By car, an hour or more. The roads suck.”

Aiken nodded and called for a chopper pickup, had Chase mobilize a unit to search out the house and warned them about the FBI. Chase came back with the unwelcome news that other agencies and operatives were converging on the area. Including foreign interests.

“We’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” Chase acknowledged and rang off.

The woods folded themselves around me with a comfortable familiarity. I loved the smell of musty earth as leaves molded into the life-giving soil, the heady aroma of pine resin and the scent of rain. These were all so right with the place I had entered so when the sound of metal clinking on metal broke the quiet, I knew it for the danger it meant. Someone was invading the woods, someone who was carrying metal that knocked against metal. Like the sound of guns or rifles.

I hunkered down behind a pecan tree and wished that I had thought to bring my bow. The only weapon in sight was a broken tree branch near my left knee; it was as thick as my forearm and as long as a cane. It would have made a decent walking stick with a little whittling.

I heard someone whistling and before too long, an older man in comfortable jeans, jacket and hat strolled into view. He had a dog with him on a leash and its tags were jingling but that wasn’t what caught my undivided attention. The thing my eyes were riveted to was a pearl handled pistol in a leather holster on his hip.

I knew the dog would scent me any second. I didn’t know what to do. If I moved, both of them would see me. He came closer and now, I saw the star-shaped metal on his jacket. I could even read it. It spelled out ‘U.S. MARSHAL’. The odds that he was here just to walk his dog in the woods was not in my favor. I eyed the pooch, he was a shepherd mix of some kind but not a color I’d seen before. He was a smoke gray with darker saddle and cream-colored shoulder markings. He looked wolfish and his eyes were the same blue as my own.

“Rashka,” the man said and the dog stopped, lifted its head and sniffed the air. I saw its hackles raise as he caught my scent. He gave off a long, mournful howl not a bark and his handler stiffened.

“What is it, Rashka?” he asked. “You find something?” He slipped the dog’s leash and before I could stand up, the dog was in my face, wagging his tail and licking me. I buried my face in his ruff as his owner stepped closer to me.

“Hi, there,” he said with a smile. “You haven’t seen a little girl around here, have you?” His face was friendly, not wary or elated that he’d found me.

“No,” I said slowly. “Is she lost?”

“Yes. Her name is Sami. She wandered away from her parents at the Walmart parking lot. We think she headed for the woods and Rashka thinks so, too.”

“Haven’t seen anyone,” I added. “I didn’t see any tracks, either.”

“I was hoping you were her when Rashka picked up your scent,” he sighed. “Her dad’s a friend.”

“Maybe I can help,” I said slowly.

“You know these woods?” He had gray eyes with hazel flecks, a straight nose, and a cleft chin. Really handsome in the way that women liked. Wasn’t more than thirty and strong. Well-muscled and he had held the straining 130-pound shepherd with ease.

“You have a scent cloth?” He eyed me with a strange expression but handed over a small pink bunny minus its button nose and one ear. I sniffed it, held it out towards the dog and said, “find Sami.”

The dog took off like a shot, back the way he had come. I followed and his owner stared helplessly at the dog, me and then turned to join us. I followed the dog's tracks and when he reached a small creek, stopped to examine the easiest way across; the way a small kid would cross it. On rocks like stepping stones, I could see where someone had rocked and moved the ones on the bank but couldn't tell about the stones in the water because the flowing liquid carried away any disturbed soil within minutes.

On the other side of the creek, I saw where a small sneaker had slipped in the mud and she had fallen. A perfect handprint lay there for anyone with eyes to see it. After that, her tracks were easy enough to follow; she'd made no attempt to hide them other than her aimless wanderings in circles trying to find her way back.

We walked slowly so I wouldn't miss any sign, her scuff marks through the leaves and broken ferns along the swampy edges of the hemlock groves. She chose the easiest ways to walk, going generally downhill. I would have expected her to come out eventually on the road that led to the subdivision or the dam but the area surprised me with the extent of the woodlands surrounding the town. There were hills and hollows aplenty here; many places for a small child to disappear. He kept up with me easily even when I hurried so he couldn't ask me any questions. We came out atop a ridge and when I looked down, I saw an open cut where something had been quarried. We could see the dog's tail wagging just behind a large cut of stone and a pile of blocks. The way down was steep, a slope of scree that would challenge anyone without a safety rope. From the turned over darkened stones, I knew the dog had made it down and probably that the kid had fallen.

"Give me your coat," I said and to his credit, he didn't argue but slipped it off handing it to me. His shirt was a long sleeved tan Carhartt with pearl snaps. I buttoned the coat back up, tied the sleeves together and knelt on the body of the coat. Before he could stop me, I rode the material down the slope almost as if it were a sled.

What stopped me was one of the big rocks that the stone masons had cut but left piled at the bottom of the slope. I hit it on my right side as my boogie board became fabric scraps. Hit hard enough to crack my ribs and my right arm. I hugged the rock with tears in my eyes and no breath left in my lungs while he called anxiously from above.

When my bones healed enough for me to move, I yelled back for him to stay there while I looked for another way down.

"Can you see her? Is she okay?" he yelled down. I pushed myself up and cradled my side as blood dribbled from my mouth. One of my broken ribs must have punctured a lung as I could barely breathe.

Beyond the cut stones of pink limestone, lay a little girl in jeans, pink jacket, and colorful rubber boots. Her eyes were closed and she was breathing in shallow puffs of air. The dog was lying next to her, whining as if he knew he couldn't help her. There were scratches, abrasions, swelling and bruises all over her body.

Like me, she had fallen down the slope and the blocks had stopped her fall with brutal efficiency. She had broken ribs, arms, and legs but the worst was an open skull fracture, her hair lay in a growing puddle of blood. Her pupils were uneven and nearly fixed. If I hadn't seen her breathing past a small bubble of blood in her nose, I would have taken her for dead.

I couldn't wait for my body to heal completely before I healed her and as yet, I didn't know how *long* you could be dead before I could bring you back. I put my hand out and shrieked as a massive pain tore through me and broken bones grated. It felt as if my body had literally

exploded from the inside out. I fell to my knees, just missing her stomach. I couldn't move my arms so I tucked my head on her side and called forth the blue light.

It fought me. Wanted to flow back over me but I persisted and forced it to cover her. It was faint, this strange aura. The faintest I had ever seen it, just barely visible in the morning sunlight and the longer I held it on her, the weaker I felt.

I persisted until I saw her eyelids flutter and the strange deformity of her skull round out. Called her name past a bubble of blood in my throat. "Sami? Wake up, Sami."

She rolled over, groaning, her own arms flailing as she inadvertently hit me. It broke the contact from her and I fell back, coughing up blood and wincing in pain.

"I fell," she said and sobbed. Her fingers rolled deep in the dog's ruff. "I hurt. Everywhere. You saved me. I was dancing in the golden light and you found me at the door."

"Yeah," I grunted. "This is Rashka. He'll help us get out of here."

"What's your name?" Her eyes were large in her elfin face, hazel with flecks of spring green. Pretty, about seven years old and smart. Smart enough to follow water downhill because it would take her to a road. Except this quarry was between her and the road.

"Lake. There's a...policeman at the top of the hill, Sami. He'll get you out of here," I said. I closed my eyes as my body struggled to repair enough of the damage so I could move.

We heard the man shouting, worry evident in his tones so I yelled back that she was found, okay, to just wait so I could find an easier way down to us.

I was able to sit up in ten minutes and using the dog as a crutch, rose to my feet. She only came to my waist and I tucked one arm into my ribs while I took her small hand in the other.

"Let's go look for a way out of here," I smiled at her.

"You have red teeth," she said and tried to wipe them. "Like your red hair. This place is called Capital Quarry. This stuff is in the Capitol building in Knoxville. The road out is there." She pointed to the right side of the pit.

I swallowed the blood and the taste of copper made me nauseous. "How'd you get lost, Sami?"

"Mommy told me to wait by the car but I saw a puppy loose in the parking lot and was afraid it would get hit. So I followed it into the woods but I lost it. That was when I saw the bad man."

"What bad man?"

"The man who hurt the puppy. He told me it was just sleeping but I know better. He told me we had to bring it to the vet. I ran and he chased me. I ran into the woods and lost him. But I got lost, too."

"He can't hurt us. The policeman has a gun and this dog. His name is Rashka. He finds lost little kids. He's a rescue dog and he's rescued us."

"Like you. You rescued me."

I rounded the corner of the quarry wall and stared at a huge pit cut into the rock wall filled with cold green water. Like a marble quarry in Vermont but the colors were wrong for marble. The water was still, not a ripple marred the surface. Coming off the right side where we stood was a rough road cut out where tractors had dragged cut stone. Rivets in the mud were knee deep and dried out. Above that was a series of giant ledges cut in steps if your legs were ten feet long. If one were careful, you could climb down much the same way that one climbed the pyramid blocks.

"Marshal?" I called and heard him answer. "There's a way down over here." I heard him answer and then a shout of surprise, the sound of a falling body and a loud crack. I ran back to

where I'd hit the block and saw him lying there in a puddle of blood. I touched his head and it moved in a manner that was unnatural. He had broken his neck and his fine eyes were no longer the bright chips I had admired. The blood spread and I tried to help him. Just as the blue field sparked and fizzled, I looked up to see another man, this one curiously silent and impassive. He held a gun and the sun sparkled off the pale ivory handle. My eyes dropped to the Marshal's holster. It was empty. I grabbed his belt and tugged him behind the rock as the other man on the rim started firing. Bullets *boomed* in the pit, splintered on the rocks and sent shards of stone at us.

"She's mine, boy!" he shouted. "I'm coming to get her!"

"I'm sorry," I told the Marshal as my healing ability refused to work on him. "*I'm sorry*. I don't even know your name." I scuttled back to Sami, the dog and we ran. Not downhill towards the road but parallel to it. We could hear his footsteps behind us.

Chapter Forty-Six

The man was local so he knew the area better than I did. All I could think of to do was run towards the road and pray that he didn't shoot me and that we'd see a car coming on the main road before he could reach us. I prayed that we might run into the other searchers looking for her and that they were armed.

By the time we hit the paved road, he had reached the bottom of the cliff and was running for a section where he could cut us off. I didn't know that so as we ran down the center line in the direction of what I hoped was the Walmart, he stepped out of the woods in front of me. I skidded to a stop and put Sami behind me as I looked for a direction to run. He leveled the pistol and I bolted, dragging the girl with me off the shoulder of the road and back into the woods. The boom of the big gun frightened both of us and made the birds flutter out of the trees. Something smacked me in the back, nearly dropping me to my knees but I managed to keep going as I pushed branches out of the way and slivers of bark hit my arms and face as his bullets came close.

"*Run, Sami!*" I shouted, my eyes searching for something, anything to help me. I saw a stand of hemlocks that had grown too large and too old, had rotted and fallen over in a massive deadfall. Dragged her trembling body into a split between two rotten trunks and told her to hide in the cleft.

Clambered back over the deadfalls leaving no obvious sign until I was well past space where I had hidden her and then left tracks in my direction so he could follow *me*. My feet stumbled and I nearly fell, leaning on a maple to help hold me upright. My lungs struggled to bring in the air but I couldn't get any relief.

My hand was red. I pulled it up to my eyes and saw bright red blood. My knees collapsed and bright spots sparked in my vision. I fell to the forest carpet and it was cold and musty, my fingers scrabbling in the leaves as I tried to drag myself forward.

The first inkling I had that he had found me were his fingers in my hair jerking my head out of the leaves and rolling me over. "Who the hell are you?" he asked furiously. I could barely see his face; his eyes were two dark holes in a tan blob but I could *smell* him. Stale body odor and wood smoke, dirty clothes that had not seen a washing machine in years. He wore coveralls and hiking boots, the Marshal's gun held steady in his big hands. His nails were black and cracked.

"You're shot, boy. You only got minutes, you is bleeding out from a lung wound." He laughed and tugged at my pants. I couldn't understand what he was doing until the cold air hit

my belly and he stuck his finger in my ass. I screamed but it was all of a thin rabbit's bleat that made him all the more eager.

"Where's the girl? I been watching her for weeks. Tell me where you stashed her and I'll make this quick." He fumbled for his fly and his dick sprung out, fully engorged and ugly as a warthog. Huge, big enough to tear me apart. He was drooling with lust as he stared at me.

He grunted and his eyes rolled up in his head. I watched in indifference as if what was happening was not related to me, a three-foot arrow went through him, the broadhead erupting from the center of his chest like an obscene flower growing from his corpse. He fell backward, his hand still tight on the .45, his dying brain telling his fingers to pull the trigger. The boom of the pistol was the last sound in my head before I passed out, drowning in my own blood.

Voices rang over me. Loud noises that bothered me. In some fashion, I knew that loud noises were dangerous to us. I moaned and a face hovered over mine. I was shaking from side to side as if I were being carried on a stretcher. Or I was on a small gauge train.

"Where is she, Lake?" I didn't know that voice but it sounded official. By straining my eyes, I was able to pick out a group of police and rescue workers, all gathered in the clearing where I had fallen. The dead man lay off to the side and covered by a blue tarp. The sun was much lower on the horizon than I remembered.

"In a tree, deadfall, uphill," I mumbled. "Marshal's dead. Dog?"

"The Marshal isn't dead, Lake. Knocked out, came to and the dog is with him. He called for help with his cell phone. We need to get you down the mountain and airlifted to the hospital," the deputy said. "But first, we have to find where you hid Sami."

I searched for Mairiy and her face looked frightened. By her side stood Leon and Robin. In Robin's hand, he held a compound bow and across his shoulder hung a quiver of hunting arrows.

We waited. Leon and my companions made vocal protests at the delay and were seconded by the paramedics. I drifted in and out, my healing ability on the fritz because of the expenditure of energy that I had put out. Puzzlement filled me; I was almost positive that he had been dead and my help had come too late and not enough to fix his injuries.

Shouts preceded a crowd of uniformed men and women. Shouts that announced that they had found Sami. A tall man in a sheriff's khaki carried her little pink clad body into the clearing. As soon as she saw me, she demanded to be put down and she ran to my side.

I saw myself in her eyes, white-faced, pale as death, sweaty with IVs in both arms and fluid flowing into me like the Nile in the flood. Blood staining my chest through my clothes and a mass of bandages piled over my ribs.

"Laky," she cried and gently laid her blonde curls on my chest, careful not to hurt me. "The bad man shot you?"

"Yeah," I said softly. "But he's dead. Can't hurt you anymore. Or anyone else."

The paramedic looked at the Sheriff. "Now can I call Life Flight? Before we lose him?"

I coughed and blood sprayed her face. Gagged as more blood filled my throat as I struggled to breathe through an increasing deluge in my lungs. Cried out but no sound left my throat. My vision narrowed to a tiny tunnel and all I could see was a hazel eye, a black pupil, and darkness.

Cameron, Chase, and the teams saw the Life Flight helicopter land in the field just off the dam access road and from the Walmart parking lot. The doctor hacked into the police channel to

eavesdrop on the activity. Aiken reported that a child had wandered off and a search was underway for her but it had changed to a suspected child abduction with a U.S. Marshal injured and the suspect killed. A child was shot in critical condition but hadn't been air-lifted yet because he was the only one who knew the location of the abducted girl.

Immediately, they knew that it was Lakan involved and both Cameron and Chase cursed. "Shot?"

"Through the back, exited the chest, lung hit. He's hemorrhaging out," Aiken reported. They watched the chopper lift off and bank, heading for the nearest trauma center.

"They'll take him to Washington General, it's the Level I Trauma Center in D.C. It's the best place and the closest," Cameron stated.

"Why isn't he healing himself?" Chase demanded.

Cameron stared out over the parked cars in the Walmart lot. "Maybe he can't. Maybe he used so much of himself healing others, there's nothing left for him."

"What are we going to do, Dr. Cameron?"

"Nothing. If you try to move him before he's stabilized, he could expire. We need to let the ER surgeons do what they do. Once he's recovered from surgery, then we can step in and remove him."

"The FBI?" Morrell questioned. "They're here, too."

"Along with every other intelligence agency in the U.S.," Aiken said sourly. "What do you want us to do, sir?"

"Sarah Hamilton had a stroke today," the director said. "She's not expected to survive. She left everything to the grandson and told the lawyers who the boy really is. The President now knows the truth about him as well."

"Hamilton or Houston?" Cameron asked naming the former and the present President.

"Both." Chase stared at the departing air ambulance. "What a cluster fuck this is turning out to be. Get everyone to Wash Gen as quick as you can. Aiken, you and Cameron come with me in the chopper. I want to talk to both of those paramedics, the kid rescued and the Marshal as soon as possible. Get me all the info on the dead kidnapper." He stalked off to his vehicle and ordered the driver to take them back to the helipad.

The flight nurse kept pushing words into my head. Sometimes I heard them clearly, others were just droning noises that kept me from the soothing darkness. I was spinning in a vortex, twirling and whirling in slow parabolic swings that kept me dizzy. I felt light and insubstantial as if my body had suddenly become pounds thinner. A puff of air or thistledown would weigh more than I. I wondered if I was dying and tried to laugh. *They* said I couldn't die. The nurse thought I was trying to say something.

I felt it when the whatever I was in landed. It was a gentle bump but it still made me cry out in pain yet no one heard me. The air rushed in with cold and vicious fingers as the hatch opened, bright lights burned my retinas and blinded me. The stretcher became a gurney, a magic carpet and they ran, they flew me into the arms of waiting blue cranes. Down a long hallway where doors magically opened, the sun followed burning brightly overhead as I flew surrounded by blue ibises on long stilt legs.

I screamed when the storks slid me onto a cold slab inside the refrigerator and a hawk tore off my clothes with stainless steel beak and talons as a spider crawled up my arms and bit me. They put a pillow over my face and held it down until I couldn't breathe in even as they blew the air in my face.

“Vitals?” the ED doctor demanded as the trauma team cut off the boy’s clothes. The paramedic calmly relayed the STATS as they transferred the IVs over to the poles on the gurney.

“BP is 65/42, pulse is 130 and thready. He’s diaphoretic, bleeding from two GSWs in the upper thoracic cavity. Entered from the posterior. We gave him two boluses of lactated ringers to get his volume up and 4ml morphine sulfate. His respirations are 12, shallow with a pneumothorax on the right side. Inserted a chest tube and drained off 450cc of blood.”

“Let’s prep him for surgery after x-rays,” the surgeon ordered. “Let’s do this before he bleeds out, people.”

“What’s his name?” One of the nurses asked. “Any info on medical history?”

“His name is Lake, he’s 15-16 maybe and he saved a little girl from a child molester, found her when no one else could. And maybe a US Marshal, too.”

“I can’t wait to hear that story. Is this Marshal coming here? Is he injured?”

The paramedic stared her in the eyes. “He said he was pushed off a 100-foot cliff by the perp and broke his neck. He said he died. And this kid came back, fixed him somehow and dragged his body out of harm’s way. He’s coming in with a broken pelvis, arm, and several ribs. A concussion but he’s alive. In shock but alive. And his neck shows a healed fracture at C3.”

The entire trauma team stared at the paramedic and the boy in utter silence as the machine recorded his vitals in the background. The hiss of O2 going into his lungs was the loudest sound in the room until it was broken by the heart monitor’s alarm as it rang in a flat line.

“V-fib,” the doctor said calmly. The team flew into action. The EMT stepped back out of the way as they tried one drug after another with no results. Until finally, he cracked open the boy’s chest, reached in and massaged the flaccid heart with long slender fingers. With utter disbelief and shock, they saw a faint blue light emerge from the boy’s chest and bathe them all in its penumbra.

Every one of them felt the first trembling flutter as the boy’s heart began to beat and kept beating as they rushed him up to the OR, the doctor’s hand around the muscle all the way there.

Only when he was given over to the cardiac surgeon did the doctor release his grip and watched the blue glow fade.

Chapter Forty-Seven

“I swear his heart and lungs sealed up even as I was stitching,” the cardiac surgeon named Allan Arbury whispered as he stayed to seal the boy’s chest; a job usually done by the assistant surgeon. No one wanted to leave the OR until they had answers for what was a medical miracle.

The boy had been lifeless for nearly ten minutes as the ER doctor, Ken Ross had performed heart massage on him. No one wanted to declare the boy gone, not while there was the slimmest chance of resuscitating him.

Allan Arbury was equally determined to keep the boy viable. They pushed 6 units of blood, adrenaline, and cardiac drugs into the kid while nurses monitored his BP, pulse and SAT levels.

Slowly, as the team of surgeons repaired the holes in his thoracic cavity, the boy’s pressure came up. Enough so that Arbury risked closing the chest with staples and three layers of sutures. When he was done, the boy looked almost like a crudely made voodoo doll. He was cleaned of blood, bandaged and slid gently onto a clean bed in Recovery just outside the ICU.

There were IVs in both arms and a tube down his throat that breathed for him, relieving the pressure on his collapsed lungs. Shadows under his eyes looked like bruised plums, his skin was a dusky hue, almost ashen, the strange hair---a red so dark that it appeared the color of oxblood was hidden under a surgical cap. He wore on his right index finger the pulse ox showing a dismal reading of 84%.

The only noise in the room was the hiss and thump of the respirator and the ping of the blood pressure machine. His pressure was hovering at 75/50, his heart in the hundreds as it struggled to maintain its volume. Fluids and blood were entering his system at a steady rate along with a drip of high-powered antibiotics. Arbury had picked out pieces of the boy's jacket and shirt from inside the lesions. The wound was contaminated with cloth scraps, dirt, and leaves.

Both surgeons stood at the foot of the bed and watched the child to see if he would wake from the anesthesia.

"What was that, Kenny?" Arbury asked. "That light? Some kind of reaction? A new bulb in the overheads? A chemical response to something in the air?"

"You saw it, too. It came from his heart." Ross shook his head. No one wanted to leave the recovery room, all of them were anxious to know more about the boy's story. The little that they had heard was he had stopped a kidnapping and saved the life of a U.S. Marshal. Arbury volunteered to speak to the family waiting in the ICU lounge. The people waiting there surprised him; he had no idea who the young woman and the two men were in relation to the teenager. One was clearly Native American and the pair brother and sister. Both had extraordinary eyes and she had almost white blonde hair. They looked Irish with clear pale skin and fey eyes.

"I'm Dr. Arbury," he said standing in the room unsure to whom he was delivering his report. "You are?"

"Lake's cousins," the older man extended his hand. "I'm Leon DeCarlos. How is Lake?" "Lake?"

"Lake Kitwillie," the girl said. Arbury realized she was no more than sixteen.

"Well, he's stable but in critical condition. He was shot in the back and the bullet tore through his lung, producing a pneumothorax. He lost almost half his blood volume. The bullet tore a hole in his pericardium before exiting his chest breaking more ribs. He coded twice but the paramedics got his heart started enough to get him here. He coded again on the table but Dr. Ross here was able to do open heart massage and kept him going until surgery. I repaired the lining around his heart, re-inflated his lung, replaced his blood volume. His blood pressure has come up and his heart is responding to the medication." He hesitated. "He may come out of the anesthesia in a few hours or he may not due to the blood loss if he went too long without oxygen when his blood pressure plummeted. He has several broken bones, some in partial re-growth. Oddly, they were not set."

"Did you see the blue light?" the girl asked and the doctors stared at her.

"What do you know about that?"

"Was it bright, blinding or fading?" Her tone was demanding and yet filled with terror. Arbury answered her quickly, sensing the importance of her query.

"Faint. Barely visible and coming from his heart."

"I need to see him!" she cried out. "He gave too much and if he doesn't renew his source, he's going to die!"

"Give what? What source? What are you talking about?" Ross asked confused, looking at the surgeon and back to the girl. "Who are you people?"

“Maiara Kitwillie and Robin Kitwillie,” the younger man said. “We’re Lake’s family. He has no one left and he’s engaged to my sister. You’d best listen to her, she’s got the sight and knows how to treat Lake.”

“Please,” she begged. “Let me see him, I can help.”

So that was why the three of them were escorted into the ICU recovery area dressed in gowns and masks to prevent any infection from entering the sterile suite.

Lakan lay at a slight incline on his back, wearing nothing but bandages on his upper body and heated sheets and blankets on his lower half. Tubes were in his mouth, coming out his side and running down to a collection bag under the bed. There were IVs in both arms; one with fluids and antibiotics, the other transfusing blood. A machine breathed for him, the lift and fall of his ribcage his only movement.

The girl, Maiara moved to his side and picked up his hand, careful not to dislodge or pull on his IVs. Arbury and Ross watched to make sure that she did nothing to harm the teenager. Her brother stood back until she opened her eyes and spoke.

“Robin, Mr. DeCarlos, I need your *golau ar y galon*, his is nearly gone!” As she said that, the monitor flickered and his heart rate and blood pressure began to drop.

“He’s crashing!” the doctors said and moved in but the fierce look in her eyes and her words stopped them.

“He’ll die if you don’t let me do this.”

“Do what?” Ross demanded.

She opened her free hand which was clenched in a fist and Robin laid his right hand on it, extending his left to DeCarlos. Once the contact was made, the blue light they’d seen before made the entire suite glow with an unearthly resonance, almost as if the moon had suddenly risen inside the room but the aura was not as cold as the winter glow of moonlight nor was it warm. It exuded power and age but not a sense of heat or cold nor was it alien.

“It’s not enough,” she cried. “He needs all of us. Dr. Arbury, Dr. Ross, will you give your *golau ar y galon*?”

“What does that mean?” Ross asked.

“*Heartlight*,” Arbury answered. “It’s Welsh for Heartlight.” He gripped DeCarlos’ hand with his left and picked up Ross’.

The aura encompassed them all and formed wavering lines that bathed Lakan where he lay on the hospital bed. For five minutes, they stared at him and the monitors, watching carefully as the readout slowly climbed back up until Robin began to stagger on his feet. Quickly, Maiara shifted his hand to DeCarlos as her brother barely made it to a chair and collapsed.

Ross was the next to go, then Leon so it was Arbury and Maiara left. When he felt the beginnings of faintness, he ignored it until the girl pushed him away just as she let go herself to slump against the side of the bed and wall.

Lakan looked...better. His color was back, his vitals respectable and he was moving his eyes under the lids, taking deep breaths as he fought the tube.

“What did we do?” Ross asked fear and puzzlement on his open face. Conflicting emotions twisted his comprehension, disbelief, amazement, and fear.

It was Arbury that answered him. “She spoke Welsh. She called it ‘Heartlight’. The Wiccans in the Old Country believe that every creature born on this earth possesses a...essence that is powerful, connected and magical. When you die, it goes back to the spirit realm to be re-born in a new soul. Some people have the ability to tap into this ‘Heartlight’ to heal, to read the future and to work magic. She used it to pull ours out to heal him.”

“Not heal him,” Maiara smiled. “I can’t heal him, I just channeled your energy into him to replenish what he used. He will have to heal himself once he wakes up.”

“He’s going to wake up?” Ross was skeptical.

“You’re Welsh?” Maiara asked instead.

Arbury smiled. “My grandmother was. Her father was an iron jack on the railroad. He blasted mines all through the West. I remember her talking about the Fae and magic. I only remember a few words, though. ‘Heartlight’ was one of them. People said she had the ‘sight’.”

Lakan moaned and both doctors were at his side instantly. He had opened his eyes and Arbury was struck by the intense blue of his irises, an exact match to the color of the aura he had seen bathing all of them. His eyes went to the pulse ox readings, now up to 95%.

“Cough gently, Lake and I’ll pull out the tube,” he suggested and Lake’s first attempt was a feeble wheeze but Arbury smoothly removed the endotracheal tube. “Don’t try to talk, your throat will be too sore. How do you feel? In pain? Just nod your head if it’s yes.”

He nodded fractionally, his eyes roaming the room seeking out the others as they came to the foot of the bed.

“Do you want something for the pain?”

He hesitated and then nodded. Arbury called for the nurse and ordered 1 ml of Fentanyl IV. It was obvious that Lake had questions and Maiara answered them before he could attempt to ask.

“The girl is safe, no injuries and she’s back home with her parents. The marshal is recovering and still insists that he was dead. And that you brought him back. He’s here in the hospital near you, with broken bones, muscle tears, and a slight concussion. His name is Teagan Calderon Muir. His friends call him TG.”

He tried to say something and his face scrunched up in pain as his abused throat protested just as a nurse came in with a pre-loaded syringe and a cup of ice chips. She was smiling.

“Hello, young man,” she greeted. “We all heard what you did for that fine US Marshal and the little girl, Sami. Anything you need, you just call us. Dr. Ross, Dr. Arbury.” She injected the needle into the port and the lines of pain around Lake’s mouth smoothed out. His eyelids grew heavy but he fought to stay awake as the nurse spooned chips of ice into his throat.

The relief was immediate, his eyes brightened yet the hold of the drugs was more than his shocked system could fight. He slipped away into a restful nap. Curious, Arbury peeked under the bandages and could not believe his eyes. The huge wound where Ross had split the boy’s chest looked days old not just hours.

Ross couldn’t believe it either and when they checked the drain in his side, they found it was nearly healed with nothing draining so Ross snipped the three stitches remaining and removed it. Under his fingertips, he found only a bare fraction of an incision and hematomas that looked weeks old.

“*You* did this,” Maiara smiled. “*You* saved him with your heartlight.” She turned serious. “Now, there is more for you to do. The government knows about Lakan, the government created him and they will take him, put him in a cage and make him perform for the rest of his life. Which will be short. Will you help us save him again?”

Ross asked, “what do you want us to do?” She told them and they agreed.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Chase, Cameron, and Aiken were the first government agents to arrive at the hospital right behind the State and local police. They made their presence known in a big way; the charge

nurse would not divulge any information on the status of either of the three patients even when threatened with imprisonment and violence. They were told that the teenage victim was in surgery and that his condition was uncertain and not stable. Cameron asked what had happened and all she would state was that the victim had a GSW and was in the OR.

Aiken spotted the paramedic carrying out a blood-soaked gurney and approached him. He flashed his official badge and led the startled EMT away from the nurses' station riding in the elevator with him up to the helipad on the roof.

"Tell me what happened," he ordered the medic. "Jason." He read the man's name off his flight suit.

"We picked up the victim and brought him to the ED," Jason replied. "Don't know the kid's name, just that he was shot in the back, it went through the lungs and he was hemorrhaging out. We sealed both entrance and exit wounds, put in a chest and bronchial tube, got him on fluids and blood expanders. We air-lifted him. He coded once, got him back and into the ED. He coded and Doc Ross cut him open to do open heart massage. That's all I know, other than he saved a US Marshal and a kid from a pedophile that's suspected of three other disappearances."

"The boy died?" Aiken asked, his heart dropping.

"Twice. Whether they kept him alive---that's up to him, the doctors and God. Look, I gotta go. There's another call." He had to speak over the sudden burgeoning noise of the chopper as the turbines whined to a start. The wind plucked at their pants' legs and Aiken involuntarily ducked lower as the blades sliced the air. He watched as the helicopter veered off and then, he retraced his steps to the waiting room.

Surprisingly, no one was in the ICU waiting area and this puzzled the agent as he knew that Lakan was still in surgery. Even Chase and Cameron weren't in sight. He went toward the center horseshoe shaped nurses' station and cornered a young RN with her hair under a surgical cap.

"Ms., where is the boy that Life Flight brought in?"

She looked at him. He flashed his credentials and she smiled. "All your other agents have set up a base in the Conference room on seven. Man, I've never seen so many badges and government IDs. Spook salad. I thought nursing had a lot of abbreviations and acronyms."

"Can you tell me how the boy is doing?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, no. Only immediate family and I really don't know his condition. I just came off a domestic GSW."

"The Marshal? What room is he in?" Aiken asked. She looked on her computer.

"Room 653, West Tower." She pointed and gave him directions to the elevators. He found his way with little effort and didn't care that he attracted curious glances because of his camouflaged gear. Most people just assumed that he was part of some military group as they were close to Norfolk Naval Base.

The room was wall-to-wall men dressed in everything from chinos and boots to three-piece suits. The US Marshal was sitting up against the raised head of the bed, his neck in a padded collar, his arm in plaster and wearing a removable cast on his hips. He had large bruises under his eyes and looked worn out yet no one was leaving his company. His eyes, a fine steel gray with chips of emerald and gold flickered when he saw Aiken towering over the heads of cops, Troopers, and other Marshals.

"Who are you?" he managed and the crowd parted as Aiken flipped his badge.

"Aiken, NSA," he offered.

“NSA? What do you want with me? The Spooks are interested in pedophiles and kidnappings?”

“Just the boy, Marshal.”

“TG Muir,” he pushed his casted arm out and Aiken gripped the swollen fingers. “What can I tell you?” Aiken hesitated and looked at the crowd. “Hey. We’re all security rated and we can keep our mouths shut.” Muir shrugged and winced.

“Tell me what happened,” Aiken encouraged. Muir did. Explaining how three other children under the age of ten had disappeared from around the Walmart area, their bodies found days to months later showing evidence of rape, torture, and dismemberment. Then, Sami, the seven-year-old daughter of his best friend had disappeared at Walmart. Her father had called him, TG immediately and a team was on-site within ten minutes. He took his K-9 search and rescue dog out to the area and met a teen in the woods. A tracker as good as his dog. He found Sami but the pedophile found them, came up behind TG, hit him with a tree limb or some kind of club and took his gun before pushing him over the edge of the quarry’s rim.

“I felt it when my neck broke,” he said and slowly shook his head. “I tried to move and knew that my pelvis was broken and my arm. I could still feel, knew I might have a chance if someone got to me before I moved and cut my spinal cord.

“He came down the trail and stood over me laughing. Then, he picked up my head and wrenched it, severing my spine. I was dead instantly. I don’t remember anything until this incredible light and warmth covered me. I woke up and was able to move. Found my sat phone and called 911. That’s all I remember until the paramedics got to me.”

“You died?” Aiken laughed, downplaying what he heard. “Did you have one of those tunnels of light experiences, too?”

“The x-rays show a healed C-3 fracture, Aiken,” TG snapped. He tilted his head the tiniest amount and smiled in a conspiratorial way. “Why are *you* guys after him?” Aiken didn’t answer. “I heard Sami’s alright. How’s the boy?”

“Gunshot in the back. Through the lung, came out the front. He’s still in surgery, we’re trying to find out his condition,” Aiken said reluctantly. “Good news is that somebody put a three-foot hunting broadhead through your perps’ chest. He’s dead.”

“No loss. Saves the county a trial.” He closed his eyes just as the nurse came in and shooed everyone out. The entire group headed for the elevators and the seventh floor. It was easy to find by the scurrying of junior agents carrying equipment back and forth including coffee pots and meals.

In a huge conference room geared towards medical lectures, Aiken found his boss and teammates jockeying for space with US Marshals, FBI SACs, State Police and Homeland Security.

“What are they doing here?” he whispered to Raylan. “There’s no terrorist aspect to this. It’s a kidnap case, the Fibbies turf.”

“It’s a cluster fuck,” Raylan returned. “Everybody wants a piece of this kid. I’m surprised that the Vatican isn’t in on it, they’re calling him the next Messiah.”

“They? They who? The media got ahold of this?” Aiken swiveled his eyes towards Chase and winced. The Director looked mad enough to bite steel and he knew that someone would bear the brunt of his displeasure.

“The doctors won’t let any of us in to see him, not even when I used the HS credentials,” Chase snarled. “It seems that doctors put themselves above Federal Agency jurisdiction.”

“We can’t move him, anyway,” Cameron insisted. “We could kill him by moving him.”

“I thought you said he was untouchable, immortal.”

“I said he could theoretically live forever, I never said he was unkillable. I suspect if his brain was damaged by a bullet, he’d die because he was unable to enact repairs. It sounds like he tried to resuscitate dead victims and couldn’t do it for himself,” Cameron explained.

Chase stared at him. “How do you know that?”

Cameron snickered and patted his laptop. “I hacked into the Hospital database and pulled up the surgery suite video feeds. I watched the entire procedure.” He blanched and swore. “Shit!”

“What?” Chase demanded. Cameron looked stunned.

“He just flat-lined. They’re trying to get his heart going again.”

Chase dragged them over to an unoccupied corner and together they watched the video stream as the team battled to save the teenager’s life. A blue haze filled the suite and crackled as if lightning had taken over the OR. No matter what the geneticist tried, he could not re-establish the feed or get the laptop to work.

“The hard drive is fried,” he said in frustration. “Some kind of electrical surge went through it.” He tossed the computer in the trash to Aiken’s protests but the doctor told them that no one, not even the FBI’s tech lab could pull anything off the destroyed hard drive. Besides, everything was in the cloud where he, Cameron could retrieve it.

There was a stir in the crowd as a nurse in dark green scrubs came out of the operating room wearing shoe covers, mask, and cap. She pulled down her mask and addressed the assembled agents.

“Marshal Muir is recovering nicely and is asleep. He has had his pelvis pinned and his arm set. Sami is also doing well and asleep with her parents at her side. Neither one will be available to speak to anyone until tomorrow afternoon. The doctors have told me to tell you that the young man was touch and go but they have his heart stabilized and beating, they’re repairing his lung and the pericardium which was nicked by the bullet. Which exited so we do not have the projectile to hand over. Dr. Ross and Dr. Arbury estimate that it will be another hour before they close up and Mr. Kitwillie goes to Recovery. He will be in the ICU, visitors are family members only and two at a time.” She turned on her heel and exited before any of them could ask any questions.

Another nurse came out and reported on the deceased registered sex offender. “The coroner has just released a preliminary COD on the victim. His name was Everette William Morris, a known, registered sex offender from Washington, D.C. He was pronounced at 3:56 p.m. by the on-site EMTs. The cause of death was a hunting arrow through the left branch of the aorta severing it, causing blood to fill the thoracic cavity. Death was instantaneous. The victim had cocaine in his system and Viagra.”

“Was the girl raped?” the FBI SAIC asked.

The nurse shook her head. “No. There was no sign of any sexual trauma on the girl.”

“The boy?” Aiken asked sharply.

“Attempted. We found saliva on the boy’s abdomen and anus. The EMT reported he was found on his stomach with his jeans pulled down to his ankles. The creep was shot and killed before he could do anything more.”

Aiken growled. One thing his mercenary mindset hated was child molestation. If someone hadn’t killed Morris, he would have. Preferably by cutting off his dick and balls. “Who killed the fucker?”

The nurse looked startled at his vehemence. “A young man named Robin Kitwillie, the brother of the patient’s fiancée.”

“Fiancée?” All three of them asked. “When the hell did he have time to meet a girl?” Aiken asked in disbelief. “It’s gotta be one of that old man’s kids from the fishing camp. He has a daughter.”

“He’s 16!” Cameron said. “He doesn’t even know what dating is!”

The nurse looked amused. “Yeah? Ask the next pregnant 12-year-old about that.” She snorted and left them alone.

Cameron asked, “what are we going to do about this, Chase? We can’t just come in and take over, not with all these other agencies involved.”

Chase sneered. “When it comes to National Security, I can do anything.”

There was a hush in the room starting near the doorway and working its way through in increasing waves like the ripples of a pebble in the water. Four Secret Service men stood there and then covered all four corners of the room. The man who entered next was well-known and well-connected, the next Presidential candidate for the coming election. Senator Jaimie Lourdes.

“Not everything, Director Chase,” he stated, indicating that he had heard the last words Chase had spoken.

Chapter Forty-Nine

The Secret Service people were the advance guard into the ICU waiting room. As yet, only DeCarlos, Robin, and Maiara were seated on the comfortable couches waiting to be admitted back in to see Lakan. They looked up at the four sober, clean-cut agents and then in shock as Senator Lourdes entered behind them. He nodded and told the men to guard the door. Approaching DeCarlos, he held out his hand and instinctively, DeCarlos shook it.

“Senator,” he managed.

“Mr. DeCarlos. Mr. Kitwillie, Ms. Kitwillie. I wanted to say thank you for saving Lake’s, Marshal Muir, Sami Halpern’s lives.”

“You know Lakan?” Leon asked.

Lourdes had the grace to flush. “I admit, I met him under questionable circumstances but I owe him my life. Whatever it takes, whatever he needs, I’ll give it to him.” He went on to explain those circumstances and all three were furious.

“Albans has disappeared, we suspect that the NSA found him and...disposed of him. His bank balance has quadrupled in the last seven months. I suspect that I wasn’t the only recipient of Lake’s...talents.”

“How do we know that you won’t do to him what this other doctor did? Or what Chase wants to do with him?”

Lourdes shrugged. “You don’t. But as the future President of the United States, wouldn’t you rather have me on your home court?”

They had no other answer but to agree with him. He nodded and took out his cell phone ordering both armed police and military personnel to the hospital. The first thing he did was establish armed guards around Lakan’s room and at every possible entry into the ICU and the floor he was on.

He called a meeting and issued orders to all the assembled agents; stating that Lakan Strongbow was under Secret Service protection by order of both the outgoing and incoming President. He stared at Chase who stared back, neither one admitting defeat. Dismissing all but the FBI, he handed the kidnapping case over to them and took possession of everything else.

Chase, Cameron, Aiken and the teams stalked out followed by the other Intelligence operatives. “This isn’t over, Senator,” Chase murmured. Lourdes held himself still and chose his

words carefully. He knew all too well the ease of an assassin's bullet, the close brush of death's finger.

"The NSA is a valuable asset to this country, Director Chase. No matter who runs it." The President Elect, his Secret Service agents, and Lakan's friends watched them all depart.

It was pain that woke me this time. Pain that told me that I was alive and with healing fractures. Pain that radiated from my chest to every cell in my body; all of them firing off as if they were superheating arc furnaces. I expected to see myself in flames from the inside out; like one of those unfortunate victims of so-called spontaneous combustion.

The machine next to my bed was shrieking an alarm and bringing medical personnel into gape. The LED display hit highs so great that the machine blew, my temp registered at over 125° before the readout died.

I groaned and lowered my body heat to a more comfortable 98° as the lead nurse replaced the BP cuff with another.

"Lake?" the doctor asked. It was the one called Ross, I thought. I could see his concerns, his fears and almost his life story in the emotions that ran across his face. My throat had eased up and I could speak. I asked first about Sami, the Marshal, and his dog.

"All three are fine, Lake," Dr. Ross smiled. "Thanks to you. You okay with visitors?"

I nodded and took a look around the room. I recognized an ICU unit open on three sides so I was under constant supervision by the nurses. I was wearing a hospital gown that covered all the important parts and was tucked under both blankets and sheets. I had an IV in one hand dispensing fluids, antibiotics and an O2 nasal cannula in my nose.

"You don't need the o2 anymore," he said. "Your SAT levels are good. We took out the chest tubes yesterday."

"Who wants to see me?" I whispered.

"Who doesn't? Somehow, someone talked to the media and you're on the way to becoming an international icon."

I shuddered. "The whole idea was to disappear."

"Look on the bright side. No one can kidnap you and get away with it. You're instantly recognizable."

"Dream on," I retorted. "I've just become the new Holy Grail." I looked up as a man, one I knew well entered my room surrounded by his Secret Service agents. He looked vibrant and healthy, his eyes twinkling like chips of chocolate diamonds.

"Senator," I greeted. "Thanks for coming."

"Like I could stay away," he joked. "After all, you saved my life, too. Even if it was unwilling."

"Where does it end?" I despaired. "Not until I'm dead?"

"We won't let that happen, Lakan. That's why I'm here, to give you the chance to grow up without interference from the government, agencies, or even individuals who would use you for personal gain."

"Chase and Cameron? Mrs. Hamilton?" I asked studying his face.

"Have been warned and sent off. Mrs. Hamilton suffered a stroke and passed away a month ago."

"That's where I come in," Lourdes said. "I have enough power to make this all disappear, to make Lakan disappear. First, I have to know if he's ready to move without endangering his health."

“As long as he doesn’t tear open the wound, he should be okay with restricted activity,” Ross said.

“He may need to do more,” the Senator warned. “Physical action may be required.”

“Unless he’s trying out for the Iron Man, he should be fine. How are you going to get him past the people camped out downstairs? The NSA, NIA, HS, Marshals, etc.? Not to mention the media?”

“Simple,” Lourdes said. “You’re going to tell them he died from his wounds.”

“They won’t believe it,” I added. “We fooled them once that way. Nor can I sneak out dressed as a girl, I already tried that, too.”

“So, what’s your idea?” Leon demanded.

Dr. Ross smiled. “I can get you out of this room and off this floor. Can you handle it from there?” He looked at the rest of them but especially Maiara. He lifted her hair. “You think you can make yourself up to look like a sick teenage boy?”

“Easy peasy,” she grinned. “With scissors and some hair dye.” She rattled off what she needed using what was available in the hospital and sent one of the nurses off to retrieve the items. Leon and Robin helped me over to the closest armchair next to her as they studied both of our faces. “He’ll need a toner to make his skin fairer but the blood loss helped. He’s paler than I saw him earlier. I need a blonde wig, too.” Dr. Ross called another of the nurses in, whispered in her ear and sent her back out with a grin on her face.

Twenty minutes later, I whispered goodbye to everyone in the room and walked out holding Robin’s hand.

We were met in the waiting room by several agents and police who wanted to speak to Robin, Leon and Maiara regarding the manslaughter of Morris. The detective in charge was named Gibril Chenang and he offered to take all of us to the precinct to finish his investigation. He asked how Lakan was doing and just about that time, Senator Lourdes exited my room into the hallway.

“He’s recovering,” he answered easily. “Some infection but the doctors are handling it. These people are under my protection, Detective.”

“I’m sorry, Senator but they have answers to some questions I haven’t asked yet. I promise to expedite the session and take them home when we’re done.”

“Home is a helicopter ride of twenty minutes,” Robin added. “We’re staying at the Motel 6 on Claremont.”

“Let me put you up at the Watergate,” the Senator suggested. “It’s the least I can do.”

Leon accepted and the detective agreed to bring us there when he was done. We followed the police down to the elevator where we parted ways with the Senator and his escort. Leon kept his hand under my elbow and bore quite a bit of my weight. A few times, he encouraged me in Abenaki when my legs trembled and my head lightened.

I could feel Detective Chenang’s eyes on me and when I looked up, he gave me a smile that was both sweet and appraising.

“It won’t be that bad, Ms. Kitwillie,” he said. “You saved a child from a murdering molester. No one will blame you or your brother for killing him.”

Robin’s brow glowered. “My sister had nothing to do with that...creep’s death. I shot him, not her.”

Chenang pointed to Robin’s wrist and fingers; even I saw the callouses caused from repeated exposure to the bow strings even though he wore guards. “Your fingers are calloused

and your right arm is considerably more developed than your left,” the detective noted. “Your sister’s hands are much softer.”

I curled my fingers into my palms. His blue eyes were sharper than his bland good looks suggested. “What kind of name is Kitwillie?” he continued.

“It’s a town in Wales. Named after the castle and the family that built it,” I answered. I kept my voice low but pitched it higher than normal.

The elevator doors opened on the lobby and I was blinded by the sudden flash of photographers’ lights as the media fell on us like a pack of hyenas. Many of them shouted to the detectives and he stopped to announce that the Captain would give a Press Conference later that afternoon after he had talked to the police chief in Titusville with the FBI agents in charge of the kidnapping.

Once we were out of the hospital, we were rapidly separated into three different cars with three different detectives. I gave both Robin and Leon a despairing glance, I knew that this was standard procedure to ensure that we had no time to consolidate our stories. I was carefully placed into the back seat of an unmarked car. It had no cage between me and the driver up front but it also had no handles in the back where I could open the doors and escape.

I watched the scenery pass by my window. It was almost as if Detective Chenang took me on a scenic tour because he pointed out the sights like any proud resident showing off his city’s attractions. Washington had many that I’d never seen and would have loved to be able to take them all in.

I saw the signs for Quantico and felt my body relax when we passed it and the next exit for the J. Edgar Hoover building. I knew the route to his precinct and his driver did not vary one street from that route. Strangely enough, all three cars pulled up in front of the modern D.C. police headquarters with its Forensic Labs and jail in the same block but separate buildings. The cruisers weren’t parked in a yard next door but underground in a seven tiered parking garage. We went underneath and pulled up in space marked by name. The driver came around and opened the door for me, giving me a hand when I stumbled. My body was tense and I was afraid. Afraid that I would blow my role as a girl.

Leon and Robin called over to me as we entered by key-card, through a door that was held open by both uniformed officers and plainclothes detectives. From their comments, I knew Robin had nothing to worry about.

I was escorted down a long hallway done in industrial white with gray tiled floors and bright fluorescent lights overhead. From there, we went into individual carrels and a room much the same as any interrogation room I’d ever seen or been inside. A table with several chairs, an iron ring through which handcuffs could be threaded and walls padded with foam that someone had picked at with nervous fingers.

“Have a seat,” Chenang smiled. “Can I get you something to drink? Water, soda?”

“Coffee, please. Cream, no sugar.” My stomach growled, too and he heard it.

“Something to eat? We have a vendor who brings really good sandwiches, not that sh--- crap that’s on the machines.”

“Sure. Anything but liverwurst.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Yuck. I don’t like that either. Or salami.” He left me alone, I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes. It seemed only a few minutes later that he gently touched my shoulder and I snapped upright, grimacing as the sudden movement made my chest wound ache. He grabbed me and held me in the chair.

“You okay, Mairy? You looked white as a codfish.”

“Yeah. It’s been a stressful couple of days. First, Lake took off and we couldn’t find him. Then, we heard about the kidnapping, him being shot, dying and everything else.”

To my surprise, I started crying and he awkwardly patted my back. He smelled spicy and like strawberries. He was clean-shaven with hair not quite military short but close.

“You sure you’re old enough to know your mind about your engagement?” he asked. “It’s not an arranged marriage or anything?”

I hiccupped and shook my head. “Lakan’s parents were killed. He had no other relatives and rather than let the state take him, my father took him in. He told the DFS people that Lake was engaged to me or they wouldn’t let him stay with us. My father helped him become an emancipated minor.”

“Do you love him?”

I hesitated. I wasn’t really sure what I felt for Mairy, my heart still mourned for Rachel.

Chapter Fifty

He let me eat. What he’d brought in was a platter of beef and cheddar, ham and Swiss and honey roasted turkey with sprouts and cranberry sauce. Mayo and mustard on the side, fresh crunchy dill pickles and black olives the size of my thumb. The coffee was Green Mountain with half and half, just this side of lukewarm. He apologized and said it was because I had fallen asleep for 45 minutes and no one had wanted to wake me.

“Forty-five minutes? Did I sleep? Sorry, I didn’t mean to keep you all waiting,” I apologized around a mouthful of meat. I ate two sandwiches, two whole pickles and a double handful of olives. Hesitated over a third and he offered to split it with me.

“I like to see girls eat,” he sighed. “My daughter is so scared she’s going to get fat. She lives on lettuce, tea, and apples.”

“What’s her name?”

“Jenny. She’s 16, a junior in high school and is on the field hockey team.” He paused. “Tell me what happened. Why did Lakan run off?”

“We had an argument. Over something stupid that I don’t even remember. We were at my brother’s house in Titusville. Lake, Leon and I had just finished a camping/fishing trip. It’s the Bass Tournament in Titusville this week, you know.” I went on after he nodded. “We called Robin to come get us at the trail head and he’d driven us to his house near the Walmart. Lake took off into the woods and we went after him. I can track but Robin is way better. Leon came with us, driving Robin’s truck and our camping gear was still in it. Both of us grabbed our bows.” I was rambling but that was normal for someone who had supposedly suffered a shock such as the pair had done.

“Where was your brother standing when he shot Mr. Morris?”

I closed my eyes and pictured the scene; re-visiting what I really wanted to forget. Slowly, I answered him as if I were Maiara and not myself.

“Lake is lying on his belly. Blood everywhere. He’s standing over him, fumbling at his trousers---really nasty ones that are in tatters and old brown corduroy with a camo jacket. I can smell him from yards away. He stinks like old sour milk and unwashed gym shorts. He’s tall and his dick is ugly. Warts and huge bent. He spits on his hand and paws at Lake, pulling down his pants, underwear and all. I can hear Robin’s indrawn breath behind me. He curses under his breath and I hear the hum as the arrow leaves the bowstring.

“He grunts once, grabs the shaft that hits his center chest, dead on his heart and dead on his feet. His eyes roll up, blood appears in a trickle from the left side of his mouth and he falls,

just missing Lake. There's so much blood coming from Lake. I run towards him but Robin beats me there, pulls the body out of his way and makes sure he's dead before we turn our backs to him and look to Lakan.

"He's alive, but barely. I dig through my backpack and find the first aid kit but it's too basic for what's beneath my hands. Blood, so much blood, and bubbles break from the wound. Air escaping, his lungs are no longer sealed. Robin pushes me away and seals both sides with plastic bags left from our camping garbage. He has me hold pressure while he tries to wrap gauze around Lake's chest."

I looked up, my eyes swimming with tears. "He's so pale, so bleached of life. I wonder if he's died. Then, we hear people shouting, helicopters overhead. Police, searchers, EMTs and Paramedics, sheriffs. They all want to know where the girl is. The Marshal called for help and they came. They took over with Lake but wouldn't let us leave until he told them where Sami was hidden."

"Did he?" Chenang asked softly, speaking for the first time since I'd started.

"He hid her in a deadfall up the slope about a hundred yards from where Morris found him," I answered. I was exhausted, burned out and nauseous, the sandwiches threatening to come back up.

"You okay, honey? You look like you're going to faint. You want a drink of water or something?" He jumped to his feet and hovered.

"I think I need to lie down," I offered and he went to the door, opening it and calling out for help. Two other detectives joined him as I put my head down on the table. I heard Robin and Leon's voices in the background and felt something cold hit the nape of my neck.

Robin said in my ear, "hold this on your nape, Mairy and then drink it."

I opened my eyes to stare at a can of cold Coke. I opted to drink it instead, the fizz settling my stomach quietly. I swallowed the burp.

"Can I leave? I don't feel so great." I looked up at Detective Chenang.

"I'm done with my questions," he agreed. "In light of the circumstances, I'm sure the DA will declare it a justifiable homicide, self-defense. You might have to testify but as far as I'm concerned, this is the end of it."

Robin and Leon both took an elbow and got me to my feet. Escorted me out to the parking garage where we all climbed into one unmarked car and were driven to the hotel. The concierge himself met us at the lobby doors and took us up to our suites. With three rooms and three beds, mine in solitary splendor. I threw off my shoes and slowly climbed onto the king-sized mattress while Leon pulled the duvet over me. I was asleep before he exited the room.

Sometime before I actually woke on my own, the Senator and Mairy joined Leon, Robin and two of his guards. My disappearance wasn't noticed until the next doctor on duty entered my room to examine me and found the bed empty with Maiara standing in the doorway screaming that I had been abducted. She was dressed like the Senator's secretary.

Rushed out under Lourdes' care, she was brought to the Watergate in the guise of his personal assistant, complete with blonde hair, short skirt, and high heels. Her makeup and wig made her look this side of thirty, the square tortoiseshell frames giving her a vague school marm's look. Barely.

The smell of coffee roused me. I sat up and swung my legs over, the pressing need to pee urgently after all the fluids I'd been on in the hospital. I padded my way to the bathroom stumbling past the assembled crowd as if they weren't there. No one said anything as I peed, flushed, washed my hands and followed the aroma of life's blood. In the small kitchenette, a

stranger handed me a large mug of coffee with cream. Once it hit my stomach with a delicious nugget of warmth and caffeine, I was roused to semi-coherence.

“Well?” I raised my half empty cup and the agent re-filled it.

“The shit’s hit the fan,” Mairy explained with a smile, swinging an elegantly nylon clad leg, a very expensive gray 5-inch stiletto hanging from her toes.

“Who are you supposed to be?”

“Senator Lourdes’ personal assistant,” she returned smugly.

“You mean secretary. Can you type?”

“Yes and take dictation, too. I can also scream convincingly and cry like a bubble blonde which is what I did when I discovered you were missing.”

“How did you fool the docs?” I asked.

“Dr. Ross examined you, I mean me. He had his nurses take my vitals. I pretended to sleep most of the time and no one was allowed in to visit you after you left my bedside. Once you were clear of the hospital, I dressed as the Senator’s aide and discovered you were missing this morning before the new attending came in to see you. The cops and staff are going crazy looking for you. I expect they’ll be here before long to tell you that you’re missing.” She grinned.

“Then, they’ll be heading here to question us,” Leon nodded. “We need to disappear.”

We looked at the Senator and he rose to pace the floor. “I have a car downstairs ready to take you all where ever you want to go.”

Now, they all looked at me. “I’m going nowhere. I have some people that need to learn a lesson in terror.”

I explained my plans to them and they argued with me but my mind was made up and nothing would change it. The fact that police and agents were surely coming to question us left them little time to spend arguing with me.

When I told them I wanted no one with me, their voices rose in near shrieks. “You can’t stop me,” I said and walked out.

I was in jeans, polo shirt, and a warm down jacket, my hair still dyed a warm honey blonde that had been under the blonde wig. I didn’t look anything like me, even my coppery skin was pale with a faint dusting of freckles. I looked like an effeminate boy, not a teenage superman, not even when scrubbing at my face, made my cheeks red, my forehead dark or scowled.

“Let’s go,” I said and grabbed her cell phone, the key card and the modem sitting on the desk near someone’s computer. We headed for the elevator and I asked the Senator for his car keys, taking the chip out of the electronic part of the plastic. On the way down, I had the parts disassembled and carefully inserted them into an arrangement of my own design using the cell phone’s guts.

“What are you making?” Lourdes asked curiously as we descended to the parking garage. Once the doors opened I had finished the quipp which did a number of things. I held it in front of us and every camera, cell phone and the car in the parking garage died without a whimper as I passed them. It affected all the cameras on our level but only those that could record or see me.

We passed an ATM machine and I detoured to it, holding my jammer/scanner in front of its screen. Money spewed out of the dispenser and I calmly stuffed the bills into every available pocket, giving the rest to Leon. Then, I made a call to the taxi company that serviced the hotel. Two were waiting for us at the front curb along with the Senator’s limo and driver.

I saw that everyone was sent off to their prospective destinations, all of those being the same. All of them were heading back to the hospital to visit me and to find out I had been kidnapped so that they could play their parts.

I could tell by the angry stiffness in all their bodies that they did not like my decision or my plans but frankly, I didn't give a rat's ass what they wanted.

Chapter Fifty-One

Chase sat in his office in the impressively modern and aggressive building that was the NSA headquarters at Fort Meade. Built of unremarkable concrete, it appeared to be nothing more than an afterthought of a maintenance shed on the grounds of Fort Meade, the base for Marine training. Both impenetrable and electronically shielded from radar and surveillance, it bore little resemblance to the massive statement that was the Federal Building in D.C. When the sun struck it at certain times of the day, it looked as if it were the storage facility for everyday garbage.

The building was a small bump above ground with the rest a warren of passages and rooms underground. It was as impregnable as the inner core of the Pentagon. Biometric scanners, retinal and electronic cards, fingerprint analyzers all controlled access into and out of the building. Armed guards and metal detectors searched those that made it inside the lobby. Even to approach the grounds was a non-starter, its perimeter bordered by electrified fences, Dobermans, video surveillance, IFR scanners and armed soldiers from the Marine Base at Quantico.

So, it was with utter astonishment that the second-floor surveillance team agent came out of the Mens' room and found a teenage boy walking down the hallway, holding in front of him an object that looked to have been a cell phone before someone had hacked at it.

"Stop!" he yelled and the boy turned around to point the cell at him.

His eyes were huge pools of electric blue and stood out against the pale skin of a child that looked as if he had been and still was seriously ill. His hair was sweated to his skull and a rich blonde.

"How did you get in here?" he demanded, coming forward. His feet felt as if they weighed more with each step until they weighed a ton apiece. He plodded down the hall and the closer he came to the boy, the more lethargic he felt until he found himself on his knees. He let his upper body fold over his legs to rest his forehead on the cool tiles of the floor. He felt fingers inside his jacket removing his gun, handcuffs, ID card and keys. The handcuffs were snapped around his wrist and one ankle, effectively keeping him from moving.

"Stay here," the boy's voice was a low whisper, an order to obey and he barely had the energy to agree. He listened vaguely to the footsteps as they faded down the hallway until he couldn't hear anything at all.

I left the agent hunched over, immobilized by the low-frequency jammer which interrupted the brain waves that regulated the sleep state, tied up with his own cuffs knowing that he would be incapacitated only for five minutes but unable to move for an hour or more. Unless someone came along and found him and had a key to the handcuffs. I had removed his along with the Sig Sauer 9 mil which was tucked into the back of my waistband. I could have killed him, but he had nothing to do with my case and in any case, I didn't really want to leave a trail of dead bodies in my wake.

I had used the scanner to access the database inside the building, had an image of the floor plans in my head and knew exactly where Chase and Cameron were, where their offices

were and the Conference room which was in use for the next hour. All the agents were inside being briefed on the next mission and reports were being generated and reviewed.

His office was on the 1st floor, a corner office with its own windows and a view of the woods and the long driveway in. He had a utilitarian desk of gray metal, a comfortable swivel chair and bookcases lining the walls with novels, law books, and reference tomes. I saw manuals on computer design, language, and programming. On the desktop was a PC, a top of the line with its screensaver blinking on the NSA seal, much like the CIA's shield on the lobby floor of that building. His office was empty, the door locked but my scanner opened the electronic key code in seconds.

I shut the door behind me and sat in his chair, hacking into his case files. Downloading what I needed, it still took fifteen minutes because it was over 10 terabytes of material and I didn't bother to booby-trap anything. I really didn't want to hurt the US security system or become any more of a threat to the NIA or Homeland than I already was.

One of the things I accessed was where Chase had last swiped in his ID card. According to the data, he was in the Conference room on seven with his directors going over the latest intel. He hadn't yet heard that I was missing but I saw the email come through on his PC. Most of which had to do with me and my situation. Right now, he was convincing the Assistant Secretary of Defense that acquiring me was essential to the security of the United States; even if it was only to keep me out of foreign hands.

I wiped out every mention of me in their database, sending in a worm that would hunt down and destroy anything even remotely related to me including the names of the people that had helped me. Sure, it would make their lives hell but the same program would kick in a week later and give them all new identities.

I heard a knock on his door and a woman's voice outside. "Director Chase? Hello? Is someone in there?"

Quietly, I went to the desk and angled the video camera in the hall so that I could see who was standing there. A pretty lady stood there in a neat pantsuit of dark gray, blonde haired and wearing an ID badge with her name on it, Rissy Carpenter, Administrative Assistant. She was Chase's secretary. She waited, her head cocked towards the door and then she strode off down the hallway shaking her head. She knew that Chase wasn't in his office but at a meeting, knew no one was supposed to be inside. I wasn't sure what she had heard, I'd been quiet and had left the computer in silent mode.

My scanner buzzed in my hand, a text warning me that the system had sensed my presence and alerted security. I was surprised, my program and worm should have stopped any alarm before it got that far.

I checked the hallway, it was clear so I opened the door stepping out onto industrial grade indoor/outdoor carpeting in a pleasant blue-gray. Heading for the door at the end of the hallway to my right that led to the elevators and the lobby, I reached it just as an alarm broke the expectant silence of Spook Central.

The elevator I was using was a private one, geared to the Director's personal use. Since it was coded to his retina scan, keycard, and fingerprints, no one would be checking egress on it simply because on one could imagine how anyone could get access to all three of Chase's locks.

I rode it down to the subbasement, an incredible *fifteen* stories *below* ground and found the sewer system just as the schematics had suggested. An old main that had been re-routed because of the driveway construction led me to a grated drain in the woods. It took me over an hour to climb from the basement up to the tunnels outside. From there, I changed my damp and

smelly clothes, hopped on the mountain bike I had liberated from the nearest neighbor and rode slowly through the trails into the deep woods.

The trails folded around me and even though I knew that I was leaving a trail a blind man could follow; I wasn't worried about them following me. None of their cameras worked, nor the motion sensors, infrared or any other of their high-tech gadgetry. The only thing I had to worry about was whether I was running into one of the wandering patrols or dogs and I'd sent them all on different routes to ensure that it wouldn't happen.

I took the shortcut down a small gully of rock, bypassing the longer, safer route. The new way was quicker, cutting off a good half mile of winding switchbacks that I'd done earlier on the way up. Although longer, it had been easier on my still healing body.

I came down after a ten-foot drop and sat back as the shock transmitted through the handlebars into my neck and shoulders making a sharp pain reverberate in my chest. I rubbed at it until the ache went away.

Once on the flat, I skidded to a stop and checked under the bandage. Nothing was bleeding although it still looked an angry red and the flesh around it all shades of green and sickly yellow. No one had expected me to be up and mobile let alone able to ride a bicycle for as many miles as I had. My day's activity would have taxed a healthy man let alone a recovering gunshot patient.

I sat for ten minutes to catch my breath studying the woods around me. As always, the sights, scents, and sounds of the forest were the very beat of my heart and soul, the elixir that fixed whatever was wrong with me and my world. I could appreciate the way the sunlight broke through the trees so that it seemed to be the fingers of God touching the marvels that he had created. I could rejoice in the muted laughter of water as it danced across the rocks in rain-swollen streams. I could feel my heart nearly stop as the songs of catbirds and mockingbirds serenaded me and the blue jays scolded my arrogance. How the sunlight glittered on mica in the rocks and the dew made diamond spider webs hang from the trees as if wearing Tiffany earrings. White quartz teased with fool's gold and the air smelled of lemon, old leaves, pine and fresh mint.

I saw dogwoods blooming in the promise of spring, oaks, and maples as green as any newcomer and the funny looking shoots of burgeoning may-apples. Even saw a few striped Jack-in-the-pulpits between the rocks and the ruts of the trail. I smiled. For the first time in a long time. The woods were to me, the most potent drug I could find and totally free.

I was almost to the trail head and the paved road when I heard sirens and slammed on my brakes. I wasn't going that fast but still, the wheels skidded enough on the dirt hitting a small rock and that was enough to knock me off. I landed in a clump of young briars, not hard enough to hurt anything but my pride and a few scratches from the emerging thorns. My clothes were faded and brown, duck so that they didn't rip. I'd chosen them for that reason and because they would blend into the forest so that at a quick glance, eyes would not be able to pick me out as a human shape. So when the police cars and SUVs flew past, they didn't see me. If I had been upright, they might have. Especially by the agents I saw scanning both sides of the state highway. I waited a good fifteen minutes after the last one went by before I climbed shakily to my feet. I left the bike down and pulled out the scanner from my backpack.

The initial chatter I was receiving from both Langley and the NSA headquarters was puzzling. I heard nothing about my break-in nor the reason why those government units were racing away from both the NSA building and where I'd sent them with a false sighting of me.

Instead of hitting the pavement back towards the rendezvous with Leon and Maiara, I shot across the state road and back onto the trail system.

The side of the trail I was on was designed more for horseback riding or extreme mountain biking. Some of the trails were so rocky that a fall here would break bones, had down hills so steep and winding that only the suicidal would take them at speed. Some areas were so swampy that my wheels were in essence swimming through them. While I pedaled, a sense of unease and urgency bit at my heels.

I came to a bridge over a deep ravine with a swift water creek that positively *boiled* under it. The bridge was made of three telephone poles spanning the space and 2x4s laid on edge all the way across. It was relatively new, still greenish from the pressure treatment that made such lumber capable of being exposed to years of outdoor conditions. I knew it was safe, yet some sense told me that I was in danger. I sat on the bike, one foot on the ground holding me upright and the other on the pedal so I could push off in an instant.

I pulled the scanner out in front of me sweeping it side to side in slow, gentle arcs watching the screen as it displayed---nothing. Just a blank gray image with an occasional flicker. Did the same behind me with the same results yet the hair on the back of my neck still lifted in primal terror.

I bolted forward, pedaling for all I was worth just as an ATV burst out of nothing in front of me. I didn't think, I just reacted by jerking the handles so that the bike and I jumped off the trail and down the hill into the thicket of tree trunks so close that I barely made it through myself. The ATV was joined by more but were hampered in the trees by their wider wheelbase. They might be faster but I had the advantage of maneuverability as long as my legs held out. I also had a map in my head of every inch of my surroundings and would use that to my benefit.

I'd seen enough of the lead ATV driver's face to recognize him. Aiken. Aiken was after me and he could track almost as good as I could.

I screamed. It echoed through the woods and captured my voice, my frustration, and anger and threw it back to me. This wasn't supposed to happen; no one was supposed to have seen me inside or be able to track me. How had they hidden their presence from me and found my location in the woods?

Overhead, I heard the noise of a helicopter and I knew that it was equipped with FLIR. My own body heat was a beacon that stood out as an angry red glow and visible no matter where I went. I could cool my temp but that brought a corresponding slowness to both my reactions and thinking. And worse, wouldn't keep the men on the ground from *seeing* me. I couldn't use the scanner on more than one man at a time or while moving. Plus, I'd used the quipp so much that its battery was almost dead and even if I *could* charge it, I didn't have the hour it would need.

I heard a thump and looked down to see a trunk dart in the water bottle on the bike's frame. Their marksman had missed my leg by a simple pedal stroke. I wheeled to the right dropping the bike into a small filled sinkhole which put me out of firing range. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw *her* and stopped the bike in shock. Rachel stood on the bank dressed as I'd last seen her and the glow from an unearthly light made her image ethereal.

"Rachel." I made her name as reverent, as full of longing, sorrow, pain and joy as I could express; all in that one word. She smiled and her head lifted to stare at the oncoming team of agents.

"Take my hand, Lakan," she said and reached down.

"Rachel, I can't enter the Spirit Realm."

"Do you trust me, Lakan?"

“Yes, Rachel. Through this life and beyond,” I answered truthfully. “Is it my time now? Have you come to walk me through the door?”

“No, silly *Boy Who Thinks Too Much*. To give you a life that you were meant to live. Take my hand, they’re almost here.”

I reached up and as my hand touched her palm, I literally flew through the air so fast that I couldn’t breathe and the ground passed underneath me as if I were flying; so fast that I could only see the blurring movement of massed colors. Like a hi-speed camera followed the lights of cars on a super-highway. Just a blur of colored streaks and trails on a tableau of midnight black.

Time slowed. She let go of my hand and I stared in wonder at the shapes of buildings that soared over my head. Downtown somewhere. They coalesced into my brain and my memories translated the pictures of downtown D.C. When I looked back at her, she was gone, making me wonder if she was real or my mind had fractured at the thought of being re-captured.

“Rachel,” I whispered in despair. I wanted to be with her, not back in this world with her substitute.

Chapter Fifty-Two

I stood on the side of the street and waited for the mini-van to pull over and park. Mr. and Mrs. Jacobi greeted me and told me to get in the car. I did so and buckled up even as he hit the gas and merged back into traffic. I had called them an hour ago and they hadn't hesitated one second to hear me out or offer to do what I needed. In fact, they offered me anything I wanted but all I asked for was a place to hole up and a ride. Mrs. Jacobi asked me what I had been up to and I gave her the short and sanitized version. She wasn't happy with how the government had treated me and went on to explain what her family had experienced. I tried to apologize but she scolded me for thinking it was my fault so I shut up and watched him handle the traffic and downtown streets with the ease of someone who was used to it.

Twenty-five minutes later, they pulled into a nice neighborhood of split-levels and ranch houses that were solidly upper middle class. Most of the cars parked in the driveways were Volvos and SUVs. Their house was a two story Colonial in white with red shutters and a short driveway up to the three-car garage. They rushed me inside; the décor was subtle and understated elegance yet it had a lived in look that said it was a home and not a showplace like the Hamilton estate.

She showed me the bathroom, telling me where towels, shampoo, wash clothes and soap were stored. Last, she handed me a brand new toothbrush and gave me some clean clothes from her oldest boy.

"When you're done with your shower, follow your nose. We're eating steak in your honor. You do like steak, right? Not a vegetarian or something?"

"No, I love steak, Mrs. J," I replied.

She nodded and closed the bathroom door. I saw a large bath with a tub and a separate shower stall, a commode and double sinks with a full-length mirror behind them. The walls were a soft green and the decor was seashells with the same designs on the shower curtain, liner and wall border. It made me feel as if I were in a cave underwater.

I wasn't in there long before I heard a hesitant knock on the door and heard voices I recognized. It was the three kids I had helped from the car accident. I knew their names; I had learned everything about them with my intrusion into their cores as I healed them. Mark, Andrew and Pickles. Well, not really Pickles, her name was Sandra but everyone called her Pickles because she was always into one.

“Laky,” they called. “Can we come in?” Fingers already on the doorknob. I grabbed a towel to cover my almost nakedness as they opened the unlocked door and crowded in. All three faces beamed up at me and Pickles hugged my knees.

“Hi,” I said foolishly.

Pickles giggled and bumped her head against my groin. I turned red and held her far enough away so that she couldn’t feel anything.

“I almost got to see your wee-wee,” she snorted. “Mom says we’re going to help you escape from the Men in Black.”

Mark, the eldest rolled his eyes. “That’s for aliens, dumbass. He’s being chased by spies. I know mom told you to take a shower and get dressed. Then come down to eat. We’ll leave you alone so you can get to it. C’mon, gang. No man wants a couple of kids watching him bathe.” He gave me a manly grin and steered his siblings out of the shower. Turning in the doorway, he added, “be out before my dad flushes the toilet. The water gets bitchin’ cold.”

Twenty hot luxurious minutes later, I was clean, my hair back to its normal shade and in fresh clean clothes as I sat at the large table in the kitchen with the Jacobi family. It was filled with a veritable thanksgiving feast only it was steak and not turkey but just as much food and deserts.

I saw the father, Stan for the first time in detail. He hadn’t been in the car at that fateful moment when the garbage truck had rear-ended his family. Nor had I been conscious when they had tried to visit me in the hospital. Besides, the doctor had told them I had died and they were under the impression that I was a girl. The kids knew better; they had seen my life as deeply as I had experienced theirs.

Both of them hugged me long and deeply. Mr. Jacobi said, “Lakan, whatever you need, you need only ask for it. You saved my whole family, me included. I would have killed myself if you hadn’t saved my wife and the kids. When we heard that you had died---Well, it was like losing one of my own.”

“I couldn’t let such grief happen to any family on Christmas Eve, Mr. Jacobi. I have lost everything; I couldn’t let that happen in front of my eyes.”

He shook his head. “Not everything, Lakan. Mike Faraday and the other people you’ve touched are waiting to do their parts. Once you’ve eaten and rested, we’ll take you to the next rail stop.”

“We’re part of the Underground Railroad?” Mark asked proving that he was paying attention in History. “Cool!”

“You know you did something to them?” Mrs. Jacobi said. “All three are now perfect ‘A’ students.”

“No. I didn’t do anything to them, Mrs. J, except show them that life was precious and too fleeting. The changes you see are because of them, not me. I just gave them a second chance,” I denied. “They’re still human, the same as they were before I touched them.”

“No,” both denied but there was no fear in their eyes as Pickles reached out her hand and the blue light fell from her fingertips to bathe the table and us in its glow. With a sudden thickening in my throat, I remembered that I had healed her, made her *better* than before. I turned stricken eyes to her parents.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to change her,” I offered.

“Lakan, don’t,” she said and got up to come around and hug me. “She’s alive and in glorious health. Don’t you know why we were on the road that day? We had just come from her chemo treatments at the hospital. She had leukemia, a type that is particularly fatal and the boys

came to see if their bone marrow was compatible with hers. We'd all been tested and failed. Hers is a rare type that is very hard to match. *You* saved her life *twice* that day, Lakan. *You* have nothing ever to be sorry about. I mean this, both Stan and I would give our lives for you if we had to, Lakan."

In the face of such conviction and depth of feeling, I didn't have any words to acknowledge such a gift. I bowed my head and let the tears run down into my collar and when the whole family hugged me, I sobbed with total abandonment until I was so exhausted that I collapsed. Mr. Jacobi carried me to the bed in the spare room and all three kids cuddled around me. Even the family dog, a Golden climbed up. I fell asleep under the burden of their love which was both heavy and weightless.

In the morning, the kids woke first to let the Golden out and then they woke me. I had gone to sleep in my clothes and they were rumpled and smelly from me having worn them overnight. I slid my feet out of bed onto carpeting which was a nice surprise as usually they hit cold tiles (which was a great way to shock the system into wide-awake mode). In the doorway stood Mark and he pointed to the upstairs bathroom, right across the hall from my room. This one was done in blue with sailboats and lighthouses. I used the toilet, washed my face and brushed the horrible morning scum from my teeth. When I was nearly awake and not half comatose, Mark handed me fresh clothes. Jeans, t-shirt with long sleeves and a light jacket/vest with pockets. In the pocket were his ID, wallet and a roll of bills. Twenties and fifties. I raised my eyes.

"Mom and Dad. They said we look alike, except for the red hair and blue eyes. There are contacts in the bathroom that will make your eyes look brown. Do you know how to use them?" At my nod, he showed me the case and I inserted them. We stared at my image in the mirror and saw the boy with dark red hair and brown eyes. He framed my face so that the hair didn't show and it was eerie how much we looked alike. He was just an inch or so taller than me at over six feet. I knew he was nearly ten months older, a star on the hockey team but still shy around the girls even though he was good-looking and not lacking in confidence.

"Stop staring, bro. You're good," he laughed and punched me on the shoulder. I winced. The wound on my chest was nearly healed but I was still tender in that area. He caught sight of the redness under the t-shirt. "Whoa. What is that? Does Mom know you have that?"

"I was shot. The doctors did surgery on me," I explained reluctantly. I had to tell him the story and he was amazed that I had saved a US Marshal and Sami. He'd heard about it on the news and was even discussing it in his Current Events class.

"MOM!" he yelled and she almost came running. Within seconds of his recital, she had me undressed and was fussing over the scar.

"It doesn't hurt, I'm almost healed," I protested.

"When did this happen? Why aren't you still in the hospital? We need to call a doctor and have him check you out," she fluttered while Mr. J came running to see what the commotion was about. His eyes widened in horror at the sight of my chest.

"Holy shit!" he said inelegantly and Mrs. J didn't give him hell for cursing. "That's one hell of a scar."

"Gunshot wound and they cut me open to get to my heart."

There was utter silence. "Are you sure you're up to this, Lakan?" he asked solemnly. "We can just hide you out here until you're healed."

“No. I have everything planned out and if I don’t leave soon, it will throw a monkey wrench into everything. I’m good enough to ride a bike for twenty miles, I can handle a car ride with Mike.”

“Car? Who said anything about a car? He’s bringing his motorcycle.”

I grinned. “Cool.” The parents rolled their eyes in parental displeasure. “Yes, Mom, I’ll wear the helmet,” I added and she popped me for reading her mind. Really, I didn’t have to, her thoughts were plain to see before she said or thought anything.

Chapter Fifty-Three

Mark was quite happy to help with my deception---he got to stay home from school while I played the role of him as Mr. J drove me out of town. We went right through several road blocks manned by state and local police. Pictures of me in both my female and male persona were posted everywhere and flashing on TV and billboards. They even had the highway signs up on me as an AMBER alert saying I was a possible kidnap victim or runaway. Nothing about why I was wanted or by what.

Some of the pictures of me had been photo-shopped with different colored hair and styles or wearing hats but all of them mentioned my ‘electric’ blue eyes.

No one at any of the roadblocks batted an eye when they checked Mr. Jacobi’s ID and stared at me. One or two asked where was he going with me and why I wasn’t in school. Mr. J said he was taking me to a specialist in Philly for my sister’s leukemia. I was being tested for a bone marrow donation.

“Brave kid,” the trooper commented and reminded me to wear my seatbelt.

“Whatever,” I drawled pretending as if I were bored instead of terrified. He waved us on and we drove for another two hours before we stopped to eat and take a bathroom break.

Mr. J chose a Cracker Barrel right off I-95 and once inside, we hit the men’s room and then I wandered the store amazed at all the old-fashioned and eclectic stuff laid out for sale.

The hostess seated us and after we ordered, a tall handsome younger man with that ineffable military air joined us at the corner table near the windows where we could look outside. I went to stand up but he told us to stay seated. Mike Faraday smiled and offered Mr. J his hand. They shook and he stared at me.

“Boy in the restroom?” he asked and told the approaching waitress that he wanted coffee and the special.

“No,” Mr. Jacobi returned and nodded to me.

“Lake? I thought you were his son. Great disguise.” He hugged me and I rolled my eyes at the unabashed show of emotion.

“Must be good if you don’t recognize me,” I mumbled around my chicken pot pie. The food was really good, the biscuits and corn muffins homemade.

“God. He eats like a teenager,” Mile sighed. “I remember those days. Always hungry.”

“What I do uses a lot of energy and fuel,” I grumbled. “You’re looking good. No problems?”

“Nope. I’m the new miracle poster child in the VA world,” he said soberly. “There are a few of my buddies you could help---” His voice trailed off. “Sorry. The last thing you want to do is bring down any more scrutiny on you.”

“It takes me a whole day to recover,” I said. “Sometimes longer depending on how badly they’re hurt. I wouldn’t be able to run or escape.”

“I know, Lake. Never mind.”

"I could make you the same." I looked up from my plate and riveted his eyes. "Well, not exactly the same but you could heal other people like I did to you. But the NSA will be after you along with the rest of the world, all wanting what you can give them. You'll never have a peaceful night again and if they catch you, you'll never leave the cell where they stash you. Except when they bring you out to sell your services to millionaires."

He flushed at that and was going to apologize but I held up my hand to stop him. "You didn't do anything, Mike and I can't fault your father for loving you enough to try anything to save you. I would have done the same thing for my father had I known him. Anyway, Albans did this and he has paid for his greed."

"You killed him? How?" they asked.

"Not me. The NSA killed him. Dr. Cameron killed him with a drug that I had been testing for Alzheimer's. It releases all your memories but it burns through the brain cells, stopping all autonomous systems. The NSA found his off-shore bank accounts and seized them---over \$22 million. All made off of me. So I took it back."

They gaped at me. "You stole \$22 million from the government?"

"Actually, I stole \$48 billion. I took the NSA's Black Budget Fund, too."

"They'll trace it! You just can't disappear billions of dollars!" Mike growled.

"Yes, I can," I grinned. "It's in Bitcoins, untraceable and untouchable. Except by me and the people who have helped me. Not only is the money untraceable but once you start spending it, it disappears. Poof. It no longer exists. Still, you can't go out and buy a new Maserati or a mansion on the Riviera. I've also made new identities for all of you but you won't get them until the government or any agency starts an inquiry into your names. When the knock, telephone call, e-mail or text comes, you drop everything and follow the directions. It will keep you safe."

"How?" Mike asked. "How did you do this?"

"I hacked the NSA computers in their main building. Everything is laid out like dominoes or a game of chess. If you follow the moves I played, you'll be safe. A new life in a new place with your families and lots of money."

"What if we don't want to leave?" Mr. J asked.

"You're already under surveillance by them," I shrugged. "In less than a week, they'll be bringing all of you in for questioning. Especially Pickles. You know they'll want her, Mr. J. They won't give her back. Don't let that happen because *I* won't." I paused before I could start yelling. "They took my mother, great-grandfather, and my Rachel. They created and enslaved me. I lost two years of my life and I won't give them any more!" I could feel my heart racing, the tendons in my neck tightening as I tried to keep the rage from spilling out.

It was Mr. J's hand on mine that brought me out of the redness. "It's time to go, Lake," he said and stood up. He hugged me so tightly that I nearly couldn't breathe. He whispered in my ear and I nodded, following Mike out to the parking lot. I threw a fifty down on the counter as I passed through the store, the clerk already knew what table it was for.

The parking lot was full but then, I'd never seen a Cracker Barrel that wasn't. I was also pretty sure that not many of them had a bike like his parked in the lot. It was a Can-Am Spyder tricked out in gleaming silver with hand-painted artwork in darker metallic silver. Up close it was just a swirling pattern of lines but from further back, you could see wolves under a moonlit night sky, eagles soaring above the forest and an Indian chief in full war regalia. The seats were real leather and off-gray.

"Whoa. What a beauty." I ran my hand over the silky finish.

“My Dad kept it for me, restored it after I came home. He put a hundred thousand into it, and then sold it for peanuts when he learned that I would never ride it again,” he said softly. “He bought it back four months ago.”

“It’s too noticeable,” I said unhappily.

“No. The dude who did the work used that new paint compound that came out of a company called Lake Enterprises.” He took his keys and tapped the console six times in a complicated pattern and the paint shimmered, turned blue as the leather became a shade of pale navy.

“It works!”

“Quite a few strange new inventions came out of that company before it was seized by the Department of Homeland Security. The NIA and (DARPA) are fighting over what’s left, Lake,” he grinned. “Mount up. We have over four hundred miles left to go.”

I climbed on behind him and he handed me a black helmet fitted with a dark visor. He pulled on his gloves, helmet and sat, turning the bike on with a muted, throaty roar that was no louder than a diesel truck.

It drove like a car with its two front wheels and one rear. He even had a radio that piped Wi-Fi into the helmet and allowed us to have a conversation without shouting. He asked me what kind of music I liked and we settled for Kansas and Queen, the Beatles and INXS as he merged onto the Anacostia for I-95 north.

I had to admit, it was exhilarating and slightly terrifying when the 18 wheelers blasted by sucking at us like voracious cyclones. Too many drivers didn’t watch out for motorcycles. Mike was cool, he didn’t curse or give them the finger like I would have, he just neatly weaved out of their way.

We rode for four hours before he asked me if I needed a bathroom break and I nodded forgetting that he couldn’t see me. He could feel my body move but not enough to translate that into an answer.

“Yeah,” I said. “And I need to stretch my legs.”

“Gotcha. Rest stop coming up in ten miles or less.”

“Where are we?”

“Almost to Philly.”

“I always wanted to see the Liberty Bell,” I said foolishly.

“Well, we have time if you don’t mind cutting your sleep time some. It just means more time on the road.”

“How long will it take us to get to your place?”

“Ten hours roughly without stopping for the night. I had planned to, anyway.”

The rest stop was less than fifty miles from Philly but already, I could see the glow from city lights on the horizon. We were on I-95 heading towards NYC and Providence.

I stood outside and watched the life of a city and its highway go by me. It was almost like watching an arterial view of a heart and its great veins as the vehicles brought in goods that made the city live and brought out the refuse it didn’t need or use.

Some scientist had actually plotted an algorithm that mimicked the growth of a city just like the circulatory system of the body. Anyway, it was a never ending scenario as 18 wheelers, buses, taxis and cars flew by while overhead, airliners came in and out of the metropolitan airport.

Mike came out; I heard him before I saw him, his leather chaps and jacket creaked like an old saddle. He smelled like one, too. “Want something to eat?”

I showed him my stash, I'd fed the highway robbery vending machines nearly ten bucks in change for Twix, Hershey's with almonds, Hostess cupcakes and two large Mickey D coffees, one with cream and sugar, the other black for him.

"Thanks." He took it and sipped cautiously, it was blisteringly hot.

We sat outside at one of the tables and I watched the night sky. It was too bright and overcast to see any stars. I opened the Twix bar and split it with him. I was a confessed sugar junkie.

"You remember anything from before, Lake?" he asked me. He knew my history because when I had healed him, he'd seen the inside of my head nearly as deeply as I'd seen his.

"No. I was basically born two years ago when Sarah Hamilton took me from Dr. Cameron and installed me in her home as her grandson. I worked for her in a lab at her house, producing things like the paint compound that can change color, portable Wi-Fi devices the size of a matchbox, drugs for Alzheimer's and tissue rejection issues. Solar panel arrays that produce 300 times more power on one-quarter less battery use. A battery that lasts over a year without a recharge and can power a car going 100mph for over a thousand miles."

"None of which are on the market, except for the paint," he said. I rolled my eyes.

"You think Sarah Hamilton would let those things go out and take money away from the oil Kingpins? No, she sold the patents to them for millions and they locked them up where no one can get a peek at them. It would make the energy business obsolete and wreck the world economy. *I would have given them away for free.*"

"You still could," he pointed out.

"I could but it would have to be done the right way to prevent an economic collapse of world proportions. Besides, the CIA, NIA, NSA and HS would kill me before they let me do it." I was silent, thinking of a way to rework his bike and get more mileage out of the engine. I mean, it already got 60 mpg but I knew a way to tweak the carburetor and make it double as well as go significantly faster. Of course, there was a cap on the speed the bike could go and go safely, even on one as stable as the Spyder.

"You have a spider somewhere on her?" I asked and he pointed to a silver tree near the gas tank. In one corner hanging from a branch, I saw a web and in its center sat a spider with one foot raised as if waving. Or giving someone the proverbial finger. Spiders were almost as sacred as wolves in Indian lore.

I finished one chocolate cupcake and he snagged the other, commenting that he hadn't eaten a Hostess in years. He ate it like I did, chewing off the chocolate icing, scooping out the cream center with his tongue and last, biting the cake part in three nips. Only then did we climb on the bike and drive on.

Chapter Fifty-Four

I stared up at the massive bell within its frame and with its famous crack in the side and felt a touch of awe that I was in the presence of something ageless and timeless. Something that represented a fundamental freedom and right that had been sorely lacking in this nation these last fifty decades.

The bell was green with age yet it conveyed the same majesty as the day it was poured and beaten. Though cracked, it was still unbroken, untarnished and defiant. I laughed at the foolish notion of hearing it ring once more even when I knew from the guard's recital and my own history lessons that if it rang again, it would vibrate apart.

Mike stood next to the museum's doorway where he could keep an eye on me without actually entering the exhibit hall. He stood out in his motorcycle leathers and helmet almost as much as when we had pulled into the parking lot on the Spyder. Even though we weren't the only ones riding bikes, nor were we the only ones on Spyderys. Can-Ams were becoming the 'new thing' if you were retired and rich.

A group of forty or more were touring together and had stopped to take in the Liberty Bell and other famous Philadelphia sites. They approached us and Mike made small talk over their different bikes and they complimented him on the now bright yellow colored Spyder. I had learned that she had a repertoire of six colors---white, black, silver, navy, yellow and beige. No red. Mike was one of those rare few males who did not like the color red. Go-fast-red.

I ran my hand across the bronze bell and was warned not to touch it by the docent. He led us over to the other exhibits and we saw up-close and personal Betsy Ross' flag, an original Poor Richard's Almanac and other Ben Franklin memorabilia. It was all fascinating even given the late hour of the tour.

Presently, we heard the loudspeaker announce that the museum was closing in ten minutes and followed the docent out like obedient goslings.

I walked next to Mike down the marble steps heading for the motorbikes. Mike's pocket buzzed and he pulled out his iPhone. The conversation was short and one-sided; from his facial expression, it wasn't good news.

"What's wrong?"

"Your friends were pulled in by the FBI for questioning and the NSA stepped in, removing them from FBI jurisdiction. They've disappeared."

"I knew that would happen," I sighed. "I warned them. Still, they knew what to do. Mairy was with them?"

He nodded. "DeCarlos, the Kitwillies and the Jacobis have all become persons of interest."

I smiled. "That's what the news said? Persons of interest?" I dug my quipp out of my pockets and accessed the internet delving deep into the Undernet, the hidden systems that no mortal was aware of---where data was exchanged and evaluated almost as if the system was alive. An AI if you will. I had calculated that within the next five years, the system would achieve an artificial intelligence and that it would only converse with *me*.

"They're safe." I read the data streams and saw that all my dominoes were falling into place. The FBI agents who had escorted each member of my troop were not who they claimed to be but pawns in this chess game I had created.

"They're on their way," I said in satisfaction.

"On their way where? Who? If you set this up, why do you have to check?"

I gave him a look. "I'm smart but I'm not God. Shit happens. Where are we going now?"

"You tell me."

"I could use a shower and a bed. I made a reservation at the Hilton under the name Franklin."

"With what credit card?" He was amused.

"Does it matter? I can use anyone's number with the connections I have," I shrugged.

"You stick people with your bills? Not very honest or fair."

"No. It charges back to what used to be the proceeds of the black budget funds which are now untraceable and digital."

"Yeah? How do *you* get to it?"

“Magic.” I climbed on the bike and waited for him to drive downtown towards the massive hotel that was the Hilton. We had one of those en-suites but nothing extravagant, just a basic three room—bedroom, kitchenette, and bathroom. A king-sized bed in a pale blue room with a twin off to the side, a huge walk-in shower with real plants and a window that looked out on the harbor. Three egresses if we needed to make a fast exit and better yet, I knew that there was an old laundry chute covered over with wallboard and paper if we needed a fourth unknown way out. We would only be in the room for eight hours, anyway. Just long enough to shower and catch a few hours of sleep.

I called dibs on the shower and lost. Even I couldn't predict the outcome of random chance more than fifty/fifty but Mike told me to go ahead first anyway. I warned him about making any phone calls even though I'd reprogrammed his SIM card on his cell. Anyone tracking it would see that it was pinging off towers in the Florida coast near the Keys. I wanted them to think we were heading for a coastal way out to the Islands where there was no extradition.

I tore my clothes off and Mike's eyes widened as he spotted my fading scars. A ragged 12-inch line ripped down my chest with a large star-shaped pucker in my back.

“Holy Christ!” he said. “You should be dead!”

“Like you should be?” I smiled lopsidedly. “You have scars that are worse than mine.”

“No, Lakan. When you healed me, you took away even the scars. The physical and mental ones.”

“Don't show me. I've seen enough wounds in my lifetime.”

“You were shot only a few days ago. It looks like it has healed for months.”

“Mike, I repaired your amputated...parts and fixed your damaged brain and my healing rate surprises you?”

He grinned sheepishly and sat on the gray comforter of the bed, kicking at the blue dust ruffle. “Well, I never saw my wounds. I only heard the doctors talking about them. I was locked in my head and wanted only to die. Will those scars on your chest go away, too?”

“Dunno. Sometimes they do, sometimes don't.” I showed him the scars on my forearms from briar thorns and one on my foot where I'd stepped on a broken piece of glass. “I did this at Hamilton's house. In the garden on a Coke bottle. I threw it at the sundial and it fell in the grass. Forgot it was there and ran right over it.”

“She was your grandmother?”

“She didn't take me for stitches. Cameron came and superglued it in her office. She was my jailor. I never knew my family. My father never knew I was born. My mother died when I was a child and my great-grandfather raised me until he died when they chased us in the mountains. When Cameron took me, he had Hamilton's doctors reprogram my memories. I don't remember much about those years. I do remember Rachel.”

“Rachel?”

“She helped me escape from...before and from Chase. I loved her and they killed her.”

“I thought--Maiara?”

“She says she's my fiancée. She looks like Rachel but it's not the same. *I look at her and see Rachel. Rachel's dead.*”

He didn't know what to say and I could see he wanted to hug me but couldn't bring himself to do that. Instead, his face hardened and he stood up. “Fuck. Get over yourself, Strongbow! Stop being a whiny pussy and deal with what's here and now!”

I gaped in astonishment. He was actually yelling at me, spitting the words out, telling me that people's lives were dependent on me as if I didn't know that. I narrowed my eyes and stalked into the bathroom turning the water on as hot as it would go. I stood under it and steamed the bathroom so much that it resembled London's fog. In that misty realm of my own creation, I pretended that Rachel was still with me but for the first time, I saw Maiara's face not Rachel's and I heard Rachel's voice in my ear telling me not to be an ass-wipe or to reject the gift she had given me. Only then did I cry for that loss and when my last tears mingled with the hot, steamy water, I felt the burden of that loss lighten.

Chapter Fifty-Five

The glow from Philadelphia lingered long after we had left her city limits. I had left the shower and collapsed on my bed, out the minute my head hit the pillows. I never heard Mike take his shower, order breakfast from room service or get into bed himself. All I remember was him waking me up hours later even though it felt as if it were only a few minutes later.

"C'mon. You need to eat and get dressed. Your hair looks like you pruned it with hedge clippers and glued it back on with super glue. And your eyes look like you're stoned." He laughed at me and I threw the pillow at him. He caught it before it hit anything.

"What time is it?" I growled. I was *so* not a morning person.

"5 a.m." I groaned and buried myself under the covers mumbling dire curses and tortures.

"What?" He dragged the blankets off me.

"I said I forgot to take out the contacts. Didn't have anything to put them in and they made my eyes red."

"Will it hurt your eyes?"

"No. Not for a day or so." I sat up slowly, reaching for my clothes which I'd thrown at the bottom of my bed. They were now neatly folded. I'd gone to sleep in my underwear and it was cold when I got out from under the sheets to head for the bathroom. I raised my temp and Mike exclaimed.

"What did you just do?"

I stopped. "Why?"

"Your whole body just glowed red for a second---almost as if you were on fire but under the skin!"

"Yeah?" I did it again and stared down at myself. When I saw what he'd seen, I giggled. My dick glowed like a neon porn movie straining against my briefs because I needed to take a leak big time.

"Brings new meaning to the word 'fireballs', doesn't it?" I called from the bathroom. Ahh, nothing like the first piss of the day. I washed my hands, face and brushed my teeth with those little sample bottles of complimentary toiletries that hotels gave you.

Dressed, clean and empty, I perused the breakfast he'd ordered. Scrambled eggs, hash browns, bacon, and pancakes. Real maple syrup. Coffee, cream and OJ. Biscuits and gravy. Orange slices on the plates, real linen napkins folded into those crazy fan shapes. Bagels with smoked salmon, cream cheese. Philadelphia of course.

The coffee was rich and delightful. I saw the slip and turned it over. Breakfast cost almost a hundred bucks. My eyes widened but he didn't seem fazed by the amount. Of course, he came from a wealthy family. Then, I laughed at myself. I had stolen \$48 billion. What was a \$100 compared to that?

I ate. Everything. When we were done, nothing remained on the tray except for our dishes and a twenty-dollar tip for the room service waiter.

“We stopping in NYC?” That was the next big city on the route home but he shook his head.

“Change of plans.” He handed me his iPhone and I read the text. *K to P4 R taken.*

“Oh.”

“What does it mean? P4 was RT 17 in Jersey, right? Exit 17.”

“Yes, I know.” I thought furiously and then nodded. “We have to go to Foxboro instead.”

“Foxboro? My dad keeps a plane there.”

“Yes.”

“Can you fly? A jet?”

“Yes.” I ran through the steps in my head and nodded firmly. “Yes, I can. I can fly a Lear.”

We left ten minutes later heading for the small city of Foxboro, PA which was only an hour outside of Philly. It had a small regional airport from which you could access Logan, O’Hare, Reagan and Kennedy. Even fly straight to Montreal or Toronto.

When we pulled onto the tarmac of the terminal, a hulking man in a chauffeur’s suit was standing next to a Mercedes limo. Not lounging against the fenders but ram-rod straight as if at attention. He came over the instant that Mike stopped the bike and the two hugged, slapped each other and did that complicated hand thing.

“Lake, this is my Sergeant, Jinx Blackspell. We served together.”

He was dark-skinned with snapping black eyes; a bulky two-hundred pounds on a 5’10” frame with muscles like a quarter horse and a neck like Conan. He moved fluidly and not like a muscle bound jock whose thighs rubbed together.

I dismounted and shook his hand but he dragged me into a bear-hug where I protested that I couldn’t breathe. He let go and shook my hand. His was as big as a basketball and as leathery as one. He was left-handed, too. “Hey, little bro. You saved my man, here. It’s nice to meet you, Lakan Strongbow,” he said in Siouan. My eyes widened in delight.

“You’re Sioux?”

“Ogallala. A distant cousin of Little Bear. Otseno Pete says hello.” His eyes twinkled. “No thanks for his pick-up truck, though. The Fibbies impounded it.”

“Yeah. Sorry about that. Everyone out there okay?” He nodded and the ‘except for Rachel’ was left unsaid. “You taking the Spyder back?”

“Yeah. Mr. Faraday’s regular chauffeur drove me out here so I could ride it home. He knows how Mike feels about this bike.”

He took Mike’s chaps, leather jacket, and helmet. He already had on boots that could pass as Mike’s as he exchanged them for his own uniform in the back of the limo while Mike and I watched. Once dressed in the leather biker’s gear, it was hard to tell the difference between the two former military men. They gripped each other once more and then both limo and bike rolled out of the airport.

The Lear sat out on the runway already serviced with the base manager waiting. “Fueled, vetted and ready to go, Mr. Faraday, sir,” he reported. “Is your pilot with you? Or are you flying?”

“Don’t be silly,” he grunted. “I was Marines, not Air Force. My buddy here is flying.”

The manager’s mouth dropped. I smiled cheerily and climbed up the short set of steps as he protested, following us inside the cockpit. It rapidly became crowded. I went through the pre-

flight checklist. Started the engines and readied the plane for take-off as the radio crackled to life with instructions from the tower for runway and wind conditions.

“Unless you’re planning on a trip to Calabash, I suggest that you de-plane, Joe,” I called him by the name on his uniform shirt.

“You know how to fly this jet?”

“Better than the man who designed it. In fact, I could re-design and make it unable to crash,” I said staring at him confidently. He nodded once and presently, we heard the airlock close and pressurize.

The tower gave us permission to depart and I lifted the bird into the air without a wobble or hitch. The plane flew as sweetly as a dream, her controls almost as easy to use as my quipp. Actually, the quipp had more functions than the Lear console and was quirrier.

I set it on auto-pilot following the direction beacons towards Providence before dropping below the radar and changing direction for Colorado.

I left the cockpit to join Mike in the lounge. He was asleep on one of the seats pushed back as far as it would go and snoring gently. I went to the bar and found it was stocked with beer, champagne, wines and soda along with ice, and sandwiches dated twenty minutes before we’d arrived at the airport.

I took a mesquite smoked turkey on sourdough with smoked gouda, sprouts and dill pickles and an ice-cold Pepsi. When I popped the tab, it hissed and little bubbles of CO2 splattered my hand.

Setting the food down on the table, I parked myself in the seat opposite Mike. “You make me a sandwich?” he asked without opening his eyes.

“Didn’t know you were awake. You were snoring. What do you want?” I got up and checked the fridge. “Ham/Swiss? Olive loaf, meatloaf or an Italian?”

“I do not snore. Olive loaf. Beer.”

“Do too.” I set the sandwich on a chinette plate and popped the cap on the beer. Sam Adams Winter Ale. He took them from me and brought his seat up.

“Who’s flying the plane?”

“Charlie.”

“Charlie?” He took an enormous bite and chewed quietly. Washed it down with half the bottle.

“Auto-pilot. We’re off flight plan and below the radar.”

“I take it we’re not heading for Providence?”

“Nope. Colorado. Private airstrip belonging to a friend. From there, we’ll fly to Canada. All of us.”

“All of us?”

“Everybody that’s helped me and is on Chase’s list. We need to disappear until every mention of us is gone. I have a worm erasing us from the data but that doesn’t remove any hard copies they may have. Written reports and notes.”

I ate a bite. Tasty. The Pepsi cleared my sinuses. “We’ll land in a couple of hours.”

I heard the radio crackle and went forward to listen to a weather bulletin about a storm brewing up over Kansas and three other states. It was massive. Potential wall clouds, tornados, vicious downdrafts, and hail with a ceiling of 50,000 feet.

“Shit,” I said softly. It was too high to fly above and too large to go around. Too dangerous to fly through but I had no choice. If I deviated from my path and went higher, I

would pop out on someone's radar. A plane that wasn't supposed to be there. The Lear had an electronic transponder that identified her call number and was also visible on her tail.

"What's wrong, Lake?" He came forward and stared at the sleek console of the jet; especially the co-pilot's controls as they followed my movements. It looked weird as the stick moved without anyone behind it.

"Storm. A big one. Dangerous thunderstorms. We can't fly above it or go any higher. We can't fly where we're at, it's too dangerous this low with downdrafts."

"So fly around it," he suggested.

"Can't. I have to climb the mountain peaks and radar would pick us up. Any unauthorized plane over certain restricted areas would trigger a terrorist alert. The Air Force would shoot us down."

"Can we head back?"

"No. We don't have enough fuel to reach Providence and anywhere else would trigger some pointed questions. Like what are we doing going in the wrong direction from our filed flight plan?"

"So, what's the plan?"

"Pray. Keep going and hope we don't hit a downdraft or the ground or trigger radar." I spent the next three hours flying the plane by the seat of my pants and when we met the brunt of the storm, it was hell on earth.

I fought to keep the Lear level at 400 feet and if she hadn't had an exquisite range contour radar heads up display, it wouldn't have been possible for me to keep her from hitting the ground. Green rain, blue lightning, and hail made vision through the windows virtually indecipherable and every shudder of thunder vibrated along the wings into the body of the jet.

I swore I could feel electricity lift my hair even though I knew the jet was grounded. Ball lightning rolled off the wings and golf ball sized hail made me jump as it banged against the cockpit's glass.

Through it all, Mike sat quietly in the co-pilot's seat holding his beer which had surely gone flat. "I didn't make it home alive from Iraq to die in a plane crash," he said softly. That was when I heard the pinging of a locator beam as the electronics in the cockpit caught it.

"What is that?"

"That is the fifty mile out beacon telling me that I'm heading for the landing strip. We should be able to land within the next half hour unless the storm is as bad on the ground and they shut the airport down."

"Then what do we do?"

"Head for another airport where we can land and hope we have enough fuel to reach it. Pray that we don't have to answer any questions," I said.

Even with a beacon, it was still hairy bringing the Lear jet down. It wasn't until I was lined up with the runway that I saw the lights. Every one of them was burning with halogen intensity. The rain was pounding the ground and I could see it shift direction as the wind veered chaotically.

The tower told me the conditions and warned that all traffic was being grounded or diverted to other airports. There had already been several crashes at Denver and Pagosa Springs.

I told them that we had no choice, I was running low on fuel and nerve. The air traffic controller told me to come in at a slight angle on R14, the wind was coming from the south and would be behind me.

The wheels dropped and the airspeed slowed as the undercarriage deployed, picking up more drag. The plane shuddered and I felt the sweat springing out on my face and armpits. I wiped my face off on my sleeve, not moving my hands off the stick. I was scared but tried to hide it.

“You can do this, Lakan,” Mike said with utter confidence.

I landed the jet with a delicate bump and taxied to the waiting hangar. As the engines died, I laid my head on the yoke and breathed harshly through my nose with audible intensity.

Mike asked, “so, how long have you been a pilot?”

I looked at him with grim humor. “Since this morning. This is the first time I’ve flown a plane.” He stared at me in horror.

Chapter Fifty-Six

I’d landed the plane on a small mid-western regional airport. Most of the runways were built to accommodate small planes like Beechcraft and Cessnas with the exception of the one I’d come down on. That one was engineered for anything up to a DC-10. Most of the flights in and out were private planes and crop dusters, ranchers checking on their livestock and the occasional Search and Rescue helicopter.

The Lear looked out of place sitting in the hangar but not more so than the Cadillac Escalade parked with the engine running. Clouds of smoke from the exhaust reminded me that it was still winter. It was cold in the mountains; we were nearly a mile high even though we weren’t anywhere near Denver.

The windows slid down silently and I recognized the driver. He looked no more pleased to see me than the first time we’d met. Darren White Deer scowled and told me to get in the back. That was the extent of our conversation for the next two hours as we drove out of town onto the reservation. He drove recklessly through an increasingly vicious storm. At one point, I swore I saw green skies and horizontal rain, the precursors to tornadoes but our luck held in that we did not drive through one.

Lightning hammered the air; wind gusts shook the SUV and pushed the heavy vehicle sideways as if it weighed no more than a beetle. Visibility on the highway through the window where I sat was...at a good estimate...three feet. The rain came down so hard that the wipers couldn’t keep up and I wondered how White Deer could even see to drive let alone stay on the pavement.

Mike tried to hold a conversation but he couldn’t get a word out of the stone-faced sullen Indian. Eventually, he pulled off the Interstate onto a secondary road that was just visible enough to see the beginnings of a forest. A sign swung violently that I barely managed to read. Sandio River Sioux Reservation, San Juan National Sovereign Territory. Population, 15,456 and over one million acres. Considerably larger than the Wind River, the Sandio included parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. It was more affluent than the Wind River. I knew it was where Otseno Pete had his summer home and was within 50 miles of his ranch. No Federal jurisdiction was allowed on the rez. So unless the feds came in illegally with SWAT, we were safe. Not that I expected them to guess where I was; I’d left small clues pointing in the completely opposite direction; Florida.

Darren pulled up in front of a larger BIA doublewide set on the corner of a small town complete with Circle K, grocery store, post office and health clinic. We’d passed a feed store and lumber yard with the Cherokee Nation sustained forest logo on the front and sides of a new

Morton building. Most everything looked fairly prosperous and not rundown as I would have expected.

This doublewide was neat and cared for with a front lawn, flowers and a back yard that was fenced. There was a beautiful chocolate Lab getting drenched as he hung from the back gate and barked at us.

The front door on the porch opened and George Little Bear hurried out opening one of those huge golf umbrellas. He was followed by Otseno Pete who hollered at us to get in before we drowned. I opened the passenger door and ran for the porch as Mike galloped behind me. We shook hands and I spoke to both of them with rain water dripping down my face and curling creepy fingers of cold on my neck. White Deer followed more slowly, letting the rain drench him.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Pete. George. I miss her." I swallowed and George hugged me. I was stiff with tension and suppressed emotion. I wasn't sure if Darren was going to haul off and deck me and I wouldn't have stopped him.

"Sorry, man. Rachel told me you two were close." He didn't look at White Deer.

"She wouldn't let me come back for her," I said and raised my eyes to Pete's. "I'm sorry about your pickup. I'll send you a new one."

"Insurance already paid for another," he shrugged. "Don't worry about it. Come in and get out of those wet things. The rest of your party will be here by seven tonight if the storm doesn't screw up any more air traffic. I can't believe your pilot managed to fly through this. The weather people are calling it the worst of the century, a monster. Who is he?"

Mike came forward and introduced himself but forestalled Otseno by announcing that *I* was the pilot and that it was *my first time flying*.

I brushed past them and entered the house, ignoring the décor or that I was dripping rainwater on the wood floors as I headed for the fridge. Bottles of ice-cold water in a 24-pack took up the entire bottom shelf. I emptied a 24 oz. before I rummaged through the deli drawer to make myself a sandwich of meats and cheeses wrapped in a tomato/basil wrap.

I ate; searched for the bathroom and used it to dry off my hair and face before I stripped down to my underwear as I went looking for the spare bedroom with a dry towel tied around my waist. I could feel their eyes on me as I stretched out on the frilly spread of what I guessed had been Rachel's room. "I'm good," I answered their unspoken question. "We're okay here until the rest of them join us or---"

I pulled the quipp out of my clothes and tossed it to Mike. He caught it effortlessly. "If any texts come through like CKMT or K to CM, wake me." I rolled over on my side and kicked off my shoes. I lay there waiting for sleep to claim me.

I was dreaming again. The sky above me was a blue so bright that it hurt my eyes and at the same time, I wanted to drown in it. There were movements in it that swirled and changed both tone and hue as if it were not sky at all but sea. I had never seen the sea in real life, only pictures, and TV.

Rachel was with me holding my hand; hers was warm but not that of living flesh. I held spirit and that blazed with the earth's fire yet it did not burn me. When I looked at her, she glowed with a golden aura that a volcano's heart could not match.

"Boy Who Thinks Too Much," she smiled. "I have come back this one time more than I was allowed so that I may bid you farewell. I set your heart at ease."

“Because I finally listened to you?” I grinned. She hit me on the arm and I yelped. It hurt, a spectral punch. “So, you were right. You get to say ‘I told you so’. But I still love you, Rachel. Only, it’s different now.”

“I know.” She kissed me and it filled my body and psyche to overflowing. We stopped walking as I felt an invisible barrier before me---what psychics and shamans called the Veil. She let go of my hand and squeezed forward, half of her disappearing into a thin crack. From behind her, rays of *power* poured through, not *light*. It would be closer to call it black lightning. Some of the particulates touched me and burned with an acid bite. I yelped and stepped further back.

She kept her eyes on me and that was the last thing I saw before she disappeared into the darkness on the other side. But she was smiling.

I

The Senator was at home in his office; he considered that home more than his residence. After all, he spent more hours in his Senate office than he did at home. This day was Thursday, one of the rare few that he had nearly nothing to do and was taking a well-deserved nap on the plush leather couch in the study. The odor of leather and books was one that brought back memories of his childhood, of town libraries in the small village in which he’d grown up and of his father’s own prized book collection. Prized not because they were rare and expensive but because they were classics and old, welcomed friends. One of his earliest memories was of his parents reading to him as he sat in their laps. His father had been a farmer and his mother a teacher, neither one particularly wealthy but his dad had given him a curiosity that extended to mechanical and electronic which he had crossed over to the new computer industry just beginning to ground floor. He bought into a small company called Apple and from that start, the Senator had built a stable platform that had launched his political career. Until the day when the stomach and back pains had gone beyond mere indigestion. The doctor had given him the diagnosis of Stage IV liver cancer.

Strange, he mused. *I never drank nor did my parents*. He rubbed his belly but all he felt was muscle and very little body fat. His metabolism although never sluggish, now was a veritable powerhouse. No matter what he ate, it didn’t wind up on his belly but burned off.

His phone rang and startled him. He looked over at his desk but a sudden vibration in his pocket told him that it was his cell, not the office line. Very few people had his personal number, his wife, and a few friends. Even his children were put through the Senate Switchboard.

Digging his cell out of his pants pocket, he held it up to read the name and number. *OMIKAYO YOU*, he read and instantly opened it.

“Lake,” he said warmly. “How are you? You’ve sure stirred up a hornet’s nest.”

Lake’s voice sounded tired. “The pawns are in play. The Bishop is advancing. The chess board is almost empty and I need some help from you.”

“Tell me.”

“I need your plane and a pilot to fly these people to Canada. Can you do that without jeopardizing yourself?”

“It doesn’t matter if I do, Lakan. I owe you more than a measly favor. When and where?”

“Tampico Springs. Florida. There’s a small private airport just out of town. I’ll give you the phone number and coordinates right before you leave for the airport. There will be about 10 to 15 people. Will your plane handle that many?”

“Yes. It’s a Gulfstream 40, it’ll hold twenty. Are you coming?” the pilot crashed or

“I’ll be there. Senator, thank you.” He disconnected before Lourdes could say anything.

II

Chase sat in front of his computer and cursed the blue screen that taunted him. An image of an Indian chief with his middle finger thrust up flickered across the screen. Occasionally, the face's mouth opened in a gaping laugh and flapped the finger like a bird.

Cameron bolted in, his new laptop held open showing lines of data scrolling rapidly down the screen. "I've got something," he spoke in a rush as he turned the laptop around. "Senator Lourdes just called his pilot and set up his Lear to Florida and out of the country to Canada."

"Where?" Chase demanded.

"Tampico Springs to Canada, Toronto."

He ordered his men to deploy a mission but Cameron stopped him. "Wait, Director." Chase paused. "Strongbow isn't stupid; he won't make mistakes. If he let us find this flight plan, it's because he wanted us to find it."

He set the small tablet down on the director's desk and ran a new program. One of the items it pulled up was an obscure mention of the sighting of Black River Pharmaceutical CEO's son and his sudden interest in a small town near Philadelphia. Just where his father kept a Lear jet of his own.

"Send a team to both places just in case," Chase decided. "Which one do you think is the real target, Dr. Cameron?"

"I'm not sure of anything with him, Director. He surprised me by coming here and even more so by getting inside. How he got out is a complete mystery to me considering all the security this place has. My God, just think what he could do if he wanted to break into a bank vault, reach the president. He could topple regimes!"

"One person, a kid couldn't change much," Chase laughed.

"Don't you see?" Cameron looked at the Director with pity. "He could if half the world believes he's the Messiah. Look what Hitler did and he couldn't do anything this kid can. Caesar. Alexander the Great. History is filled with men and women who changed the world. I hope you remember Einstein? He had half the intellect that this boy has access to."

"Are you saying that he could make a nuclear bomb?"

Cameron snorted in disgust. "Jesus, any third rate college student could do that off the Internet. All he'd need was some refined uranium and that's not so easy to get. Don't underestimate Lakan is all I'm saying."

"Surely you're smarter than he is," Chase pointed out.

"Older, wiser, more skilled in dirty tricks and subterfuge, maybe. In straight on intelligence, I'm not so sure. *I* couldn't have come up with these computer advances that came out of Hamilton's research labs."

"I understand, Doctor." Chase nodded as he stared at his blue screen and the middle finger.

"Well, at least he has a sense of humor," Cameron returned.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Nearly the entire White House Intelligence Staff was present in the Main briefing room, from the Secretary of Defence to Homeland Security, the President and V.P., the Chief of Staff and most of the Intelligence Agencies. Anyone who had anything to do with National Security was inside the room with armed Secret Service agents parked outside the doors. The people conspicuously absent were Director Chase of the NSA, his in-staff assistant Dr. Cameron, the FBI Director and the Assistant DD of the NIA.

President Houston raised his eyebrows. "Where are Chase, Cameron, Rutgers and Hauser?" he demanded naming those missing.

The DoD answered him. "Out pursuing the subject of this meeting." Mark Devereaux threw a thick manila folder on the table top, passing out similar folders to each member. The first item in the folder was a photo of a young teenage boy, around the age of 12. Good looking in a delicate way with electric blue eyes, honey-colored skin and deep mahogany red hair. The color called oxblood but without the usual freckles associated with redheads.

"The boy's name is Lakan Strongbow, son of Michael Hamilton Jr. and former FBI agent Rachel Strong. He is presently 15 years old and the most wanted person on the face of this planet. Two days ago, he walked into the NSA building, accessed the Director's office, his computer and gained entry to the entire database of NSA files. We know he copied everything onto a flash drive and then inputted a worm that erased everything pertaining to him and the people involved with helping him."

"How did he get in? How did you get this info if he erased it all?" James Belcher of the NIA asked.

"From hand-written field notes copied off an agent's notebook, photos taken from the former Director Hamilton's phone records and newspaper articles and blogs. This kid has some rather unique and priceless talents. Page two---." Everyone opened their folder and read the summary on the fifteen-year-old.

"No wonder Cameron was thrown out of several medical colleges. The first genetically designed human infant. What did he target for?" President Houston asked.

"Perfection. High IQ, faster reflexes, superb health, good looks, height, weight, superior in every way," he returned.

"Red hair?" Houston asked having experienced the social stigma in the school of a redhead sister with freckles, one of the unfortunate 'carrot tops'.

"Oxblood is the color it's called. The number one reason we need to acquire this child is something else entirely," Devereaux continued. "Page 10." All of them flipped to that section and read the headlines from both *Alabama Star* and the *Washington Herald*.

Back from the Dead?

Teenage Girl Saves Family from Christmas Tragedy.

Six Hurt in Garbage Truck Accident.

Witnesses claim that Sandra Jacobi and her mother, two brothers were fatally injured in a multi-car collision between their vehicle and a Waste Management Garbage Truck. 12-year-old Sandra nicknamed 'Pickles' was pulled from the wreck by an unidentified teenaged girl with what witnesses said looked like a broken neck. "She appeared dead," claimed Roger Flynn, a former army medic...Also injured was Leon DeCarlos, owner of Cherokee Construction who appeared to have been impaled front to back judging by the holes in his clothing and seat back yet none of the victims showed signs of these wounds...Anthony Anderson, Herald.

Boy Saves US MARSHAL and Local Girl from Serial Killer/Sexual Predator.

Sami H ____, 7 years-old was last seen in the Walmart parking lot in her hometown of Titusville, TN on Friday afternoon. Within a half hour, a search party was underway spearheaded by a friend of the family, US Marshal Teagan Calderon Muir who also claimed to have been murdered by the alleged suspect Everett William Morris.

Though suffering from a gunshot wound to the chest, the boy managed to prevent Morris from finding and abducting Sami or hurting anyone else. The perpetrator was shot and killed at the scene by local hunters returning from a deer hunting trip. Their identity has been released as being members of the family of the teenage boy. He was airlifted to a Washington trauma Center to undergo emergency surgery. His condition is listed as critical.

Sarai Newly, Post

“Are you saying this boy can bring people *back from the dead*?” Houston shouted.

“That’s what they claim. We located a doctor named Albans who was killed in a hit and run but he worked with Senator Lourdes’ doctor. Rumor has it that Lourdes was pulling out of the primaries because he had stage IV liver cancer.”

“But he looks healthy! I saw him playing basketball at the Y with some inner city kids,” Belcher protested.

“And on page 32, there’s a photo of Sgt. Michael Faraday when he came home from Syria, with his diagnoses and injuries,” Devereaux returned. He watched as every man in the room blanched at the cold facts of Faraday’s genital mutilation.

“Thank God the poor bastard had brain damage and didn’t know what happened, to him,” he added. “Except, this photo was taken two days ago.” He held up the camera phone with the image of a tall, handsome young man in leather motorcycle gear holding a black and red helmet at his side. He wore a suspicious look on his face as he stared at the picture taker. Behind him, the Liberty Bell showed plainly but more importantly, you could just see the beautiful green Can-Am Spyder with its custom artwork. It was obvious that the cell phone owner had really wanted an image of the bike.

“It was posted on U-tube yesterday,” Devereaux offered. “The paint job is impressive, it’s *Lake Compound Illusion*. You know, the paint that changes its molecular structure so that it can be any of six different colors? Came out of Hamilton’s research labs.”

Houston asked, “all these have something to do with this kid, right? He can...bring back the dead, heal the amputated and brain-damaged and create techno-marvels? How the fuck did Chase keep him secret from me? *I’m the god-damned President!*”

“He kept the whole project under a black ops site with Director Hamilton’s help. Then, she spirited the boy away to her home. He escaped and this Dr. Albans found him, used him to make a fortune off rich men with problems. He kept him at a variety of mental hospitals and clinics under lock and key, taking the boy out to pre-arranged sites where he met the...customers. Once again, the boy escaped from the clinic heading for the Smoky Mountains. From all accounts, this Lakan Strongbow is a ghost in the woods. If he makes it back to the Rockies, we’ll lose him.”

“Is that where Chase and the others are?” Houston asked.

“He’s tracking Strongbow down now, using some kind of program that the doctor wrote on his laptop.”

“Do we have men after him?” the President demanded.

“Yes, Mr. President. Our top agents and law enforcement are after both, I have a BOLO out on the boy with an AMBER alert so he’ll be handled with care.”

“Whatever you do, don’t hurt him,” Houston shuddered. “We’d be crucified by the religious factions if that happened.”

There was a rapid knock on the doors at the same time as Devereaux’s cell vibrated in his pocket, along with several other cells. He read the text and nodded to the aide standing nearest

the double doors. Opening them, another intelligence drone brought in pages of paper data handing the sheets to the Director of Defence.

“We’ve just received confirmation that Senator Lourdes has ordered his Lear jet to ready for a flight to Tampico Springs, FLA to pick up a party of 15 and fly them to Toronto. Director Chase has also sent a team there and to Foxboro, PA.”

“What’s in Foxboro, PA?” the NIA director asked curiously. An older man, he tended to fall asleep at meetings and it was well known that the Deputy Director really ran the agency. Houston made a mental note to replace the man at the next Congressional meeting.

“An airport and another plane owned by a client of the boy, a Michael Faraday Sr. His son and an unidentified pilot took off there a few hours ago, heading for Rhode Island where the son Michael Faraday Jr. lives. Tower reported the plane as far north as Scranton before it fell off the radar.”

“Fell off?”

“Either the pilot crashed or it dropped below 400 feet,” Devereaux returned grimly.

“Can you fly a jet below 400 feet?” one of them asked.

“Not in a Gulfstream. If the pilot did that, I’d like to shake his hand,” Houston said, being a former Air Force jock.

“If he headed west---he flew into one monster of a storm front. They’re closing airports and runways from East Coast Boston to Atlanta all the way to O’hare and St. Louis. High winds, downdrafts, torrential rains, tornadoes, ice, and baseball sized hail. Lightning. This storm is 800 miles wide. If they’re caught in it, well, their chances of survival are slim to none unless they get above 100,000 feet or go around it. Neither is likely or we’d have picked them up on radar.”

“Who’s flying the plane? Faraday?”

“The Foxboro Manager did the pre-flight check for Faraday and told the tower that the pilot looked like a 15-16-year-old boy. Blonde hair and brown eyes and that he looked ill. He stated that he seemed to know what he was doing and said that he could fly the plane better than the man who’d designed it. The manager said the kid wasn’t boasting and he watched the takeoff. Flew like a pro.”

“Blonde with brown eyes? Isn’t he a redhead with blue eyes?”

Devereaux nodded. “He’s also been a girl at times, pretty enough to fool men.”

“Have you adjusted the BOLO to reflect that disguise?”

“Yes, Mr. President. We think he dropped below the radar to hide his destination.”

“Where is he going? Not Rhode Island or Canada?”

“He’s disappearing all the people who have helped him. I think he’d sending them to Canada but not himself. I think he’s going home.”

“Home?”

“Yes, Mr. President. I believe he’s heading home to the Reservation where he was born, to hide in the mountains away from Chase, Cameron and everyone that wants a piece of him. That’s where I’d send our men, to wait for him to land.”

“You think he’s survived the storm.”

“I don’t believe even a monster storm can stop this boy. I think he’s the closest thing to a god on this earth. I’ve heard Director Chase refer to himself and his team as the *God Slayers*. I believe we need to make sure that they don’t achieve their aims regarding this boy. I believe that Allan Chase wants to use him to make himself *God*,” Mark Devereaux said earnestly.

“I agree, Mark. You have whatever resources you need to do this. When you bring him in, I’d like to meet this Lakan Strongbow.”

“Yes, sir. So would I. One request, nothing pertaining to this case should be electronically transmitted. All records are to be handwritten or typed manually, not put into a computer, tablet, cell phone or emails. If you do, it will disappear. He hacked into the NSA files and downloaded a worm that eats everything related to his case. No orders, requests or permissions will go until we re-boot and re-load the system.”

The entire group groaned. No one even owned a typewriter anymore or had a personal assistant that took dictation.

“Just the NSA or everywhere?” Houston demanded.

Deveraux shrugged. “We don’t know yet. The IT techs are running diagnostics at the FBI, CIA and HS. The NIA said it wasn’t possible for a hacker to get into their system and make it sneeze let alone erase anything. They refuse to check.”

“Tell them *I* said to do it,” Houston snarled and left the room.

The Assistant Director of the NIA gave the DoD a hard sneer but nodded in agreement. The meeting broke up, each man departing for their respective offices already on their tablets and cell phones despite Deveraux’s warnings. It only took minutes to convince them that he was correct in that Strongbow’s worm had reached every level of US secret intelligence services.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Across the entire US from the state of Maine to Hawaii, at exactly the same time of day, a million people received an e-mail, text, cell call, landline phone call or telegram announcing that they had or would receive an all-expense paid trip to Toronto, Calgary, Quebec or Montreal, Canada. Tickets were available for an immediate download and certified as legit. Those who were still in doubt could call any airline and verify that the tickets were real and paid for. The airlines were deluged with phone calls and each customer was told yes, a reservation was made and paid for in their names. Itineraries were sent and nearly 95% of those called obeyed the instructions to use the tickets within the next 12 hours or the trip was void with no refunds. One quirk, the tickets were held in the name of Lake Hamilton and they were to ask for them that way.

Within three hours, the US Intelligence services were going insane trying to stem the tide of departing US citizens who were a strangely similar group of people. Half were males under the age of 40 and the other half females under 35. It looked like a convention of professionals meeting for a company getaway---only in the thousands. The airlines and hotels were agog with the 1000% jump in revenue, all paid for out of Bitcoins and anonymous.

Toronto Hotels had to sub-contract to accommodate them all, even using B&B’s outside the city. And they weren’t the only large metropolitan area to be hit. Quebec, Ottawa, Calgary and Edmonton were also inundated with American tourists.

The FBI and Homeland Security were bewildered and unable to keep track of a tenth of the horde. In every group of hundred or so was one that resembled their quarry yet when approached and taken into custody, fingerprints proved it was not Strongbow. Deveraux decided that the entire mess was just a diversion as the plane trip to Florida had been.

A team intercepted the Senator’s plane before it could take off and that group of passengers turned out to be a Bingo group from a nursing home in the area. The Senator laughed so hard he was in danger of choking on his own spit until one old lady with blue hair whacked him hard between the shoulder blades. She offered him a nip from her thermos which did not contain coffee or tea but good old fashioned Kentucky Bourbon.

After 12 hours of fruitless headless chicken running behavior, Devereaux pulled his team back and asked for options. It was one of his younger agents that offered his opinions. "I'd want to go home," he said. "If I was leaving forever, I'd want to look at my home one last time. He dropped off the radar because he did not want anyone to see him heading west. Home. Look for him there."

"He was born on the Reservation," Devereaux mused. "A small one deep in the heart of the San Juan Wilderness. It would take an army to find him."

"Not an army. A tracker. That's what Chase's Sgt. Aiken does. He tracks men for the NSA and CIA. Find him or someone like him and you'll find this kid."

The DoD pulled out a map of the state of Colorado and plotted his strategy.

I

We couldn't fly any further and not just because of the storm. Any more use of the jet would point an arrow straight to where I was hiding. We waited out the storm in silence, an uncomfortable 36 hours because I had no control over the weather. Huddled in faded jeans, jacket and used boots, I kept quiet and out of the way of the adults. I'd found a spot at the top of the basement stairs, away from their arguments and grumblings but within reach of windows and doors where I could watch the face of the storm.

The wind died around 2 a.m. and with it, the rain. The silence of the moaning wind was unnerving but the other noises told me that life was resuming back to normal. The hoot of an owl, the mournful yapping of coyotes and the *kree-kree-kree* of a nighthawk told me that the storm had blown out. Nature had reclaimed the night.

The air smelled of ozone, cedar limbs broken and water stirred to mud. Of broken and raw lumber and fires from lightning damage.

There were no sirens breaking the deep of the night here on the rez, just the cautious sound of voices calling for help and to offer help. Voices assessing the damage.

Redline Pete and George apologized, saying that they had to go see what damage had been done and what aid they could provide for the injured and homeless. Darren had already left the house; the atmosphere lighter with his departure.

Mike wanted to help but hovered not wanting to leave my side. I told him to go, that I did not need a babysitter or his help anymore. He followed Little Bear out. The silence inside the house was impenetrable.

I descended the stairs to the basement and found the gear that I had asked Redline Pete to assemble and set aside. Gore-Tex vest and jacket, lined rip-stop pants, long underwear, and long-sleeved tee shirts. Everything in drab green and browns. Boots broke in next to a rigid framed backpack with a drop cloth, tent and sleeping bag. I lifted it, it weighed over 40 pounds.

Rifle with scope, canteens and a compound bow with a quiver of hunting broadhead arrows in camouflage. Unpacking everything, I pared it down to the bare essentials before I stripped and redressed in the survival gear. The scar on my chest was a bare white line; it still hurt underneath with a residual tenderness and weakness.

Last on was the aluminum framed pack. I shrugged it on only after carrying it upstairs, through the kitchen and out onto the back porch. It took only four steps down from the deck and four more to reach the majestic wilderness that was the San Juans. It folded around me.

I walked lightly, conscious of my feet and not to leave a sign of my passage through the grass or on the ground. This made my going slower than normal yet I knew that I could not leave one clue or my friends would track me.

Once I'd gone a mile in through dense red pine and lodgepole, I could move faster. The pine needles under my feet were thick enough to mask any prints on the rocky soil. Unless, I ran. I had too many miles to go before I panicked enough to do that.

I walked uphill; I wanted to reach the ridges where I could look down and back to see if anyone from the reservation had followed me. It would most likely be hours before anyone thought to notice I was gone and by then, emergency services would be thick on the ground making my disappearance even harder to spot. I knew Redline Pete would have brought help in, using the stolen money to pay for it.

The only electronic device I carried was my quipp. With it, I could contact everyone I needed, make changes in the chess program I had set in motion and keep abreast of what was happening out in the world without fear of being triangulated.

Walking further into the wilderness, I aimed my feet towards Conejos Peak which I knew to be a relatively hard trail with long traversing switchbacks. It would most likely have park visitors using it even this early in the season. One of the trails used in the National Park system, it crossed the Continental Divide but I would only be on it long enough to cross over into Utah near King's Peak. After that, I would be deep in lands not normally visited by any but the most die-hard backcountry hikers. I was hoping not to meet up with anyone who could authenticate my presence as they would definitely remember a hiker carrying both a scoped rifle and bow. It was out of season for anything but turkey. I would see mule deer and elk once I climbed higher but would not need to hunt until my dried goods were long gone.

I walked for a good four hours before I took my first break. The forest showed the effects of the storm. Downed trees were everywhere, making some places almost impassable. State crews would have to spend months cleaning up this mess; I wasn't sure if they had the funds to do so. I wanted to make sure that I was deep enough into the national forest so that my friends couldn't track me down. I'd told them my plans had been to fly out and meet DeCarlos and the Kitwillies, going on from there by car towards the Canadian border.

My first stop was a hundred yards off the Conejos Peak trail on a small spit of land that jutted out over the valley below me. I could see my back-trail almost to the trailhead and even though most of it was covered by trees, enough clear patches existed so that I could see if anyone was following me. There were enough star and moonlight for my eyes to pick out movement and the shapes of anything human. I saw only animals. Below the split was a ravine where runoff had dug into the friable rock to make an early wet season waterfall. Such rock would also make climbing difficult as it would not hold pitons and slide under boots. The sound of the water was what drew me to the spot, I loved the sweet rushing of water over stones and the bellowing of it as it fell in a veil of ever-changing lace. The bad thing about sitting so close to the spectacle was that it could mask the sound of approaching predators, both animal, and human. It was also bad camping etiquette to hog a water source and keep wildlife from it or to build a latrine nearby and pollute a drinking source.

I found a semi-flat rock near a downed stump that rested against a rising rock wall near the face of the escarpment and eased my pack off my shoulders. It was a good place to sit and rest, with concealment for me yet I could watch below me. I set the pack down. I was sore, my chest and shoulders had rubbed under the straps and load, my lower back reminded me that only days previously, I had been flat out in an ICU with a gunshot wound.

I was starving and my first task was not to light a fire but to pop open an MRE and activate the chemical pack that made the food hot. As meals go, it wasn't that bad, meatloaf with gravy, granola bar with almonds and raisins and chocolate bar with nuts. I'd been sipping water

from my canteen all along; I had two hanging from my pack and would refill them from any clean spring I happened across. They were safer than drinking from the creeks and I wouldn't have to use chemicals to disinfect them.

The treetops were over sixty feet above my heads even though I was sure these weren't first growth giants they were still huge. The sun was just rising, pushing back the stars and the moon. After the storm had passed, the night had been incredibly still and the moon bright. An easy walk for me in the woods but not for anyone trying to follow. And I knew that they would follow.

I leaned back against a tree trunk and closed my eyes. I would allow myself a half hour for a breakfast break. Any longer would let me stiffen up and want to sleep. I figured I had done maybe ten miles if I was lucky with most of that being uphill. I had gone from 8,000 feet above sea level to over 12,000. Some of the other peaks I would have to cross would be even higher than that.

I yawned and rested, the food a warm nugget in my belly. Under my hand resting on my lap was the rifle. Not as a deterrent against wildlife but for protection against anyone coming after me. And I knew there would be, just as I knew my ruse with the free trips would only confuse Chase and his NSA for a day or two.

The soft rustlings of the bare branches of the few deciduous trees, the souging of the wind through the pines and hemlocks, the quiet rushing of the waterfall all combined to lull me to sleep. I let it, my body needed it to recover from the stress of the last few days.

I slept no more than 30 minutes, waking myself within a minute or two. The sun had risen fully by that time. The air was crisp and chill, a faint mist hovering in the dips as the moisture in the air reacted with the rising temperatures.

Patches of snow covered the shaded sections yet faint green shoots of grass, fiddleheads and snow lilies broke through the snow cover. Moss and lichens covered the rocks which themselves sweated off the frost from the night before.

Ground squirrels and chipmunks scolded me as I sat on my stump watching their antics, their busy bee grocery shopping. A mountain jay dove near me, eyeing the foil packets that had held my meals. I would not leave my trash behind to kill animals or tell humans that I had been there. It went into a separate pocket for such stuff until I could bury or dispose of it properly.

Lunch was at 12 noon. By then, I was starving, shaky and suffering from caffeine withdrawal. I made a small fire and brewed a pot of cowboy coffee. Strong and black with the grounds boiled right in the water. For a treat, I added four spoonfuls of powdered milk and spent an hour enjoying both the view and the coffee.

I'd only managed another 5 or 6 miles, most of them had been straight uphill on slopes that challenged my stamina and my calves. I was still several hours from the crest. Once I did reach the peak, I could use the old cabin that was nestled under a ledge on the backside of the mountain in a thicket of red pine and cedar. One room, it had a stone fireplace, bed and a camp stove with two windows and a door. All covered with iron bars to keep out the bears. Next to the house was piled a cord of wood and it was the custom of campers to replace what they used before leaving the cabin. In the pines, someone had dropped several trees to make a corral where they could turn loose their mounts. It was not a comfortable place to be in one of the frequent thunderstorms that hit the area.

Someone had been in the cabin last hunting season and restocked, leaving notes in the journal that went back 45 years. Other journals were stacked in the bookshelf on the far wall

going all the way back to the late 1800s when the cabin had originally been built. I did not add to them.

Canned goods filled the shelves and an old fashioned can opener hung from the door. Dishes were old blue chipped tin and paper, a spigot pumped water fresh from a well below the plank floors. There was a deep dry well next to a cast iron sink and I pitied the mule that had brought it up the mountain.

The counter was wooden with granite on top, a plank table with four mismatched chairs and a pine framed bed with a rope box spring. The mattress was new, a twin air bed with a foot pump stored under the frame. There were clean sheets stored in a chest at the foot of the bed and a down sleeping bag opened and spread out on the flat mattress.

I wasn't planning on staying more than overnight, it was one of those places that a helicopter could fly to and check for me; one of the few passes I had to use to cross over into Utah.

I dropped my gear inside the door and sat outside on a stump left for use as a chair so I could watch the sun set below the mountain range.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Wearily, I dragged my feet onto the trail where markers informed me that it was 6m to the trail head, 2m to Kitsennie Trail and 145m to the Salt Lake City cut-off. Not that I wanted to head there, it held nothing but vast scrubby plains with no cover and plenty of pronghorns.

I had taken a wrong turn somewhere. After four days of hiking, I should have been out of Utah and in the Rockies of Wyoming. I was supposed to meet up with the Kitwillies since Leon had returned to his home and business. Last I'd checked, he'd been pulled in for questioning but since he didn't know where I was or anything about my plans, the authorities had finally released him. Probably so that they could follow him straight to me. The plan was for him to meet Mike Faraday and the Jacobis and then they would drive up to the Canadian border entering the Mohican reservation just over the border. Where they would disappear via Senator Lourdes' Lear Jet for overseas.

I wanted a hot shower, coffee brewed in a Keurig with real half and half, to sleep in a bed that had a foam mattress. I wanted clean clothes and real toilet paper, the light from a 60-watt bulb and to hear the sound of a furnace kicking on. I wanted to see the sun come up through a frost-lined window pane and hear the sound of traffic.

When I was through feeling sorry for myself, I turned around and retraced my steps down the mountain for a loop that connected the one I was on for the one I *should* be on.

In those four days of hiking, I'd managed to travel almost a hundred miles which in this terrain was quite an achievement. I hadn't seen a single soul in the woods but I had heard helicopters flying search patterns and ATVs in the canyons below me. The fire towers were beacons in the night as their occupant lit the only source of electrical illumination within a hundred miles. I was glad I didn't have to climb up the tower stairs every day. Going to the bathroom was a bitch as it was on the ground and the only way to use it was to descend a hundred steps and then climb back up. It was no wonder that the Forest Rangers were in such good shape.

I promised myself that the next lake I came upon I was going to bathe, icy water or not. I had not read of any hot springs in the area, not until I was near Yellowstone. That part of my trip would be the most dangerous. People were in and out of the park, poachers had reached the backcountry and the Rangers had many Towers used to keep track of fires and lost tourists.

Around 2 that afternoon, I came upon an old campsite that had seen some serious excavation with the remnants of a burial pit and yellow crime scene tape.

My heart pounded in my chest and I had flashbacks of a tent, two men, and soldiers chasing me. The two men had fed me by their campfire and put me to sleep in their tent.

“I remember,” I said slowly to the trees and the whispering of their ghosts. “I remember running.”

I hurried beyond the clearing and before too long, I came to the banks of a deep creek. When I looked up, I saw a thin trail that switch-backed all the way to the top but I remembered flying, falling from the crest and landing in icy cold water that rolled me down its rapids. Of huddling in a cave made by enclosing boulders with two blue dogs that kept me warm. It took me another hour but I found it and laughed at how small it seemed to my 16-year-old eyes. Something else had used it for a den, inside were small bones and tufts of red and gray fur.

From there, I found my way through aspens just unfurling their new leaves and in the sunlit patches between the rock ledges, new grass was pushing up. It smelled like spring and with spring in the Rockies came the frequent thunderstorms and violent lightning that tore apart the skies and threatened to pull down the mountains. I could feel the freshening breezes on my face and smelled the coming moisture in the air. Any colder and it would come down as snowflakes.

I had just managed to pop open my tent and dive inside as the storm hit. Didn't get a chance to tie the nylon down with pegs but I wasn't afraid that it would blow away with me inside it. Because it was camo-colored, I wasn't worried either that it would stand out like a beacon if it had been red or blue.

The storm passed slowly. Laying on my stomach, I chewed on a granola bar and caught up on the news through my quipp. The NSA and Homeland had gone crazy trying to keep track of the near million people that had cashed in on the free trips. My ruses to give us time to escape seemed to be working.

The storm that had hit the reservation had killed ten from tornadoes, hitting their trailers especially hard and causing over a million dollars in damages. Kansas and Oklahoma had borne the brunt of the storm with the most deaths and damages. Redline Pete and his casino had volunteered millions to help rebuild. Several airports had suffered losses and downed planes, with Mike Faraday's being one of those reported missing.

I tried to send a text to Maiara but even my quipp could not penetrate the tree cover or the mountains. I would need to get out in the open or climb higher.

The sound of the rain on the tent changed from a demanding roar to a gentle muttering and I rolled over onto my back using my discarded pack as a pillow. After four days of four meals a day, not much was left in the pack. Mostly granola bars and dried fruit. I'd only packed about a week's worth of rations as anything more would have exceeded the 40 pounds I could carry.

Unzipping the front of the tent, I watched as the clouds brewed a new pot of sky as they blew apart as quickly as they came. The sun sparkled on the dew as if the entire world was coated in diamonds. The air smelled sweet and new, the promise of a clear evening implied in the brilliant blue sky with no trace of white.

I had to wait for the tent to dry off enough to roll it back into its sheath. I figured that I could get another hour or so of walking in before stopping for the night. The sun went down early and fast this high up in the mountains so that it was totally dark by 5 p.m. The moon was on the wane and provided little light deep in the woods.

Trouble was, every step I took resonated deep in my memories and drew me off my intended direction. I walked longer than I had planned and found myself at the end of a deer track that stopped at a rock wall towering hundreds of feet over my head. Too high to climb and too rugged to go around. Besides, my gut was telling me that this spot was important and one of the places that I was meant to find. So, I went forward again until my nose was nearly touching the granite and schist of the stones and that's when I saw it---a fold like a curtain in the rock with a narrow passage behind it.

My heart beating like a native's drum chant, I slipped in and followed the twisting rock walls, my feet scuffing through a pale yellow sand. Chunks of quartz had fallen from the walls and I could see the glimmer of gold here and there. I stopped in amazement as the tube widened to reveal a sheltered valley that had somehow escaped the harshest part of winter. Here, the grass was still green and knee-high, the trees still wore their bonnet of leaves and the air was fifteen degrees warmer than outside the valley. Somehow, this valley had been protected from the winter. Deer looked up from their graze and unconcerned, ignored me. The coats on these does and fawns had not changed to winter pelt but were still the red of summer. I heard the snort of horses and whinnies as they saw me. Two came galloping up, dancing to a stop near my outstretched hand. I knew the names of these two bays and called them. Tango and Cash. They crowded me, nuzzling for a treat but all I had was a protein bar. Neither cared but lipped it up, gone in seconds. I laughed as their teeth crunched the oats and caramel to bits.

"I know you," I said, tears in my eyes. Those eyes rose slowly to the far end of the valley to see a burial platform high in the sky. Unbidden, the Sioux death chant filled my lungs and I sang it for the man I had called Tungasila. Grandfather. I cried then. For my grandfather, for my mother and Rachel. I bid them all farewell at the same time as I let go of all the memories that I had forgotten.

I knew why I had lost my way; it was my heart showing me the way to return to the land of my people and to reclaim what I had lost. I knew the way home to Grandpop's house and would leave for it next morning.

The same cave still held our supplies from the last time we'd camped here but that could wait. I dropped my gear but kept the rifle as I stripped down to my shorts. Running barefoot, I loped all the way to the hot springs on the bench but once there, I eased myself inch by inch into the nearly scalding water. I grinned as Grandpop's voice teased in my head.

Groaning in pure bliss, I relaxed as the hot sulfur water unlocked the aches from my bones. Better yet, I remembered Grandpop's lessons on the plant life and looked over my shoulder for the soapwort I knew grew along the marshy part of the creek. Leaving my natural hot tub, it took me only a few minutes to pull up the plant and skin the root. Slippery, the smell fresh, I went back in and the second time was no easier. I scrubbed until I was squeaky clean and fresh smelling, even over the scent of sulfur's rotten eggs.

Bathed, I simply ran myself dry which had the added advantage of keeping me warm. Once I was dry, I put on my last clean set of clothes, not that anyone was there if I had chosen to go naked but it was still a bit too cold for that. I went back to peruse the cache of food in the cave. Most of it was in canned goods and MREs. I opened a can of peaches in syrup and ate the whole thing, followed by a can of spam. A lot of people sneered at Spam but I could remember my Grandpop making gourmet meals with it. He had even stocked plastic bottles of water and packets of cherry Kool-Aid. I could almost hear his chuckling as I mixed up a water and shook it till it turned a red as glowing as a garnet.

Almost as red as your hair, he would say. Huh, who ever heard of a red-headed injun?

Then, my mom would say, *He's related to the Firebird in the old legends*. She would gently tease me about my insatiable thirst for the red Kool-Aid and how it turned my lips red as if I had become a vampire. Grandpop would laugh and tell me there were no such creatures but the Wendigo might get me if I was lazy or told a lie. So many good memories had returned and with them, the knowledge of how to find my way home.

I went to sleep in the cave on my spread out a sleeping bag with my head towards the entrance where I could watch the stars. Even though I was exhausted and limp from the hot bath, I was too excited to fall asleep right away. I lay there and listened to the night noises and heard the horses as they grazed within yards of my campsite. Deer moved as quietly through the knee-high grass as a whisper of thought. Nighthawks made their eerie cries and the wind rattled the tokens on Grandpop's grave. It became a lullaby that eventually dragged me deep into a peaceful slumber.

I woke just as the sun finished climbing over the rim of the hidden canyon and saw why it had fared so well during the winter. The rock itself gathered the sunlight and reflected it back into the valley, heating it up more than the outside forest, making almost a tropical climate inside the bowl. I sat up, stretched and yawned. My body was very stiff and sore; I kind of wished that I had thought to bring painkillers with me or at least some ibuprofen.

Dressing wasn't a problem as I'd fallen asleep in my clothes but the first order of the day was to dig a toilet. That chore was done, I used it and then went through the food for my breakfast. Dehydrated eggs, vacuumed sealed bacon and muffins. I wasn't afraid to start a fire in the cave or the valley that of necessity, I made a small one and then hit myself when I remembered that Grandpop had brought a camp stove with us. And the small bottles of fuel. Within minutes, the smell of scrambled eggs, bacon, and fresh coffee filled the cave and made me drool. I ate with my fingers, not bothering to dig out the utensils and toasted Gramps' spirit with a cup of light coffee gratis a can of condensed milk.

Tango and Cash milled about curious as to what I was doing. I went back into the cave and looked for a saddle but the closest thing I could find was a saddle blanket. That would have to do, along with a rope bridle I made from some leftover rope. I climbed on from a tree stump, not like they did in the movies. My chest was still too sore to go jumping up onto a bareback horse that hadn't been ridden in several years. At least they weren't razor-back thin, I didn't think my butt could handle it. Tango didn't even step sideways. He turned his neck around and smelled me, then waited for me to nudge him in the ribs before he started for the gap out of the valley. Cash followed without me calling him and the rest of the wild horses trotted back and forth but stayed in the bowl. Their whinnies carried no further than the first twist of the entrance.

I waited in the fold for a few minutes, listening to the sounds outside the passage and watching the horses' ears. If anyone was close to the exit, the horses would know and warn me. When I was certain we were alone, I kicked Tango on and emerged onto the trail that led to Grandpop's house. It was wildly overgrown as if all nature had conspired to hide it yet the horses knew the way and I let them guide me.

"Take us home, boys," I said and patted Tango's neck.

Chapter Sixty

Home. I recognized the doublewide home under the piñon trees with the spectacular view out over the valley. In the distance, the small cluster of government housing was just visible to the naked eye. The village where I had been born and lived the first 12 years of my life, it didn't look any better now than it had back then.

The solar panels I had designed and built for my grandfather were gone. Dismantled and taken away by Chase and Cameron's men to reverse engineer for their innovative design.

There were dogs in the yard. I looked for my own, Zig and Zag but these were the typical nondescript strays that hung around the village---not Blue Heelers. They barked lazily at me but did not get up or come to investigate me. There was a newer model pickup parked near the sheep pens and I heard the sounds of hens. Someone lived here.

Clothes hung from a line strung between the house and the nearest treeline. On it was men and women's underwear, jeans and t-shirts, socks from feet both large and small.

I didn't see any lights on inside or smell either coffee or food cooking. I swung the rifle up just in case but not pointing it at anyone in particular.

"Hello, the house," I greeted in Siouan and the screen door banged open to reveal a short man dressed in jeans, wide belt with a dinner plate belt buckle, faded chambray shirt, and down-at-heels ropers. His skin was burnished copper kissed by sunlight, his hair cut short, spiky and iron gray. His eyes crackled deep as midnight.

"Hau," I said and he responded alike, descending the steps to greet the morning.

"Coffee?" he asked and spoke over his shoulder to a dim figure in the doorway. A woman spoke, asking in a high voice what was wrong.

"Nothing," the older man said. "We have a hiker from the woods."

"You're Dan Kitenanny from Bitter Creek," I said suddenly. "Grandpop's nephew."

"You know Tungasila Strongbow?" he asked. "You are the one the government people told us to watch for."

"What happened to Zig and Zag?" I asked, sliding off Tango. He stood quietly at my side where Cash ambled over to the barn letting himself in.

"The Blue Heelers? Calico Pete from Penny Lake took them, he needed a herding dog for his sheep at the Rancheria. You would be my great nephew, then? Lakan Strongbow." He simplified the complex fraternal relationship. I thought we were probably fourth cousins.

I nodded and dropped the rifle towards the ground. I waved my free hand in the general direction of the house. "You going to call them? The government agents?"

"No. They are liars and not my family."

"You inherited the place?"

"Only living relative," he said in amusement. "Course, the Feds came and stripped the place before they let anyone back in."

He did not ask me where I had been or what I'd been doing. The woman came out with two cups of black coffee and one of those non-dairy creamers. Homemade burritos that were cool and wrapped in aluminum foil. She was pretty but only a few years younger than Dan.

"My wife, Betsy Tsosie."

"You're Navajo?" I asked in Dine` and she broke into a delighted spate of words where her husband was more laconic. I told her thank you for breakfast but that I had come only to see the home place once more before I left for good. She wanted to know where I'd been, what I'd been doing and whether Grandfather had been buried properly.

"Yes," I said softly. "As he wished and in the old ways."

Both were silent as we gave my grandfather a moment of respect. "Will you come in and rest?" she asked.

"No, thank you, ma'am. There are people after me. Federal people. I don't want to bring trouble down on you or the other villagers."

“We will not tell the government liars that you have been here,” he said. His eyes flickered over to the two horses.

“Keep them. They were Grandpop’s and I can’t take them where I’m going,” I said easily. I took the mug from her with my left hand and flipped the rifle over my shoulder where it hung out of the way.

Adding capfuls of creamer, I made the coffee light and took a cautious sip. Hot and strong as a burning tire. “How long have you lived here?”

“Two years. Major Two Snakes called us and told us that Grandfather and you had disappeared and the animals needed care. He looked into Grandfather’s affairs and found a will filed at the Courthouse in Cortez. It left the place to you under my guardianship. We couldn’t find you, either.”

“Was there any money?”

He nodded. “A sizable amount---over 50,000 dollars. We haven’t touched it.”

“My mom’s life insurance,” I swallowed. “It’s yours. I don’t need it. When did they take the solar array?”

“Before we came,” he answered.

“You’re using kerosene or the generator?”

“Wood stove.”

“I can help you put in a wind turbine to generate electricity, you won’t need to buy gasoline,” I offered and he smiled.

“The old ways are good enough for us.”

“Yahtahey,” I said and finished my coffee. They watched me walk slowly down the long rutted road that had been our driveway. It was a two-hour drive to town by car but that was because you couldn’t go over ten miles per hour or you risked taking out your oil pan. Plus, I could take shortcuts a vehicle couldn’t.

I had spent more time hiking than I should have and by now, Mairy and Robin would have been waiting a day longer than they expected at the rendezvous point. Once I was sure I had a cell signal, I texted her a message and told them to meet me at the next point. I would be arriving by mechanical means. I put everything in Abenaki rather than encrypt the message and besides, the English translation was even more confusing than the Indian.

I reached town about noon, and the only sign of life was at the grocery store. Several old and rusty pickup trucks were parked out front. No one jumped out and said ‘hey! You’re dead!’ or ‘the Feds are looking for you!’

It was dirty and even more squalid than I remembered, the empty clinic building a strong, scary reminder that the government still decided the life and fate of the reservation’s people. I hesitated to pass by its broken doors and then opened the glass door to the store. Part grocery, pharmacy, post office and bus depot, it served the needs of the reservation in all ways but one. You couldn’t buy beer or liquor there but had to go all the way into Cortez.

The woman waiting on the few customers was Rosie Lopez, a half-blood Sioux that had known my mom but she was so busy that all she said to me was wait, that she’d be with me soon. I doubted she would recognize me, my hair was still blonde and my eyes brown from the contacts I still wore. I nodded and wandered the aisles, picking up a few candy bars, chips, and snacks. A cold Pepsi from the cooler, one of the few places on the rez that had ice. I drank it as fast as I could chug it. It didn’t mix well with the remains of the bitter coffee.

“You have a bus schedule?” I asked and she hooted as if I had said something hysterical.

“Ain’t no buses come out here, not since the clinic shut down. You want to catch a ride, you got to go out to Bitter Springs Corner and wait. One comes by every day or so.”

“Thanks.” I left a ten on the counter and told her to keep the change; her eyes tallied what I held and she nodded. Her voice followed me.

“You could hitch a ride with Deputy Chisholm. He’s going that way to Cortez.”

I pretended not to hear her but exited the store. The last thing I needed was to spend a few hours riding with a cop, even a Sioux Nation one. I walked across the street to the only gas station in town and re-filled my canteens. It was a long walk out to the Crossroads and no water between here and there. I bought a six-pack of bottled water from the clerk and stuffed it in the backpack. Putting one foot in front of the other, I walked the lonely road out of town. The only paved road in town. I stepped off to the side and squatted when the sheriff’s car flew by and he did not see me.

Dusk was nipping at my heels by the time I’d reached the state highway but here at least, traffic was frequent enough that I could have hitched if I wanted. I didn’t take the chance, I waited at the only stop sign for the last fifty miles, praying that a bus would come by before night fell. The only cover here was the encroaching darkness, the trees started at the base of the hills, a good hour’s hike from the road. Everything between was nothing but road and sparse brush. The shoulders of the road did not have a gully where I could have lain flat and hidden.

I set the backpack down on the ground, a dry reddish dust that had not seen rain in quite some time and sat with my legs stretched out in front of me. My feet hurt and my calves were tired. My whole body thanked me with eternal gratitude that it was prone and not moving.

I wasn’t sure if the bus driver would let me bring the rifle on board but might let me store it in the luggage compartment underneath the bus. Of course, it would have been better if the rifle was wrapped up or in a case but maybe because he or she was going through Sioux Sovereign Territory, he or she would bend the rules. It would be unloaded, in any case.

It was near enough to 9 p.m. when I spotted the big headlights of a bus or 18 wheelers. He slammed on the brakes before he got close to me, stopping a good bus length beyond the sign. I heard the air brakes chatter and the pneumatic hiss of the door as it opened.

It wasn’t a Trailways but another local company out of Tucson and the driver was a tough, no-nonsense Latino woman in a gray uniform. Her name was on the breast pocket of her shirt, Juana Rodriguez and she had a wedding band on her right index finger. She was around 40 with big hair and no make-up.

“Almost didn’t see you,” she said in Spanish. I held up my rifle and raised an eyebrow. Grumbling, she told me to unload it as she rose from her seat to join me at the luggage compartment. I handed her the bullets and she tucked them into her pocket as she unlocked a steel box welded to the frame in the huge space reserved for bags. I followed her in, taking an empty seat as she deposited the bullets into another lockbox near her feet.

There were quite a few empty seats with all the filled ones occupied by drunk Amerindians. “Twenty bucks for the fare,” she said. “Or a waiver card if you’re drunk.”

I handed over a crumpled twenty and she stared at me. “You’re not running away, are you? How old are you?”

“Sixteen. No, ma’am. My dad is meeting me at the Walmart in Cortez. I’ve been on my vision quest.”

“Did you have a vision?” she asked and realized that she had asked me one of those taboo questions; as personal and private as if she’d asked how I masturbated.

One of the drunks gasped and muttered a curse. She apologized and took my money, reseated herself as she popped the clutch. The big coach lurched forward. Soon, we were doing 80mph down the arrow straight blacktop and she didn't slow down until we started climbing the hills into the city.

It was three in the morning when the big coach pulled into the bus depot. I started to rise but the driver told me that I could stay and ride the rest of the way to the Walmart as that was where most of the passengers were going.

"Probably to wind up in the drunk tank," she muttered sourly. "That's all I do, ferry drunks back and forth."

"Maybe they can't help it," I told her. "No jobs, no careers and no hope. Just a shack on the reservation and a welfare check. No self-respect and we've lost our cultural heritage. You know that our teenagers have the highest rate of alcoholism and suicide in the country?"

"What about you, son? You don't drink?"

"I'm a genius," I shrugged. "One of a kind but there are times I've thought about suicide myself."

One of the drunks came forward. "Hey, man. Don't talk like that. You had a vision. I wanted to have one and never did no matter how many times I tried."

"Yes," I said quietly. "I saw the Firebird rise up from the ashes of the white man's cities and burn it all to ashes. The only thing left standing was an elk and a red-haired boy on his back. An eagle fell from the sky and was snatched by a great bear who in turn, was destroyed by the Firebird as it changed from yellow flames to red and then blue-white." I spoke in Siouan so she could not understand but the others did and it sobered them all.

"You," the first man said reverently. "*You are the Firebird.*"

Chapter Sixty-One

I had to convince Mrs. Rodriguez to leave me. I could see she wanted to wait until I handed myself over to my supposed adult father. I didn't see either of the Kitwillies but I *pushed* her unease aside and she drove off more worried about meeting her time schedule than me. She did ask one of the other passengers to keep an eye on me. All six agreed and hung out in a cluster that made the Walmart greeters and other customers nervous. It didn't help that I carried a rifle, either. None of them ventured inside to buy beer nor were they as drunk as they had been on the bus. I wouldn't say they were *sober* but close enough that no cop could hassle them over it. Not that the cops needed a reason to hassle *Indians*.

"You don't want to buy beer?" I asked surprised. All of them shook their heads sheepishly. They sorta looked like a herd of befuddled sheep. None of them were over 30 and actually, I thought 25 was stretching it.

"What are you going to do?" I asked them and each one of them came up to me and asked for a blessing in the old way.

Astonished, I gaped at them. "I'm no holy man! You think I can bless you? Better you go home and talk to the priest. He can change your life, not me!"

"*You* changed our lives, Shaman," First Man said. "You gave us *hope*. I am going back to the Rez and I will tell my people of your vision." He turned on his heel and walked off with the others following like stunned deer in the headlights.

I shook my head and wandered the parking lot remembering the last time I'd done that. Not such a good idea but at least Sami and TG were still safe.

My quipp buzzed in my pocket and when I pulled it out to read the text, I saw that it was from Mairy. They were on the way and I was to meet them on the road out of town heading for the Cisco Mountain Pass.

Why there? Im at Wallyworld.

We were followed. Had to ditch the truck. DHS found us Denver.

How???

Saw C&C. had an Injun tracker w/. looked Dinee, found ur tracks Big Creek, saw Robin. B careful. Know where ur headed.

Went there. Saw my cousin Dan K. and his wife BT.

There was a long pause and then a spate of words. *Lakan, ur cousin Daniel Kitenanny died in a car crash two years ago w/wife and 3 kids. He was driving drunk. Did they give you anything? Touch your things? Feed you?*

I had coffee and burritos. No one stopped me or has followed me. Im fine---no drug effects or sickness.

You could be tagged!!!

I did not sense any deception from either of them! He looked like my grandfather's nephew!

Get out of there, Lakan! Run! Hide! We're coming for you!

I shut her off and went searching through the classifieds looking for a reasonably priced off-road motorbike and called as soon as the clock turned to 8 a.m. I didn't want to wait that long but calling someone at four in the morning was sure to piss them off. The seller sounded like a teenager and he agreed to bring the bike and a helmet out to the parking lot of the Piggly-Wiggly on state highway 79 at 11:00 a.m. which was the soonest he could drag his ass out of bed. I wanted to test drive it before I bought it. I spent the rest of my morning at the McDonalds eating breakfast burritos and drinking coffee, the rifle now wrapped inside a used paper cylinder I'd found in their dumpster. It smelled vaguely like French fries but it did a great job of disguising the rifle.

When the kid saw me, he almost backed out of the deal thinking I was too young to have the money. I had to give him a deposit upfront and show him the full amount in my Bitcoin account before he agreed that I could buy the bike. He signed the pink slip and I transferred the coins, all four thousand into his Amazon account. He handed me the helmet. I took it for a quick spin around the lot and found it had been used hard but still had plenty of rubber and spring. The engine sounded sweet, throaty and no oil leaks. It would do.

"How are you getting home?" I asked and he said I could give him a ride back. He wasn't more than 18 himself, thin and with a bad case of acne.

"I live in Red Hill." That was just outside Cortez near my meeting place with the Kitwillies.

"Okay," I said.

"But I'm driving."

I hesitated but shrugged. "Okay." I climbed on behind him and held onto the sissy bar as he took off. There wasn't a lot of traffic but enough to make me nervous. I liked riding the bike, even one as small as the Honda. He rode like an indestructible teenager with a death wish but managed to reach his house without dying, wrecking the bike, mailboxes or even a scrape. He lived in a nice house in the burbs with a Volvo SUV parked in the driveway.

"Great," he muttered. "Mom's home."

"Why are you selling the bike?" I was curious.

"Too small and too slow," he shrugged. "Besides, I want a Ducati."

Huh. If he could afford that, he had some serious money. "Well, thanks. Good luck."

He jumped off and went in without a backward glance or another word. I backed up, rode off and popped a wheelie just because I could. And it felt good.

I was careful on the highway, not taking the bike above 50. I wanted to feel how it handled on the pavement as well as off so I took it on the shoulder and further out onto the sandy scrub beyond the road. I raised clouds of dust making me glad that I was wearing a helmet as the visor kept most of it from getting in.

I was just about to head back onto the pavement when I saw a string of red and white lights go flashing by and then heard the sirens as county sheriffs and state police SUVs blasted past. I hit the brakes and let the bike idle to a stop setting my feet on the ground to hold it upright. It was heavier than I expected and strained my arms and chest. I wasn't as healed as I thought.

I checked the quipp, set it to the local police band so that I could hear the chatter. Strangely, there wasn't anything on the band so I tried Mairy's cell.

??? I texted and she answered a few minutes later.

Wuzup?

Police just blasted by. CSP and locals. U OK?

Nothing here. How far u?

Not far, I texted back. How's Leon?

There was a wait and then she texted me. *He's in the bathroom. We stopped at the Circle K for sodas.*

Great. Get me my usual. Be there in 10, 15.

Miss u. Hurry.

I veered off into the brush but kept the bike's speed down so that I didn't kick up dust clouds but it took me longer to reach the cutoff. I followed the dirt bike trails of which there were many crisscrossing the high desert of chaparral grass, cedar, and cottonwoods. In places, it was so thick that I couldn't see my way through and that made me less worried that anyone would spot me. Unless they were in a helicopter.

From the message sent me from Mairy's cell phone, I knew something was wrong. She should have known that Leon had gone back home. I had a bad feeling about them and stopped the bike to unwrap the rifle and make sure that it was loaded before I continued on.

I rode the bike up to a mile from the cutoff, dropping it in a dry wash that came down from the beginning of the hills. They were piñon green and sandstone red. Behind me rose the foothills into the Wyoming wilderness where no one could find or track me.

I crept to the back of the Circle K sitting at the junction of two highways, one of which led up into the mountains to the town of Red Cat. From there, you could depart from the Yellowstone National Park, a land that even today, people could not fathom, were frequently lost in, found dead or not found at all.

Home to bison, elk, mule deer, grizzlies and newly released wolves as well as mountain lions, it was a predator's paradise. Even if some of those were human.

The Circle K was a large one with a Subway inside it and an attached car wash. There were several trucks parked outside, two at the pumps getting gas and one at the pay for air checking their tires.

The people I saw were ordinary, overweight and clearly not the agents I was expecting. None of them had out of state plates and at least one of them should have---Robin and Maiara had driven up from Tennessee. None was from the D.C. area and none was rentals. I watched to see if there were any cameras outback and scanned the front using the quipp. It told me that no one inside was using anything more than a cell phone, no one carried a concealed weapon or ear mics. I couldn't be sure if any were undercover police or FBI but I could piggy-back my quipp into their CCTV coverage and see what their cameras saw.

The interior of the store was the typical gas station/convenience/video rental store. It had two huge freezers in back next to the restrooms. One carried dry ice for the long journey from store to home where that could be a hundred miles round trip in the high heat of the desert and the other carried bags of ice.

They offered live worms and flies for fishing once you rose higher into the mountains, there you could fish for trout.

Several customers were wandering the aisles, picking up beer and chips, jerky and coffee, water and ice. The heavy woman and skinny man at the pump came in and paid for their gas. The woman with cash and the man used American Express. My quipp told me the amount of each sale, the gallons, credit or debit, his pin number, name, and address. He was from Farmington and she was local. The two clerks, an Indian girl with long braided hair was pretty in her green shirt with the Circle K logo. The man was a few years older and seemed nervous, constantly flicking his gaze back and forth to the CCTVs.

He looked white, red from sunburn on his pale skin but his arms were heavily tanned as if he was an outdoorsman. Hair and eyes dark with a short cut that was almost a buzz. He wore an expensive watch on his right hand.

My quipp vibrated and I looked at the text screen. I looked at another message. *Where r u?*

My car broke down ☹ im walking to the station. Should b there in 20min or so.

Well come get u.

?about all the cop cars I saw?

Theyre going to a big reck at the I 18whls hit a school bus.

I looked around and didn't see a single police vehicle parked anywhere I could see that they could park. Unless they were hiding in the brush and even there, I would have seen some sign that they had gone in, a dust cloud, broken brush, tire tracks. I saw nothing like that.

K. meet me at mile marker 277, she texted.

K. I punched back.

I saw two people exit the store, a man, and a woman. Both looked the same size, build, and general description of the Kitwillies but then, they would be in a disguise. This woman had dark hair tucked through the back of a baseball cap and wore a thin summer sundress with worn sneakers and a wide leather belt. The man was sandy-haired with light eyes and wore a tan hoody with black jeans and lime green sneakers. Expensive Jordans.

They moved as a team, getting into one of the pickups---a Dodge 4x4 that looked like an older model, 05. One of the few that didn't have a pair of rifles hanging behind the driver's seat.

I watched them drive off and then another couple followed speaking into their hands as if they had radios. I didn't see any cords hanging from their ears but micro-radios were much more sophisticated than portrayed in the movies. They could be as small as a mud spot on your hem. I didn't watch the next ones leave, they were Afro-American and so obviously cops that no one would mistake them.

When the convenience store was empty of customers, I sneaked up to the back door by the dumpster and unlocked the electronic keypad with my downloaded code.

I didn't realize how hot it was until I was inside the air-conditioned cooler and backroom. Sticking my head out, I said hi to the clerks and watched them whirl around in shock. The male almost went for the gun hidden under the counter.

She jumped over the counter and hugged me. Then she hit me. I yelped.

"Lakan," she cried. Maiara looked nothing like I'd last seen her, nor Robin.

"Great disguises," I admired, grinning. He hugged me, too but I stopped the punch before he could finish it.

"How'd you know the texts weren't from us?" she asked.

"Well, they were until they found the frequency and stole my transmissions," I admitted. "Somewhere near the village where I grew up. I guessed something was up when that local cop went flying by me. Luckily, they thought you were still on your way to meet me, not already here. You ready to leave?" They nodded and we went out the back door.

Chapter Sixty-Two

We drove back to where I had left the bike and Robin helped me lift and toss it into the back of the truck, tying it down with ratchet straps of blue nylon. Then, Robin drove off into the brush following my directions towards the borders of the park.

Once we found the main road that was black-topped, Robin cranked the big truck up to 75 and pushed it as hard as he could. Mairy gave me the once over.

"You sure you're alright?"

"Yup. I'm fine. A few irritating blisters from my backpack rubbing," I shrugged.

"No, you idiot. Your wound."

"It's nearly healed." I opened my shirt and showed her. It was only a thin red line under the sutures. Mairy pursed her lips.

"Those need to come out."

"Haven't exactly had time to worry about that," I grumbled. "Been busy running. From the government. Spies, assassins and all that."

"Well, we're stopping at the cabin and fixing that," she ordered just as Robin hit a pothole the size of Kansas. The bike slammed into the bed with an awful crunch. I winced.

"Where is it?"

"Small town north of Red Cat. Near the Devil's Breath, it heads all the way to Montana and Canada."

We traveled the back roads and small state highways into the night. Stopping only at secondary routes with small gas stations for gas and snacks. Robin paid for the gas with cash, he had nearly a hundred thousand in an old duffel bag with St. Louis Cardinals on it. It sat between him and Maiara. I rode in the jump seat taking naps and eating the junk food he'd bought at the stations. I had rewired the radio so that we could pick up every police, fire, rescue and emergency bandwidth to monitor all the channels and hear what was going on. And it scared me. I heard *nothing*.

Not even on the radio, TV channels or my quipp accessing the news reports. It was as if the entire country was in the middle of a news blackout.

"Something's... not right," I mumbled as Robin turned down another state road onto a rural route. We were headed over the border into Montana, at the foothills of the ridge that became the Rockies. Some of the wildest country in the world. Forests so thick that a horse couldn't make its way through it, where cliffs were a footfall away from the solid ground and mountains that topped out at over 16,000 feet in elevation. Where the weather changed from 65° to 25° in the matter of hours and lost campers were the victims of grizzlies, falls or exposure. Victims of their own stupidity.

These were all pine, hemlock, and spruce which was all that grew above the frost line. Huge trees that had umbrella skirts to the ground and you could hide a marching band beneath their bows. The ground was soft loam covered with pine needles and ferns. Not much light made it down past the hundred foot crowns; it was a sort of twilight in there.

Both of them were watching my face as we emerged into a tiny clearing with a small cabin made of logs. A covered porch circled the front; I saw no electrical wires feeding to the cabin nor lights on in the windows. Two with a door between and bear bars across all three. A large stack of split firewood lay some yards away from the porch with an ax stuck into a stump.

"Generator?" I asked.

"Wood stove, kerosene lamps. Well water from a pump spigot in the house," Mairy told me.

"Who owns it?"

"Some family in Boston. Bought it after the 'Twilight' craze. Bigfoot nuts used it to film a docu-drama."

"Humph," I grunted. I looked at the sparse grass and few tire tracks as he brought the truck to a halt. Opened the door and stepped out, checking the bike in the bed. It had a few more scratches but the biggest problem was that the gas tank had leaked from lying on its side.

"We only came up here twice," Robin said. "We stayed in town, mostly, except for bringing in supplies."

"We stay the night or go?" she asked and I hesitated.

"I don't know," I was confused. "Something doesn't feel right about the mad rush of emergency vehicles out of town and the cops, the so-called bus accident and the lack of activity on the scanners is... odd. I ought to be able to pick up *some* chatter about my escape. About the hacking of the NSA, the free Canadian trips. Something."

I sat on the edge of the porch while they went inside and started packing for our departure. Top of the line stuff, all geared for the serious hiker and survivalist.

Reprogramming the quipp, I checked the Darknet and there, I found rumors that were flying at the speed of light.

The Messiah was on earth. Earth had found an immortal. A person who could heal the sick and raise the dead. The NIA had him. The CIA wanted him. The President had issued a \$5-

million-dollar reward for his capture. Russia was sending people to steal him. China already had agents here closing in. Israel wanted him and even Rome was becoming interested in this 'miracle' person.

Oh God. There were even pictures of me. Both as a girl and a male. Photoshopped images of me to show what else I might look like. My face paled and both of them stopped piling to ask what was wrong.

"Did you buy all this stuff from one place?" I asked, my throat tight. Three piles sat on the meager grass, three backpacks, three compound bows, quivers stocked with hunting points, three sleeping bags, three small one-person tents, three sets of rescue grade first aid kits, camp pots, water purification tablets, food freeze dried and vacuum packed. Sets of clothing in space bags, boots, socks, lanterns, GPS, detailed waterproof contour maps, whistles, flashlights and glow sticks.

Everything and I meant everything you could possibly need or want for the trip was on the pile. Two of the piles were considerably larger and I assumed that one was Robin's and the other mine until I saw ladies boots next to the pile. Mine was the smallest as if they thought I could not carry my own weight.

"We bought them from two different places," Robin said defensively. "On three separate days. Walmart and Dick's Sporting Goods."

"Big purchases?"

"Four hundred or so each time. Chain places," he answered.

"Cash?"

"We burned my credit cards," he nodded. "Mairy is too young to get one."

"I sent you some," I pointed out.

"We used them to pay for the truck and the rentals. Hotel rooms. Nobody takes cash for those, anymore."

"That's okay. They were legit cards from real people. The NIA can't track them easily without corroborating their actual physical presence and that would take days' even if their computers weren't compromised."

I showed them the stuff circulating on the Darknet. "There should be the same thing going on in the news, radio and Internet. There's *nothing*."

"If they know you're here, then why haven't they stepped in to grab you?" Mairy asked looking around nervously.

"If they knew where I was, they'd already be here," I agreed. "Unless, they are waiting to catch all of us."

"Are they smarter than you?" Maiara asked in a surprised way. I snorted.

"There's always someone smarter than you think you are, especially if they're older and sneakier. Not that there are rules but there *are* some things I just won't do."

"Like what?" Robin stepped in, dropping the last bit of gear on the pile.

"Like kill a kid. Or a pregnant woman. I have no qualms about killing a woman if she's pointing a weapon at me. Desecrate a burial ground. Turn on a friend. Or lie to one."

Neither of them said anything until Robin gestured to the pile. Slightly huge. I wasn't sure if it would fit inside the nylon-framed pack. I rolled my eyes.

"That's a blivet, you know."

"Blivet?"

"10 lbs. of shit in a 5 lbs. sack," I snickered and stood up to help.

We had finished by the end of the hour. It would have taken less but when I said we didn't need something, Mairy would argue that we did. So, it took twice as long as it should have. After that, we went inside the cabin and it was a nice surprise; lined with honey colored tongue and grooved horizontal planks. Comfy couch, table and four chairs, two twin beds and a cook stove set against the native rock chimney. A small counter top was split by the old-fashioned spigot water pump and the water came out clean and pure, Colorado Rockies' finest. It was ice cold.

Kerosene lanterns hung from the walls. Bright flowery curtains hung down from the two windows and matched the colors in the southwestern rug on the plank floors and in the same covers on the beds.

"Toilet?"

"Outhouse out back. And an ice-cave where they stored stuff. Pretty cool, actually. The owners found a cave and made it into a root cellar, wine cellar/ice box. Water drips in through the rocks and freezes in the back of the cave. He put in stainless steel shelves and wine racks. It's about the size of a large storage trailer. No exit other than the way in but it's really hard to find."

"Only one way out is a death trap," I returned and sat on the bed. It was a hard mattress. Mairy came over with a small kit that I recognized. Medical stapler and remover. Alcohol pads and ointment. She gestured and I pulled my t-shirt over my head. Both of them stared at the spot where I had been sawed open and put back together. It was sore underneath, deep under the bones.

"Would you have died, Lakan?" she asked, her fingers soft on my skin yet they burned with a heat that could not be described. Sexual yet mystical. Soft yet the weight of eternity.

"Maybe. If the blood loss had been too great or the shock interfered with my brain. I think if my brain was destroyed and not enough left, it couldn't re-build the system. I don't know. Something switched off when I had the accident that killed my mom but it also switched on later when Cameron tested me. I hid it from him and my grandpop for a while."

She regarded me with her arctic blue eyes but her hair was still black and braided. I gave the braid on the right a small tug and the wig came off to reveal a short crop of blue curls.

"You cut your hair!" I said in dismay.

"It'll grow back. I tried to tuck it under the wig but it was hot and itchy," she shrugged. "What is it with men and long hair? Shut up and let me do this." She leaned into me, gave me a quick tease of a kiss and then proceeded to tear my flesh out. I yiked as scorpions bit me.

"Oh my God," she laughed. "Don't be such a baby!"

In her hand, she held two tiny metal staples that had felt as if she was tearing me open with fish hooks. In rapid order, she removed the rest and wiped off the tiny spots of blood with an alcohol wipe smearing antibiotic cream down the scar. I looked as if a slug had slimed me on his way to the cabbage patch. Then, Maiara proceeded to give me a kiss for each staple. Halfway through, Robin gave me a disgusted snort and slammed the door on the way out. When she got to the last one, she kissed me there and sent tingles of lust and joy throughout my whole body.

The room blued. She looked up at my belly and smiled as the blue glow flowed over her. It made her shimmer in a cloak of beauty, outlining her as if she wore only an aura of light.

Then, around her pulsed the same corona only hers was an icy orange and I watched in amazement as the two merged to become a white hot radiance that could have melted the stars.

Her ghostly arms wrapped around me as both of us floated above the bed, our clothes somehow gone. We were melted into each other, auras bonded and when the mortal part of me slid into hers, it was as if the entire universe trembled on the brink of some sacred and awaited

paradigm. When we both exploded, I heard Rachel's laughter in my head and saw my mother, great-grandfather, and ancestors standing by with approval in their posture.

Rachel's voice whispered, 'I told you so' before I forgot them in the pleasure and rightness of where we were.

Maiara gasped and we floated down towards the bed. I opened my eyes and saw her glowing face watching as that spectral illumination faded.

The blue-white glow in the room remained. I lifted my hands and they bloomed with it, leaving traces in the air like the tails of a comet. Oddly, we were still dressed but the scar on my chest was completely gone. Mairy's hair and skin color were back to normal.

"Wow. That was some light show," she giggled sounding like the teenager she was. She kissed me on the forehead. "Are you hungry? I could whip up some scrambled eggs and bacon. There are some fresh foods in the icehouse."

I didn't want to sleep but I was hungry and the more I thought about food, the faster the glow dissipated.

Rolling over, I grabbed my shirt and pulled it back over my head, smoothing it into my jeans as I went to the door. I found Robin furiously chopping wood, his body covered in sweat.

"Robin. Stop." He slowed and slammed the axe into the stump, his shoulders rigid.

"Robin?"

Turning around, I saw his face. It looked both puzzled and embarrassed. More so when Mairy called for him to come in. Slowly, he walked over to me, his eyes questioning.

"Man, that's my baby sister, you know?" he said gruffly. "I can stand the kissing but--- You were only in there for a few minutes." His eyes widened as he saw the last of the fading blue glow.

"Mairy?" he asked plaintively and she turned, still in all her clothes with a spatula in her hand.

"Robin Redbreast," she teased gently and her face was the face of a woman, not a girl. Robin's eyes grew huge and he swallowed as awe-filled his body. He gripped the doorjamb and almost fell. I reached out a hand and held him up with no effort at all. Where the words came from I didn't know.

"Be at peace, my brother," I said in Welsh and Abenaki. He nodded and came in to sit and eat with us.

Chapter Sixty-Three

We loaded up as soon as the sun rose not that it made much difference in the amount of light in the woods. The birds were the first to break the silence and then the chutter-chutter of the frogs. An eagle called overhead; I wished that I could see it gliding on the thermals. The air held a hint of moisture, rain or early morning dew. Only a few hours would tell us the outcome.

Mairy had made breakfast burritos with the last of the eggs and bacon. And coffee. We drank most of it so she made another pot and we used that to fill our thermoses.

On the way out of the cabin, Robin took one last look before he locked the door leaving the keys in the front seat of the truck.

"The bike?" I wanted to take it but riding in the woods was stupid. Plus, there was only the one so someone would still have to walk, it was out of gas and was too loud announcing our presence. Besides, we were headed into a no-vehicle zone and that was one way to draw negative attention to us.

“Someone will find this place, the truck and put it together. By then, we’ll be long gone,” Robin shrugged. “Ready?”

I nodded and stepped out of the clearing weaving my way through the close-knit trees following no trail because there wasn’t one. Within minutes, my lower legs were soaked even through the treated nylon of our outerwear.

We hiked on a steadily rising slope through trees so large that a lumber broker would have drooled in ecstatic greed yet these were protected from logging. We came across a blowdown where the wind had funneled through a small gully and made a maze of dead and fallen giant matchsticks. It was open enough so that we could see the sky and looked up to the giant peaks of the Sawtooth Range. A hundred miles over that first ridge lay El Capitan and the heart of Yellowstone.

We saw no one and when we camped for the night, it was always in a place where we could escape in at least three directions yet not where anyone could see our fire. I dug pits for the fire so that the heat could escape but the flames were not visible unless you stood over it. All we used it for was to boil water and make coffee with the occasional hot soup.

Our backpacks held a week’s worth each of food and when the dried stuff ran out, we had protein bars and could hunt and fish.

We saw views that only John Muir would have seen and documented, places where the ordinary person never got to go. Animals so shy that we barely caught sight of them. Once, Robin whispered to me that he had seen Bigfoot and I looked, too. The Sioux believed in the creature called Sasquatch and so did I.

Occasionally, we heard a deep hoot and the sound of a stick beaten against a trunk. Robin and Mairy’s eyes were huge and fearful.

“Don’t worry, the hairy man won’t hurt us,” I smiled and called a greeting in Siouan. He was quiet, but we knew he was around. On the third day of our 12-hour hikes, I led them to a small canyon carved between two ridges. It was no more than twenty yards wide with shale and slate outcroppings. Huge slabs had fallen making passage difficult but not impossible yet there was a clear, well-defined animal trail in and out.

The walls of the slit rose above us for forty or so feet before they curled in on themselves as if it were the edges of a fluted bowl that had fallen inside. So nothing could stand on the rim and look directly down underneath along the wall.

“Where does this go?” Mairy asked me, tired for the first time that I could see. She dragged a few feet behind Robin, the last in the line.

“We’ll camp here for two days,” I said and danced around the debris. It took only a few minutes to reach the center of the canyon, a small cleared spot under an overhang where the two edges of the bowl almost met.

The soil was a reddish sand from sandstone washed through during flash floods with chunks of granite on the walls. In the granite were gem grade garnets. A small spring trickled into a basin behind me and the smell of sulfur was strong.

Ten feet further in was a series of rock slides with water running into basins carved into the rock descending to a vertical drop of ten feet with a steaming waterfall that fell into a deeper pool. They fell in layers as if they were giant steps and were beautiful.

“Hot springs!” Mairy squealed, dropped her pack and ran, shedding her clothes as she went.

“Spa baths and a shower,” Robin admired. “How did you know this was here? Your grandfather tells you?”

“I read about it years ago in a letter from a Franciscan priest, Antonio de Vargas, to his father, in 1659. No one had bothered to translate a document from an obscure friar about a trip to convert Indians when it had nothing to do with gold or gold mines,” I explained. “There’s a way out of here down past the waterfall but we should be safe enough in here for two days. Safe enough to cook with fire, bathe and rest.”

I shrugged the pack off, made sure my bow was handy and gestured for him to go play in the water.

“I can wait if you want to go with my sister,” he said grudgingly.

“Naw. It’s okay. I’m not as tired as you two.”

He needed no second urging but joined her. She screamed at him to cover his eyes but he told her that he had seen her butt naked before. I noticed he kept his boxers on, though.

I had beef stew bubbling in the kettle and biscuits browning, with a full pot of coffee ready by the time both of them dragged themselves back to the campfire.

All three tents were propped up and open, I’d laid out fresh clothes and a towel each. Mairy walked gingerly on soft feet and her wet t-shirt left nothing to the imagination. Her panties were silk and transparent. Robin’s boxers were jockeys and surprisingly dapper, a sedate blue with white stripes. I handed over the towels and they rubbed their hair and then wrapped the towel at his waist and her chest.

“I figured you for a briefs man,” I commented and gave Mairy my block of rock. I’d managed to move two of them over for seats, the rest were either too large to move or too small to bother.

“Thanks.” She shoveled it in and then slowed down as the taste hit her. “This is really good. And biscuits, too.”

“There are herbs and foodstuffs all around us,” I said. “You know that. I just used what’s growing here to add flavor. Wild onion and garlic, sage, oats and wild rice.”

“When did you have time to find them? I never saw you go off the trail.”

“I didn’t have to. I picked as we walked. Look.” In the spots where there was soil, red cane thickets had sprouted; the red canes of raspberries, already leafing out. Dried, the leaves would make sweet refreshing tea full of vitamin C and anti-oxidants.

She sat down and ate two bowls of stew plus four biscuits with Robin doubling her efforts. Only when they were done did I finish what was left. Both of them blushed at their greed but I laughed.

“Don’t worry, I ate enough tasting it when I cooked it. I’m not hungry anymore. Coffee?”

Mairy drank hers black but we still had non-dairy creamer and sugar packets. When all of us were done, I cleaned the pots and Robin helped me hang the food packs from a hook stuck in a crevice and out of a determined bear’s reach. Not that I was worried about bears, a sasquatch was in the area and would keep away any large predators.

“You ready for your bath, Lakan?” Robin asked sleepily as he stretched on his rock. Mairy had rolled into her tent and looked to be asleep already.

“Keep watch if you want,” I said softly. “But I think we’ll have a warning before anyone approaches.”

“Bigfoot?”

“The hairy people prefer to be called Sasquatch or man of hair.”

“Go get wet.” I noticed he dragged his bow close but his eyes were heavy. I laughed and took off my clothes walking carefully down to the lower pools, sliding with the stream of warm

water until my feet found the five-inch ledge behind the waterfall. I slid onto it and hot water cascaded over my entire body in pure bliss. I had my hot shower.

I stayed under long enough to wrinkle like a prune and only came back as Robin called my name in worried tones. Where I stood, I wasn't visible to him being below eye level.

As I padded back, I used my enhanced metabolism to dry myself off and it shocked him as I was enveloped in the blue aura.

"What is that?" He stared at my face after a quick glance and away at my genitals.

"Some kind of energy aura," I shrugged. "Comes in handy when I want heat or cold. Dries me off and my clothes, too."

"Cool. Can you make ice or drinks cold?"

"Never tried that." I dressed quickly, the chilling evening air leached my heat out quicker than normal and I didn't want to waste energy if I didn't have to use it.

"Who's taking the first watch?" he asked.

"You go ahead and sleep. I'll wake you in four hours," I decided.

"Mairy?"

"I'll take her turn, too. Let her sleep. Tomorrow, we'll hit the Montana border and have to cross the river somewhere, a bridge or the road depending on where we come out of the woods. That will be the most dangerous crossing for us, except for crossing into Canada."

"We have to pick up the passports, right? At that country store/post office?"

"Yeah. I received confirmation that all three packages were delivered and on time."

"I miss Dad and my horses," he mumbled.

"I know," I sympathized. "You can go back, you know. They'll give up on me eventually and you can have your life back."

"What kind of life is it? When the spies are everywhere, watching you, waiting for you?" he mumbled and his voice trailed off. I pushed him towards his tent and he fell to his knees, crawled into a fetal position and dragged his sleeping bag over his face. He was snoring in seconds.

I watched the moon rise and saw a huge shadow fall over the ground from above me. When I looked to the rim's edge, I saw the hairy man standing there looking down at me. He threw something and it hit the ground with a soggy thump. I reached it, finding a fresh haunch of venison. As I turned to say thanks, I threw one of our last chocolate bars up and grinned as the hairy man snatched it out of the air. He ate it, wrapper and all, disappearing as quickly and quietly as he had come.

Chapter Sixty-Four

One minute we were in the deep woods, the next I'd looked up to see a broad stretch of open area where the feeble sun had managed to pierce the thick trees in a straight line. I knew that it wasn't a clearing but a road or the broad swathe cleared for hi-tension wires. We continued and stepped onto a paved two lane road, following it north for a mile before we found the first state highway sign. Shaped like a broad shield, back on white; the sign was punctured by bullet holes but was readable. State highway 89 heading to the town of Red Lodge. Yellowstone was sixty miles behind us.

"Where are we?" Robin asked. Both of them were exhausted. The last seven days we had spent twelve hours a day hiking and it had taken its toll on them. Even after stopping and resting for two days in what Robin had called Taco Valley, (Hot springs and squeezed between two rock shells) they were still beaten.

“Cheer up. We’ll be in town in another hour,” I told them. “From there, we can ride for a few miles until we get over the glacier.”

“Glacier? We’re going through Glacier National Park?” Mairy yelped.

“Around it. It’s too open here. Luckily, it’s tourist season and there will be lots of hikers and day-packers in town. No one will notice three more.” I eyed Mairy’s blue hair which sweat, rain and sulfur spring water had faded to the palest baby blue and blonde.

“Best get rid of that but don’t go back to your blonde color. It’s too noticeable.”

“How about pink? I can be Goth, too,” she teased.

I shuddered. “No piercings. Those are just gross.”

“Pooh. You’re such an old fudge.”

“Fudge? That’s the best you could come up with?” Robin rolled his eyes and I ignored both of them.

“I don’t think anyone will be looking for me here but it’s best if we do some kind of disguise.” I set my pack down and fished in it for Mairy’s wig. Once on my head, I bought out the last pack of Mark Jacobi’s contacts and popped them in. My eyes were brown and I darkened my skin as well.

“What do you think?” I asked them. Changing my skin tone was no harder than healing an ingrown toenail.

“You look like an Injun,” they said. Mairy rubbed my skin. “Can you do that for me?”

“Maybe. I can give you an instant tan,” I said hesitantly.

“Try.”

I laid my hand on hers and we watched as the blue aura exploded out of me. Instantly, I had a woody so hard that it hurt. She melted into me and I was all set to do it right there when something wrenched me out of her arms.

The cold air made me shiver. I trembled as if I had met my worst fears and fallen to them.

“Holy shit! I guess it’s not such a good idea to touch you,” I said shakily.

Mairy recovered faster. “Does it do that if you touch my brother?”

I looked at her in horrified disgust. That was like imagining sex with him. Ewww. Gross.

“I guess not, Mairy,” he said. “He didn’t ‘Smurf’ out when I grabbed him.”

I tried again only this time, just a fleeting brush of my fingertips on her elbow and I thought only about increasing the melatonin in her skin. As long as I kept any emotion out of it, the aura didn’t do more than a tiny spark. Like static electricity.

She mouthed a quick ‘ouch’ and rubbed at her arms. Commenting that they burned, very much like a sunburn. We watched her pale skin turn red and then darken to a medium toast. While my nerve was still up, I grabbed her brother’s hand but there was no reaction other than a slow warming of my own. Both of us let go at the same time and stood around like two embarrassed dudes. I sneaked a glance at him and caught him doing the same. In minutes, the three of us were laughing so hard that tears ran down my face and I had a hard time breathing. And standing.

“Dude, don’t EVER do that again,” he snickered in between gurgles. He punched me and started laughing again. He finally managed to reach an upright position, adjusted his backpack and hoofed it down the road.

“How far do you think I should let him go before I tell him he’s heading the wrong way?” I snickered. I picked up Mairy’s hand and this time, only a faint tingle leaped between us.

“Smurf?”

“Don’t ask.” We watched Robin for a hundred yards before he realized that we weren’t following him. I jerked my thumb in the opposite direction and he turned around running, cursing me as he pounded towards us.

I laughed and took off, tugging at Mairy’s arm before we galloped like idiots on the yellow line.

His feet slammed furiously but it’s really hard to run with a 40 lb. pack, sleeping bag and bow on your back. With lungs heaving, he still managed to spit out purulent curses as he caught up to us. He was almost at arms’ length when I heard the sound of an approaching vehicle, something large and powerful by the engine’s whining. Yelling, we darted to the side of the road on a small embankment and he was close enough for me to grab his pack frame, jerk him off his feet and onto the ditch by the shoulder. A huge log truck screeched its brakes as it saw us in the center of the road and tried to stop. Its load shifted and the butt grapple swung free, hitting the side rails. The supports gave way with a loud crack and 24-28 in. round fifteen-foot chunks of raw lumber started rolling off the sides and back of the truck.

I heaved Mairy up the slope away from any falling timber and dragged Robin out of the way just as two of the timbers passed over my head. One more came at me as I turned to run. Gathering Robin to my chest, I jumped that log---a 24 in. spruce and landed on another that tipped on end. From that position, ten foot in the air, I did a swan dive, rolling my body and Robin’s before landing on a hemlock with bent knees. From there, we did a flip and a somersault, landing on four at once before I had to spin, catching another as if I were surfing a big one. I walked it rolling over and over like a lumberjack at the county fair but minus the water that floated them.

The last log shuddered and flipped end over end, knocking four on top of me. I was unable to find a position where I could safely jump, duck, roll or miss all of them without killing Robin in the process. In despair, I did the only thing I could think of---I froze time and because Robin was with me, I was able to move him. I was able to move him but only because I was holding him. Still, he was in shock.

The truck was frozen in a roll-over halfway between the road and the pavement, the driver rigid behind his seatbelt. The logs hung in mid-air, mid-rollover and Mairy’s mouth opened in mid-scream.

I slid between the logs still carrying her brother and set him down next to her, out of the way of re-bouncing logs and crushing danger. The minute I turned him loose, he froze like everything else; if I tried to move either of them, I could literally tear off a limb because of the forces needed to move an object in stasis. I wanted to let go of time myself but I had no control over when it resumed so I was unprepared when the truck landed sideways with a huge crash that shook the road under my feet. It hit the pile of logs, shifting the whole load in my direction.

I managed to jump three but the fourth hit me in the chest. I felt my ribs go and blood filled my mouth. I hugged the rough bark of the tree as it swept me away to roll up the hill crushing my legs and pelvis, smashing the pack and my back at an angle that was beyond my spine’s ability to flex and then bounced over me, completely missing everything but the tip of my finger. Oddly, that pain hurt the worst. A splinter dug into the skin and it burned.

I heard screaming, the rumbling stutter of an engine, the scraping sound of wood on concrete, shaking voices on a radio calling Dispatch and reporting an accident with injuries.

Robin and Mairy were kneeling at my side touching me, calling my name. I was so cold, and shivering, their voices seemed to be so far away.

“Don’t move him,” a man’s voice said. “I called the sheriff’s department and the Park Rangers. They have an SAR chopper only minutes away at the Ranger Station. You hang in there, boy. What’s your name? That was some fancy footwork you did there, almost like watching the fairies dance in the woods. You saved these folks’ lives. Talk to him,” he said urgently as my eyelids started to lower. “Talk to him. Keep him conscious.”

Hands rolled me carefully onto my side and did something to the pack so that it slid off me. My back didn’t feel right. “Can’t breathe,” I whispered and spat aspirated blood. Bubbles formed and popped on my lips. It tasted gross and filled my lungs. “Mairy?”

“I’m here, Lakan,” she said and there were tears in her voice.

“Did he see me Smurf, Mair?” I managed to try to move but nothing worked, nothing obeyed my brain’s command to move. I could feel the magic trying to heal me but it would take too long before I could get up and go with them.

“Have to leave, Mair. You. Robin. Tickets not wait. Lose connections.” I thought I said that but all I could hear were my desperate gurgles and bubbles bursting.

She wiped off my lips and kissed me. It was cold and lacked the fizzle. Not even a spark of electricity.

“They’re coming, Lake,” the man said. He stood up as we heard both the approach of the helicopter and the intolerable whine of sirens.

They parked down the road because there was no road, only a mass of broken and splintered wood. They ran between the logs and up the hillside, past the logging truck and next to the log grapple that had come to a rest only a foot from my head. It bled red hydraulic fluid that glistened and spread like my own blood but it smelled sharp and spicy like cinnabar.

I was surrounded by uniforms. Men and women in the forest green of Park Rangers, dull gray-green of the Troopers with their Smokey the Bear hats, the black cargo pants and long-sleeved shirts of Paramedics and EMTs. Next came the dove-gray flight suits of Life Flight nurses.

They moved me as if I was a glass vial of nitroglycerine, rolling me carefully onto a backboard and stabilizing my neck with towels and a strap on my forehead.

“Fractures at L5, 6, 7,” I said in a wheeze. “Right upper lobe pneumothorax. Bleeding into my stomach. Left ulna fracture mid-point. Pelvis crushed with internal injuries. Both femurs compound fractures mid-thigh and right hip subluxated.” I paused and said with a faint touch of humor. “No head trauma.”

They sat back in shock as the woman inserting my IVs stared at me. “Are you a med student? Your mom or dad a doctor?”

“No.” She finished the IV and pushed fluids and morphine which I did not feel as shock was creating a domino of effects in my body. They loaded me onto a stretcher as the other paramedic splinted my arms and legs in air casts. Carefully, they carried me to the nearest cleared area where the chopper had set down.

I was floating but still coherent enough to watch the faces running with me as they blocked out the trees and the road. Just around the corner from the wreck, we would have seen a small valley that opened up to vast plains and the sun reflecting off the glacier of the Park.

Mairy and Robin’s pale faces were with them as they were loaded into ambulances themselves. The truck driver was sporting Band-Aids on his face, and he went into another unit. I couldn’t see anything after that as the troopers shut the hatch. All I saw then was the nurse’s face as the chopper took off.

She had a blood pressure cuff on my arm and pumped it as the other one placed an oxygen mask over my nose and mouth. Smiling, she asked me questions all the time.

“It’s not his fault,” I said as she lowered it on my face. “The truck driver, not his fault.”

“BP is 60/40, pulse 150 and thready. Georgie, hit it,” she called over her shoulder.

“What’s your name, son? How old are you? Where’s your family? Who are those people with you?” She cut my clothes off and found my ID in my pants.

I tried to remember the names on our IDs. Blake Ravensfoot. Oh, the wig had fallen off, I couldn’t feel the stricture on my head anymore. It must have come off during my dance on the logs. They would find and remove the brown contacts in the ER but that could be explained as vanity not disguise.

“Ravensfoot,” I sighed and she lifted the mask but I could still feel the pulse of O2 in my face.

“You from the Reservation? Who are your parents? Blake, stay with me.”

I opened my eyes. I was so tired. I groaned as the pain escalated. “Are you hurting? I can give you another 1 ml morphine. Sarai.”

I shuddered and she popped more drugs into me as she slid several round pads on my chest, leg and side. A rapid beating matched the pounding in my chest as the narrow tunnel of my vision darkened. It disappeared before her voice. Calling me.

“Blake. Ravensfoot---Shit! We’re losing him. De-fib!!”

Rescue One set down on top of St. Anne’s Trauma Center where a Trauma team was already waiting. The flight nurses jumped out pulling the stretcher with the patient and two of the team transferred him over to their gurney smoothly without jarring. She rattled off his vitals, holding the IV overhead and informed the doctor that the child had coded twice but had a pulse albeit thready and tachycardic. The hospital ER team rushed the boy into the elevator and descended to the triage room.

She handed over his ID that she had found in his pants pocket. “His name is Blake Ravensfoot, that’s all I know. He was one of three hikers coming down 89. A logging truck tipped over, lost its load and one of the logs rolled over him.” She recited the list of injuries the boy had diagnosed and was met with those same shocked looks.

“No, he said he’s not a med student or dependent of a doctor. I think his ID says he’s 16.”

They did X-rays, ultrasounds, and an MRI before sending the boy to surgery. The films and occult tests confirmed every one of the boy’s predictions, down to the splinter in his fingertip.

The surgeon called in a neurosurgeon who reviewed the films of the boy’s thoracic fractures. He nodded slowly before he went into the OR to clean up the bone fragments that had crushed and cut the spinal cord. Even without the spinal injuries, the crushed and fractured pelvis, macerated hip joint all pointed to a grim prognosis. If he survived the pneumothorax, shock, blood loss and possible bone marrow blood clots from breaking both femurs, the mangled pelvic girdle would preclude him from ever bearing weight again. With his spinal injuries, it was 100% that he would be a paraplegic until he died.

Chapter Sixty-Five

The minute that news of an accident involving three individuals under the age of 25, in a rural wooded area of the country coupled with unusual circumstances brought the intelligence community to a full alert. The entire 911 transmissions and accompanying rescue, police and

ranger broadcast were heard at NSA headquarters. The victim's name was reported and the destination of the trauma center. Immediately, Chase set up agents to fly out to the hospital and area.

Ten minutes later, Chase's computer guys had hacked into the hospital database and was reading off the surgeon's notes.

"Man, it looks bad," the IT guy reported. "Says he's coded twice. They have him down as Blake Ravensfoot. The driver of the truck is Wallace Kittredge, 52 and works for Sunshine Logging Products out of Seattle. The other two witnesses are Molly and Timothy Hessions. A married couple. They stated that they were joking about sleeping in a real bed as they walked down the center line of State Highway 89 when Kittredge came around the corner, saw them and slammed on the brakes. He admits he was over the center line and his load shifted, toppling the lumber off the trailer.

"Here's where it gets weird---he says he watched the younger boy grab the elder around the waist as if he weighed nothing and danced on the falling logs as if he was an acrobat. He said he'd never seen anything like it. Said he saved both of the hikers' lives."

"Notify Dr. Cameron. Have him meet me on the runway, we'll be taking the Lear to the Hospital."

"Yes, sir." He went back to his screen as Chase blew out of the Tank, unaware that he and his agency weren't the only ones departing for Montana.

Homeland was interested in the sudden flare of ticket sales to the state and chatter on the net, cell phones, and news feeds. It wasn't long before they were in on the act and that prompted the media to take notice.

Within five hours after the accident, a veritable firestorm of activity was bearing down on the sleepy little city of Red Lodge. Hotels were sold out within a hundred miles of the Trauma Center and the hospital switchboard was overwhelmed with phone calls asking about the boy still in surgery. It alarmed the DON enough that she had to use her cell phone to call the Sheriff's Department and ask for help.

Just about the time Ravensfoot came out of surgery, a three-piece-suited mob was entering the lobby demanding to see the CEO of the Trauma Center. Many of the agents carried serious credentials but the DON was a tough ex-Marine who had seen service in Iraq and Afghanistan. She wouldn't back down for no damned spymaster and told him so in so many terms. Neither was she impressed with the Director of Homeland Security or the CIA.

"The patient is in surgery and not even God is allowed in there," she snapped. "You can wait in the patients' lounge like everyone else. The doctor or nurse will come out and talk to the family then."

"Family?" the agent demanded.

"His cousins are waiting down the hall." She pointed but when they ran to the waiting room, the pair was gone. Nor were they in the restrooms, cafeteria or anywhere within the hospital grounds. A review of the security tapes did not show them entering or leaving the hospital. The Agent in charge sent more men out to scour the town looking for the pair that someone suggested might be the same brother and sister who had aided in Strongbow's former escape. Then, they settled in to wait until the surgeons were finished and Director Chase could arrive to take over the operation.

Strangely, it was the President that was the last to know that Strongbow had been found. The Deputy Director of the FBI personally brought him the news and after he threw one of his

famous presidential tantrums, he sent a fast Super Stallion from the nearest air force base with a contingent of armed MPs to guard the boy's room as soon as he came out of surgery.

Those men were told that no one, not CIA, NSA, NIA or DHS were allowed into the room by Presidential decree.

The Super Stallion landed on the helipad in front of emergency at the same time as Strongbow came out of surgery and was taken to recovery. The sight of heavily armed military police marching through the halls, down the stairs, and off the elevators caused many a doctor, nurse and patient to shriek in fear. And to drop things.

They marched up to the OR doors and told the coordinating nurses who they were, why they were there and who had sent them.

"He'll be out of the recovery room in an hour or so, just as soon as he wakes from anesthesia," the head surgical nurse told the Sergeant. She smiled at the team of six wide-shouldered, handsome hunks. "Probably won't wake up for hours, though. He's suffered some serious trauma."

"We'll wait. I hear the President will be coming on Air Force One," Sgt. Adams said. "That means Secret Service will be all over this place. Get everything you need before that happens. This place will be on total lockdown once the POTUS gets here."

"Who *is* this kid?"

"I don't know. I just know POTUS wants him protected."

"He'll be going to ICU. You can't stand in there, we try to keep it sterile but outside the electronic doors which are also kept locked, there's a waiting room down the hallway that feeds only to ICU."

The Sergeant sent men to guard those egress points and others to disperse the crowds waiting in the patient lounge. They moved off only under threats and invoking the terms 'presidential decree.'

I was expecting faces to be the first thing I saw when and if I woke up. If I did indeed wake up at all. After freezing time, dancing like a dervish while carrying Robin and trying to heal myself, I wasn't sure if my body had enough 'juice' left to let me survive my injuries.

I came awake slowly. In great pain and my first sounds were an involuntary groan at that. The ring of faces staring back at me made me flinch in more pain. The doctors and nurses moved efficiently around me, one of them adjusting my IV and instantly, I was awash in a lovely drugged haze. Morphine haze. I floated on that for a while as the sounds of medical activity happened around me. I heard the drone of machines and the mutter of voices, the sounds of other people in pain and voices of loved one trying to soothe them.

The faces I didn't expect to see were military in MP uniforms dressed in BDUs and armed with automatic rifles and Glock handguns. I recognized the rank of the man in charge, he was a 30 something Master Sergeant in the Air Force. His name was on a Velcro patch on his chest. Adams. He had piercing green eyes, dark brows over deep-set eyes and sandy brown hair cut in regulation length. Tanned and ruggedly handsome, he wore a tight-lipped look as if he had to refrain from bursting out in laughter.

"Master Sergeant," I said, lifting the mask off my face. Even so, my voice was a thin whisper. Only one arm moved, the other was encased in a heavy plaster cast. The rest of me felt as heavy as if a mountain sat on me. Or a ton of plaster.

"Blake?" I swiveled my head towards the voice of a doctor wearing greens. He was short, slender but ramrod straight so that he appeared taller than he was. His arms were hairy but so

clean that he squeaked. He wore a surgery cap over his hair but his face mask was hanging half on/half off so that it hung from his neck like a midget's bib.

"I'm Dr. Pentelli. You're just coming up out of the anesthesia, Blake. I'm one of the surgeons that worked on you. How are you feeling?"

I tried to grin but it was sloppy and when I spoke, I slurred as if I were drunk. "Morphine buzz."

"We'll try to keep you comfortable. Can you feel your feet, Blake? Try moving your toes." His dark blue eyes looked down at my feet. They were too far away for me to watch them. Besides, I already knew that my spine was fractured.

"L4, 5, 6, remember?" I reminded them. "I know what that means."

"How do you know what kind of damage you had? You were right on with every diagnosis, just as you told the flight nurses."

"Not Dougie Howser," I chuckled. "Nor son of doctors. I read. Eidetic memory."

"Where are your parents? The people you came in with have vanished."

"Gone? My cousins?" Good. Mairy and Robin had taken my advice and split. I knew that I could escape once I'd healed but getting all three of us out of custody would be too difficult even for me.

"Know I'm paralyzed," I said, trying to take a deep breath and not succeeding. "Pneumothorax?"

"Inflated. Seems to be holding pressure. Your sat levels are at 90% hence the O2. We had you on a ventilator tube for a couple of hours until we saw that you were breathing fairly well on your own."

"Who the grunts?"

He looked at the armed guards. "There's a regular three ring circus going on out there. Every agency from D.C. is parked wherever they can find a spot, waiting for news of your condition. *Who are you, Blake Ravensfoot?*" He paused. "And why is the *President* coming to my hospital to talk to you?"

"President? Of the hospital?" I was puzzled. "I have insurance."

"President of the United States," he returned and I dropped my mouth under the mask. Things were worse than I could imagine if the *President* was on his way here.

I tried to raise my body but all I managed to do was get my one arm under me and even that was difficult. Pentelli felt it and placed his palm lightly on my chest with the barest touch and fire wrapped me in a second skin, scorching me to the bone. Somehow, I'd forgotten about my broken ribs.

"Broken ribs, Blake," Dr. Pentelli reminded me gently. "If you're thinking you're going to escape---well, besides the fact that both of your legs are broken, your pelvis crushed and your arm fractured, your spine is beyond repair. I'm afraid that you will not walk again."

"Gee, doc," I drawled. "That's some great bedside manner you got there. Good thing I don't believe you or I might be really depressed." I closed my eyes and when I opened them, some time had passed because there were different nurses around me and the shadows coming in the windows were lower and softer.

One of the nurses, a younger woman with improbable pink hair saw that my eyes were open and took my vitals. As she finished with that, she asked me if I thought I could eat or drink something. I was very thirsty and said yes. While waiting for her to return, I drifted off again and when I woke, this time, I found myself in a completely different room. A private one with armed guards just outside my door. The walls were all windows from the waist up and I could see out to

the nurses' station, all the rooms were circled around the center station so that the nurses could watch all of us from one point.

I was in severe pain and tried to keep it in but the minute my eyes opened, one of them got up and came in my room. She took one look at my face and slid a needle into my IV. Within seconds, I was floating away again and she lifted my eyelids, running a flash in them before she patted me on the arm.

"Try to sleep, Blake," she said softly. "No one will bother you until the doctors release you." I closed my eyes again and did what she said.

Chapter Sixty-Six

Whispering woke me from a drugged state. I'd been dreaming that something was holding me by the ankles, dangling me over a blazing fire yet it wasn't my head that suffered pain from burning. Instead, it was my chest, legs, and feet that screamed for relief from an intolerable, bright, stabbing, pulsating fire waiting, creeping inch by inch to destroy my flesh.

I came awake screaming, biting my lips as soon as I realized it was coming from me. One of the nurses in cheerful Easter bunny scrubs slid the needle into the port on my one movable limb and the pain receded enough so that I could focus my attention on other things.

Like the two men that stood at the door guarding it, in three-piece suits with expensive tailoring that hid the government issued Sig Sauers in shoulder harnesses. Two more men sat in chairs pulled up to the side of my bed and one wore a dark blue windbreaker over his suit with glow-in-the-dark white letters. FBI. His face was familiar to me and a million other people. Mark Devereaux, the Secretary of Defense sat next to President Alex Houston. Both of them kept their eyes riveted to my face. Behind them were the two Secret Service agents, my doctor and a nurse stood at the right side of my bed.

"Slumming?" I gasped but no one answered.

"Lakan," Dr. Pentelli greeted as the nurse took my blood pressure. They wobbled in my vision and I wasn't sure if they were real or a hallucination. I'd woken earlier and had seen both coyotes slinking through the room and Chief Sitting Bull at the foot of my bed.

I licked dry lips and noticed that they had replaced the oxygen mask with nasal prongs. I swallowed and Dr. Pentelli held a cup with a straw to my mouth. I took a few swallows of ice water. *He had called me by my true name.*

"My feet burn," I whispered.

"Do you still hurt?" He held my wrist, his fingers on my pulse and they were warm against my cold skin.

"Not really. It's there but waiting. President Houston, Director Devereaux."

"You know who we are?" Houston asked.

"I don't live in a cave," I retorted. "Have to be a Neanderthal not to recognize you two." I closed my eyes. When I re-opened them, they were still there. "You're real."

"As real as you are, Lakan," Houston agreed.

"What do you want?" I was resigned.

"Knowledge."

"You believe that crap that Chase and Cameron are hyping?" I sneered.

"Lakan, I've seen Michael Faraday now and when he came back from Syria," the President said softly. He leaned forward with intensity. "I've also talked to Robert Sheckley, he's a good friend that I've known since I was a junior Senator from Idaho. I *know* what his son looked like after his overdose and I've seen him since."

“Then why am I broken and paralyzed?” I cried out. “I can’t feel anything below my waist! I’m a fucking 16-year-old cripple!”

“I don’t believe that Lakan,” Houston said. “And neither do you. This is my proposition--you give me five years of your time and cooperation and I promise that no one will so much as type your friends’ names on a lunch list.

“By the way, that was some trick with the free trips to Canada. Homeland is still dealing with the aftermath of that fuck-up.”

“You can say that?” I gaped.

“Why? You think my tongue will sizzle and burn if I curse?” he grinned. “I have a temper. Tantrums even. Just ask them.” He jerked his thumb to the two agents on the door and both rolled their eyes,

“I talk to Senator Lourdes, you know. All the time, he’s one of the few men that I can trust when he tells me something. Even when he lies.” He paused. “What you did for his son, Mike was...a miracle. I expect you to do the same for yourself.”

He rose to his feet and towered over me. I’d seen him on TV but I’d no idea that he was 6’6”. Massive and probably hit 250 lbs., not an ounce of it fat. I wouldn’t want him chasing me.

“Think about it. I can protect you from every nut out there, including Director Chase and Dr. Cameron. Not to mention the Chinese, Russians, ISIS and Israel.”

“Holy shit. ISIS?” I said inelegantly.

“Oh, and the Vatican, too. All of ‘em heading for little old Red Lodge, Montana.”

Dr. Pentelli blanched, “Can you protect him here?”

Devereaux stepped forward. “No. This is not a secure location nor do we have enough agents and soldiers or police to hold off a mob and believe me, once his name is leaked and it will be, we’ll have thousands, hundreds of thousands descending on this hospital and town. The sooner you give President Houston an answer, the sooner we can remove you to a place that is safe.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Pentelli jumped in. “He almost died. He did die. He’s held together with staples, plaster, and wires. He can’t be moved or his spinal injuries could prove fatal. He might blow a fatty embolism that could kill him. He’s safer right here.”

I studied Houston’s face and then the Secretary’s. In both Mens’ eyes, I saw no deception or greed, no threat of danger but then, they were politicians for whom lying was as easy as breathing and making people believe was child’s play.

“Five years and no contact with any of the people that helped me? No warrants or charges against any of them? You’ll let them go? Not keep tabs on them?” I bargained.

“They should go into the Witsec program,” Devereaux argued. “They’re at risk of kidnapping as a hostage to get to you.”

I shook my head slowly. “Where I sent them, no one will ever find them. Their covers are too good.”

Mairy, I thought. *Could I lose five years of my life away from her?* I swallowed my own sense of loss and thought I could if it meant that she and Robin were safe forever. If the rest of my friends who had helped me would be safe forever.

“Cameron and Chase? What are you going to do about them? Neither will give me up.”

“Don’t worry, I have plans for them, too,” Devereaux said grimly.

“He’s on his way here,” I said faintly, the drugs pulling me under. I let them rather than fight the rising tide of pain versus drugged slumber.

I lifted my head and saw the artificial lights dimmed in my room which indicated to me that night had fallen. There was a hushed and muted sense to the people moving just outside my door and inside, a small glow from the chair near the door illuminated the agent sitting there. It was the light from an e-book reader or Kindle.

I heard him breathe over the hiss of my oxygen line and the subtle pumping of the sphygmomanometer cuff. I woke because my last pain dose was wearing off.

The agent heard me, put down the e-book reader and came over to my bedside. He wasn't one of those typical intelligence clones---six foot, dark-haired and blue-eyed, a generically handsome government agent. He was a redhead with green eyes and freckles.

"Hey," he said quietly. "You need the nurse?"

"Yeah." He pushed the call button and one came in within seconds. None of that waiting around for hours to get an aide to call.

"I need a shot," I said and she nodded. Her name was on the tag hanging from her neck and I reached for it, turning it so I could read it. Maggie LA Flute, R.N.

"Dr. Pentelli ordered pills for you now, instead of a shot." She lifted the head of the bed up to a slight incline, watching to see if I showed any strain. It was 2 a.m.

I didn't have to ask what time it was because of the big industrial sized clock on the wall. She went back outside and we waited for her to return, me more impatiently than he did.

"You like to read, Lake?" he asked me.

"Yeah. What's your name?"

"Jeff Lindsey." His eyes weren't hard as I would have expected to see on a Secret Service agent. He didn't look that old, either or like a rookie. "Your hair really that color?" He pointed to my blonde locks.

I shook my head. "Red. Dark---like oxblood they call it. Am I still wearing brown contacts?" At his head shake, "then, my eyes are blue."

"I guess you're a master of disguises," he grinned and pulled out his chair, up close so he could sit and talk to me. "I heard you dressed like a girl."

"I've had to be good at it and it wasn't my idea. Still, it worked. What are you reading?"

"The newest Indie book, *President Richard Nixon: A Walk Through His Life* by Anne Kamwila." He went on to tell me all about the book and his voice relaxed me enough so that when the nurse returned with a cup of pills and a pitcher of water, I wasn't clenching in pain. Jeff went through the whole ID routine along with me, even though he'd seen her five minutes earlier. He checked my name, DOB, and her ID to ensure that she was who she said she was and that I was receiving the proper medications. Only when he was satisfied did he allow her to give me the pills and the water.

I swallowed with a sip of ice cold water and lay there waiting for the Vicodin to kick in.

"You can ask for a sleeping pill, too," she reminded me. "Don't wait until the pain gets so bad you can't stand it. Every four hours the doctor has ordered it."

"Sleep is not something I have a problem with," I sighed. "Even the pain will be gone in a few days." I leaned forward into a sitting position and lifted the arm in the cast, wiggling the fingers. Already, the black and blue sausage look was fading and my arm didn't hurt as much as my legs and hips. Then again, I really couldn't feel anything below my belly button.

"Hey, I don't think you're supposed to be sitting up," he said in alarm.

"You think I can hurt myself any worse than I have already?" I asked in irony. "I'm already broken and paralyzed. What else could I hurt?"

"You could die!"

“Been there. Done that.” I reached for the railing with my cast and hooked it at the elbow, dragging my body with its anchored plaster legs to the edge of the bed. Between the rigidity of them and Jeff’s arms, I was standing.

I couldn’t say it didn’t hurt because it didn’t. Or at least, not so that I could feel it. I was a little worried, I thought I should have felt *something* by now. A tingling, itching, heat---anything to prove that my spine was regenerating.

I felt that subtle heat in my hands and looked down where his hands were on my waist, holding me up.

“Are you Welsh?” I asked out of the blue or so it seemed to him.

“Irish, actually. Red hair, freckles and all.”

“I would ask for you *heartlight*, then,” I whispered. “This is a thing that can only be freely given, not taken but it comes with a price that only you can offer to bear. You and I will be bonded forever.”

“What, like brothers?” he joked.

“That and more.”

“Why? What will it do? To me? To you?”

“It will help me to heal faster. It will make you healthier. It will make you my soul brother. It will *change* you.”

“Will it hurt me?”

“No. But it might make others hurt you to take it away.” He was silent, thinking of the Senator’s cancer, Mike Faraday’s bomb injuries, and Sheckley’s overdose. Brain damage, reversible deaths, repaired injuries that medical science had no answers or explanations.

“Okay,” he decided. “Go ahead.”

The blue glow started at my palms but it was a pale, feeble thing until his literally leaped from his eyes, mouth, ears and nose to pour into me with glorious abandon. He looked like one of those eerie creatures from horror movies but more ethereal---as if he were an angel shedding his human skin. In seconds, I felt bones knitting, organs healing, my cord stretching and reweaving back into the infinitely complex structure that regulated my merest thought of movement.

I felt my toes twitch and felt the pain of mending bones where I hadn’t been able to before. It was almost as bad as when I had broken them originally. I screamed and that was enough to break the connection between us. He staggered back to collapse in his chair and I fell backward onto my bed trying not to cry from the intensity of the healing that I felt.

The brilliant light, my screams and his shout of alarm called the nurses to run into my room. They yelled for a doctor and one was there in less than five minutes. He was a stranger, Jeff tried to get up and check him out but he could barely move.

Both of us were examined and after I was given another pain shot, the doctor berated me for trying to get up. He inspected everything on me from my eyes down to my toes. When he ran his fingernail across the bottom of my foot, my toes curled under. His murmur of surprise was heard by all.

“Do you feel this, Lakan?” He poked me with a pin and I jerked even through the haze of fentanyl.

“Ouch.”

“Get Dr. Pentelli on the phone and the neurologist on call,” he ordered. “I want another set of X-rays and an MRI done STAT.”

“Lakan, can you hear me?” He came over to my face and looked down at me. I hadn’t realized that they had laid me flat. “Lakan, I’m ordering more tests for you, to see if you’ve regained some movement because your swelling has gone down around the vertebrae. We’ve given you enough fentanyl to take the edge off so that it won’t cause you any discomfort when we move you. Angela, call X-ray and set it up.”

“Yes, Dr. Stevenson,” one of the shadowy figures said.

“Agent Lindsey, are you alright? Can you tell me what happened?”

Jeff’s answer was a mumble. He was nearly unconscious with lower than normal pulse and blood pressure but no lasting harm had I done to him. He’d given me everything he could but no human could give up all their heartlight, even if they wanted to do so. It was like breathing---you could hold your breath but the moment that you passed out, you automatically began breathing again.

“He’s okay,” I mumbled. “Just ‘sausted.”

“Sauced?”

“No. Tired. Me too.”

I was vaguely aware that they slid me down on the bed and locked the side rails. Then, I went traveling down the hallways through long corridors but all I saw were the lights overhead. It seemed as if I were in a dream, and even when they slid me onto a narrow table covered by a white sheet and the loud knocking disturbed my quiet drowse, it still felt like a dream.

After that, someone rolled me back and forth, hushed voices urging me to move this way and that. Another saying that I couldn’t or shouldn’t move. Somewhere in the midst of all their activity, I simply shut off.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

There was a palpable tension in the air and it didn’t take a genius to figure out that it was fear. I saw it on the nurses’ faces when they came in to check my vitals. I saw it in the faces of the dietary aides who brought my first meals. In the respiratory therapist who gave me my BIRD treatments. I even saw it in the doctor’s and agents’ faces as they changed shifts.

I put down my plastic spoon and poked the jello with my finger. We were still waiting for the radiologist to read my films.

I’d been served a high protein meal of beef, veggies and dessert, had managed to finish most of it. My guards today were an agent and the Master Sergeant Adams.

“What’s got everyone’s panties in a wad?” I asked. I was grumpy as hell, sick of being stuck in bed and worried about my friends. As of yet, I hadn’t given my answer to Houston but I really had no other choice unless my legs and spine came back.

“There are crowds building outside,” Adams said grimly. “More than we can handle if they decided to storm the lobby.”

“Am I being moved?” I asked.

“The doctors are discussing it with Director Devereaux. Right now, Dr. Pentelli is afraid to move you. He feels that it would do more harm than to just hide you under another name,” the Sergeant shrugged.

I turned on the TV and we watched the local news which was being reported from outside the hospital proper. He wasn’t kidding, there were thousands of people out there demonstrating, some with banners and placards demanding my appearance. Demanding that I heal the sick and raise the dead. They were nuts.

I saw journalists from the big affiliate stations, and men who were clearly government agents as well as the gamut of America's ethnic groups.

I was truly frightened and Adams took the remote from me, turning off the TV.

"You'll make yourself sick," he said. "They're not stupid enough to stand up to men armed with automatic weapons and the USAF."

I wasn't going to wait to find out. I smashed my cast on the railing and plaster flew off in chunks, cracks appeared down the length of the cast. Adams grabbed my arm and stopped me.

"What are you doing?" he yelled. I tried to pull away but he was still stronger than I was.

"My arm isn't broken anymore," I panted and peeled the cast away. We stared at the pale colored flesh. In a normal kid, the muscles would have atrophied before the plaster cast was removed in six weeks. Mine had been immobilized for only a few days but it looked no different than the other arm. I'd had a compound fracture of the ulna with a large bone piercing the skin yet there was no scar, no lump under the skin or on the bone. It was nearly healed with only a slight residual soreness. Still, I wouldn't want to stress it too hard or risk re-breaking it.

I wasn't quite sure of my legs but I was damn sure that my pelvis hadn't knit together enough to bear weight. Any movement on my lower half felt as if I was moving on broken glass. I feared it would be another week before I was healed enough to carry my own weight and I was afraid to risk asking anyone else for their heartlight.

"If you think I'm letting you get up and try to walk out of here, you're crazy," Adams said. "You're paralyzed, remember?"

"Put me in a wheelchair but get me out of here and down the walkway over the drive through," I ordered, naming the pedestrian walkway that connected one hospital building with the other. From there, I could study the crowds without them seeing me.

"No," both agents denied and the doctors.

"I need to see the stuff I came in with. My backpack." I tried next.

"Most of it was destroyed when the logs rolled over it and especially the weapons," the agent reported. "The rest of your stuff like clothes and books are in the closet."

"Did the police or agents go through it?" I asked.

"Why?"

"Was there a cell phone?"

"It was probably taken by the police or the FBI looking for contacts like your friends or family. Or it was probably squashed too."

"Look, you've read my file, right? You know that I'm a genius, that I can create things your guys can't even dream of? In my pants or pack is a device that looks like a cell phone without its cover. It isn't a cell phone. I need it."

Adams went to the corner where the closet was and dug through what remained of my gear. The frame of the pack was shaped like a pretzel and anything rigid had been flattened to the width of a card.

Some of the food packages had split open and leaked all over my clothes, my pans were crunched but the slim profile cell phone had survived with only a shattered glass front.

"I need a monitor and a USB cable," I looked up. "Easiest just to bring me out to the nurses' station."

"You won't bend right for a wheelchair," Adams pointed out.

"So, wheel my bed out."

Before he'd made it out of the doors, we had nurses screeching at us, asking what the hell were we doing?

I nudged Adams with my hand, the newly freed one and that caused another heated discussion just as Drs. Pentelli and Stevenson arrived with the radiologist. Great. Two more and we'd have a baseball team.

"Your arm shows a healed fracture, Lakan," Dr. Pentelli reported seriously. "Where are you going?"

"I need the computer at the desk." I reached out and pulled myself closer until I could grab the USB cable from the back of the tower and checked the port. I stuck one end into my quipp and the other into the monitor as I manipulated the text screen on the old cell.

Hacking into the hospital cameras was child's play and my quipp scanned every available face running through NSA files, FBI, CODIS, Interpol, and CIA. It brought up twenty mug shots, leaving them on the right side of the screen and when I touched each face separately, it gave me a shortened version of their rap sheets.

Four were from Russian Mafia, six were from China and the rest were rogue agents and mercenaries. Free agents who sold out to the highest bidders. Another hundred or so came up as undercover intelligence operatives for the NSA, CIA, FBI, NIA, and DHS. The only ones I didn't see were the Mossad.

"Holy shit. They're going to raid us and take me," I gaped. I pointed to six that I knew were involved in the high-level kidnap and ransoms for the Organized Crime Families and Drug Cartels.

"How long do we have?" the Sergeant demanded, drawing out his weapon and checking his load. The Secret Service agent was more interested in the quipp. I could see the wheels turning in his head over what the device could do in his company's possession.

"The President can have it when I'm done with it," I snapped. "Right now, it's more important to get me out of here before the people out there get in."

Just about the time the last word exited my mouth, Agent Lindsey and two more MPs barged in. "Cameras picked up some men climbing the stairs from the basement armed with AKs," Lindsey ground out. "Wearing body armor."

I shifted to a schematic of the trauma center's floor plan. There was no place safe where I could hide that the incoming agents wouldn't find me.

"Is the Life Flight helicopter still on the roof?" I asked.

Dr. Pentelli answered. "Yes, but the pilot is off-duty and not available. The engines are shut down."

"Not a problem. How many will it hold?"

"Two crew, the pilot and two patients," said Pentelli.

I disconnected the quipp and sent a text to Lindsey, Maiara and Robin along with another set of instructions to Houston and Devereaux. Then, I hacked into the onboard electronics of the chopper and started the engines.

"Dr. Stevenson, I would ask for your help," I said formally. "And yours," I pointed to the nurses and other men in the room. Explained what I needed and what it would do to each of them. None turned me down and once more, the blue glow rippled through the room almost as if the aurora borealis had taken up residence within these four walls.

I felt my bones knit, my spine tingle with renewed function; my pelvis grow strong. Those who gave me their heartlight fell to the floor in a dazed languor, exhausted but unharmed. When they revived, they would find that no longer would they suffer from those common aches and pains nor would they experience sickness again.

Dr. Pentelli brought me the bone saw and on my urging, cut the now useless casts off my legs. I stood on my own and as my nerves protested the sudden shock of repair, I kept my face from showing any pain or I would be back in bed no matter how I argued. I was almost healed but still in a fragile state; I used what I had left to harden what bone I could before I got down to check the people lolling on the floor. No one was in extremis. The rest of them--Adams, Pentelli, Lindsey and the two MPs watched me walking with gaping mouths. Last they knew, I had both legs broken, an unstable pelvis and was crippled with a severed spinal cord.

“You read my files. This is why everyone wants me. I *can* heal the sick and raise the *dead*. Among other things. I’m a genetically modified organism, *created to be the very best in human design that man and God could make*. Now, we have to leave because if they catch me again, my life will be over and I *will* kill myself. So, are you coming?” I didn’t tell them I wasn’t sure if I *could* die.

I waited for a scant few seconds and then headed for the elevator to the roof. I heard the sounds of pounding feet behind me, stopping only when I saw Pentelli pause to snatch a bag of medical supplies.

Adams and his MPs kept their hands on their weapons as we heard the sound of shots fired. The other two air force men tried to outflank me but no matter how hard they tried to speed up, they couldn’t run fast enough to pass me.

We didn’t attract much attention from the staff or visitors, they were all riveted to the windows at the rioting mass below. Soldiers were pouring from vehicles parked down the street and climbing up the sides of the building.

Pentelli kept up with the agents and all of us squeezed into the elevator riding it up to the roof and the chopper. It was larger than I thought, more like one of the army’s medivac choppers.

Still late afternoon, the wind was blustery atop the building and blew our clothes against our bodies. Only then, did I realize that I was still in a bare-back hospital gown. I grabbed the folds and held them closed, my face reddening in the wind.

“Who’s gonna fly this thing?” Lindsey questioned.

I opened the pilot’s door and slid in keeping my bare cheeks from sticking to the seats. Grumbling, I worked the switches, my feet on the rudders and hand on the collective.

“Surprise.” I lifted the bird straight up and flew over the city but not without notice. Several news choppers followed. I pulled on the headphones and asked who held my quipp, noting that Lindsey had it last. Sheepishly, he pulled it out of his pocket and I explained how he could use it to take over the controls of the other birds. He must have played with remote controlled helicopters as a kid because he landed both of the news choppers without crashing either of them. Lucky reporters, I wouldn’t really have cared whether they’d bounced or not.

“Man, what else can this thing do?” he asked, admiring it. I took it back. As we left the city behind, I saw black SUVs following us on the ground.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

“Where are we going?” Adams asked. “The nearest safe place I can think of is the Base.”

“Put me down in the midst of government employees? I don’t think so.” I rolled my eyes but they couldn’t see them. I checked the GPS for a decent place to land and found one far enough out of town where access from a road wasn’t possible in case the SUVs managed to keep us in sight.

“Don’t look now but we’ve got another chopper on our tail,” Lindsey shouted. I jerked around and sure enough, a military grade helicopter with black paint and no markings were following us.

“Is it one of yours?” I shouted and Adams turned to look.

“No. Maybe CIA or some such. It’s unmarked so I’d bet it’s Black Ops,” he returned.

“Let’s hope they’re not armed,” I said grimly and no sooner had I said that they fired upon us.

“Rocket!” Adams screamed and I dropped down almost touching the trees. Not that the maneuver would deter the rocket. Probably a LAWS from the speed it was moving and I had an idea how to dodge those.

“They’ll kill you!” Lindsey shouted. “I thought they wanted you alive!”

“They do. They don’t care if you die in the crash, they assume I’ll heal if I get hurt.” I calculated the speed and angle of the rocket and at the very last second, turned broadside as my passengers yelled in disbelief but Adams grinned and threw open both door hatches so that the rocket simply blew straight through the opening and past the astonished noses of my passengers. Might have singed a few nose hairs but then, who needs ‘em anyway? We saw it explode into a grove of red pine and blow the three-foot-thick trunks into matchsticks as pine cones lobbed up like grenades, branches flying like chaff in the wind.

“Look for a tunnel or overpass. Where’s the nearest overpass or train tunnel?” I demanded but then I remembered the long span of a bridge over one of the mountain gorges we would have crossed coming over the traditional route into Red Lodge. The trouble was that it was too far away and offered no place to hide something as large as a chopper nor did this area have tunnels through the mountain where I could fly the bird in and hide it.

I turned around and headed straight at the other helio in a game of chicken, so close that I could see the other pilot’s eyes. Wide, shocked and full of terror. He broke first before I did but that wasn’t the point. I drove the blades into his Perspex windscreen, metal shrieked as it bit and crumpled, slammed the skids down on his roof, knocking the chopper out of the air. The turbines whined and yowled worse than a Siamese cat in heat and sparks flew off both machines. We were stuck to his in a parody of two metal beasts mating and I could watch his face screaming curses at me. The men in back with pistols couldn’t aim because both birds were whirling in circles. Yawing out of control.

We rode it down and at the last minute, I jogged hard left, disentangling the twisted metal beyond its stress point and we broke apart going two separate ways. We crashed into a small grove of young blue spruce and they hit the rocky outthrust of the ridge’s peak. The branches bent rather than broke, bounced as our broken blades tore them to pieces but the boughs were springy and thick enough to cushion our landing as if we’d landed on a giant air mattress.

We hit the ground about as hard as if we’d fallen from the top step of a six-foot stepladder. Still, there were groans and blood, bruises but I was almost certain that no one had sustained worse than a nosebleed. We heard a dull thump from below us; it was as close as a hundred yards and followed by a bright flash with a greasy black column of smoke.

“Everyone okay?” I asked sitting sideways against the right door of the bird. We’d crashed on the right side, the rotors jammed into the ground against a chopped trunk of hemlock. I pulled off the headphones and released my seatbelt. In the back, Adams and Pentelli were doing the same.

“Any injuries?” I pushed medical equipment out of the way that had dislodged in the crash. Scrambling over the seat, I checked on the five men. Other than a few dazed looks, no one seemed to be injured.

“Doc, Sergeant, gather up the blankets, first aid kits, and water bottles. Any weapons. The men in those SUVs will be on our trail along with any survivors from the crash.”

“It exploded,” Lindsey pointed out.

“They might have bailed before. I’m not staying around to find out,” I said and stood up so I could push the left-hand door open. It was higher than my head and the movement hurt my ribs and my hips as I levered myself out so I was extra careful how I slid out the side door down to the ground.

I’d crashed the chopper in a fairly young stand of spruce and chosen the spot for that reason. Young and springy, the branches and thin trunks had caught and absorbed the craft letting it slide down without much damage to us inside and preventing the chopper from blowing up.

Most of the blades had sheared off on contact with the other helicopter so we didn’t have to worry about shrapnel as we hit the ground. All six of us stood in the small clearing our sudden descent had created and five of us wondered where we were.

“We have to leave. Ready?” I looked around. We were on the north slope of the mountain about halfway up the crest, on a ridge between two valleys. The trees were all firs, with blue spruce and piñon pine predominating. It smelled strongly of pine, the bruised and broken branches had released pine resin and the branches slowly returned to their former angles from where our passage through had forced them. They crackled with snaps that sounded like .22s but the sound coincided with the gusts of wind so I knew where they were coming from. That is to say, they weren’t shots fired at us from the survivors of the crash. If there were any. We caught a whiff of burning Avgas and the unmistakable odor of burning flesh. After that, I heard the sounds of exploding shells and the right-of-way suggested we move off before one of us was shot by accident. They seemed to think one or more of our pursuers had survived and were shooting at us. I knew better---there was no rhythm to the shells going off.

The doc wrapped my feet in layers of ace bandages over cut pieces of blanket. Gathering what gear they deemed necessary, I led them off into the deep woods. The MPs ranged behind and to the sides of me and after I tripped for the nth time, Dr. Pentelli told us to stop so he could do something about my feet and lack of clothing. I wasn’t cold, I automatically adjusted my body temp to keep me warm but kept it low enough so that I didn’t *smurf*. But I wasn’t able to do anything about my tender feet on the rocky ground, pine needles and broken branches. Walking barefoot on pine needles was akin to walking on pin cushions with the pins pointed up.

He insisted on cutting a hole in another one and making a poncho for me to wear. When I told him I wasn’t cold, he said it was more for him, he was tired of looking at my bare ass.

“Well, if you people would design something better, my ass wouldn’t be hanging in the breeze,” I complained.

Pentelli laughed. “It is the best design that they could come up with, Lakan. Easy on, easy off, easy access to IVs and treatments. How do your feet feel? Your pelvis, legs and ribs?” His hand was on my wrist and I caught him taking my pulse.

“Sore but not too bad. Considering we just came through a plane crash,” I grinned back. “First thing I need to do is wrangle up some clothes.”

“We ain’t gonna find them out here,” Adams said. “Cool trick with the rocket, though.” He grinned at me and I grinned back.

“Yeah, it was. The only thing I could think of at the time. There will be cabins out here.” I shook my head and brought up in my memory a map of the area. “There’s one not too far from here, about six, seven miles that way.” I pointed northwest up over the ridge.

We started hiking. Thankfully, all of them were in decent shape. Actually, I was more worried about my own stamina than theirs.

The MPs disappeared quite a few times, falling back to check if anyone had followed us. I didn’t worry about the three after the first time; Sgt. Adams found our trail without any effort and seemed equally at home in the woods as I did. He drifted close as I scouted out the easiest route up the ridge before I committed us to climbing it.

I found a deer trail and called a rest. The Sergeant helped me bend down against a tree trunk and rest my back on it. Red pine. Sticky resin stuck to my blanket.

“There are men following us,” he whispered.

“How close?” I asked without moving my lips.

“Couple clicks behind. I saw them from the top of the ridge a while back. Down in the valley coming off a paved road that skirts the lower part of this ridge. I saw them climbing on the power lines right-of-way.”

I closed my eyes and brought up my image map of the area. Saw where the hi-tension lines right-of-way ran relative to our position. Opened my eyes in alarm.

“If they have ATVs and GPS, they’ll cut us off from the cabin before we can reach it. We need the gear in there to escape and survive,” I worried.

“You know Houston and Deveraux will have men tracking us down.”

We heard the sound of choppers in the air. Several of them. “Sounds like they’re still a few miles away,” Jeff said. “They’ll find the crash site.”

“But maybe not ours. The trees covered back over our landing and it was thick enough to disguise the crash. Planes come down out here and aren’t found for years, decades. The only way they’ll find it is if they’re on the ground searching for the burning chopper and stumble on our crash site,” I said. “Then, they’ll know we all walked out alive. We have to hustle.”

I climbed to my feet and finished the bottle of water that one of them had brought from the wreck. I noticed that no one else drank. “Go ahead, fill up on water, there are springs we can refill from. Water won’t be a problem.”

I waited and they passed around the bottle emptying it and I watched to make sure they didn’t throw the plastic away. We would need it to carry more when we did find a spring. Looking up, I picked out the route I wanted before we started the climb. In minutes, my calves and hamstrings were complaining of the gradient. As long as it wasn’t so steep that I had to use my hands and knees, I was happy. I’m sure the sight of my bare cheeks wasn’t making them thrilled either but no one complained.

Fifteen minutes later, all six of us were on the ridge. There was plenty of cover so I wasn’t worried about being sky-lined but I did worry about the pursuit using FLIR to hi-light us. Luckily, no helicopters had flown over since we’d left the crash site.

There was a decent trail atop the ridge, I’d picked up the subtle signs of deer hooves on the slope and followed. Made by mule deer and elk, they had picked out the easiest path and that would take us to both water and feeding areas. Several times, I called a halt so that we could watch does flit past, heavy with fawns. They wouldn’t start dropping their babies for another month.

We didn't see any bucks but they would be coming down to the meadows as soon as it got dark. I kept walking until dark because I was afraid that our pursuit would reach the cabins before us.

Two hours after our chopper crashed, I stopped at the edge of a narrow road that really could be called a trail. As wide as a four-wheeler track, it opened up to a tiny clearing only as large as the cabin which was a 12x12 box with a stove pipe chimney and rusty tin roof.

The cabin looked abandoned. The tax rolls had it paid up to the present, its owners three men who hunted every year during deer season, both bow and black powder. It was stocked and we'd find whatever we needed to survive the woods inside. The owners were so rich that they normally left all their weapons and gear behind, replacing what they needed before they hiked in from the road, some twenty miles back down a trail that even four-wheelers found difficult.

I checked the perimeter, walking slowly and carefully around the cabin using the trees for cover. I saw no evidence of any vehicles in the grass nor footsteps in the loam or pine needles. Watching the birds, crows and ravens looked back at me yet they remained unconcerned. No animals acted as if enemies were coming, even the red squirrels and chipmunks didn't scold me.

Only when I was sure no one waited to ambush us, did I walk up to the cabin's door. The outside was made of sheet metal with wood framed windows. Anything wood lower than three feet would be chewed by porcupines and smashed in by bears seeking food or someplace to sleep over the winter. Same reason there were steel bars on the windows and doors, front and back. There was an attached shed filled with 14 in. chunks of split firewood and a generator with a 55-gallon drum filled with diesel. I wondered how they had brought that in on four-wheelers. Then again, the owners were rich enough that they might have airlifted most of the building materials in by chopper.

The key was hanging on the back wall of the outhouse and opened both the iron bars and the door. The inside was hand polished cedar tongue and groove, a mini mansion that belied its outward exterior. Kerosene lanterns and propane ran the appliances but what excited me the most was the closet full of clothing and the beautiful compound bow hanging on the wall over the twin beds.

I grabbed that before anyone else and pulled back the bowstring, noting the ease of the draw. She had an eighty-pound pull so her owner must have been a bull. On the floor, I found an aluminum case with a dozen arrows, some with hunting points and some target heads. Two fletcher's gloves, interchangeable for left and right handed.

The others raided the pantry, pulling out cans and vacuumed sealed and dehydrated foodstuffs, packing it all into duffle bags found in the bottom of the closet. I found jeans and cargo pants in camo patterns but better yet, climbing leggings, flannel shirts and a down vest which offered comfort, warmth without bulk. In a pinch, it could also serve as a pillow. In a bag near the back wall, I found hiking boots and thin-soled expensive climbing shoes with a bendable sole. The owner or son must have been a free climber, I found more gear packed in a light weight rucksack. Pitons, ropes, carabineers, rosin and gloves with the fingertips cut off. A helmet and headlamp with extra batteries.

Canteens and iodine purification tablets were in a waterproof box along with self-striking matches, a compass and striker stone. Flints. Whoever this camper was, he was clearly into rough country camping and survival. I even found a smoke jumper's fire cover and space blanket.

I allowed no more than fifteen minutes to eat, drink but told them not to use the outhouse but go in the woods and bury it. A fresh pile of human feces in the outhouse would tell everyone

we had been here. Nothing was to be heated for the same reason, the smell of food carried and we had to leave no trace that we'd been here.

Dr. Pentelli handed me a protein bar and a sandwich made from spam and crackers. I ate hungrily and gave the cabin one last look, checked to see that we'd left no sign in the grass and took them back the way we'd come in. The little sign our feet had made, I swept away using a handful of grass pulled from various places and then threw scattered leaves atop the rest.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

We were all sitting around a small campfire that I had allowed once we'd found a spot on a rocky ledge that rose up seventy feet behind us in a wedge that cut us off from view below. The stiff wind that had blown up around midnight brought with it a sudden chill that cut through us.

We'd walked far longer than was safe, especially since I wouldn't allow any use of flashlights or headlamps. Although I could see fine, they could not in the near black of the night so it necessitated that they walk directly behind me, one man holding onto the next. Sort of like prison lockstep. That made us extremely slow but we didn't have to worry about anyone falling, twisting or breaking an ankle. It left us vulnerable to pursuit because the soldiers couldn't venture off to check our back trail. If they were wearing NVGs, we were screwed. I was pretty sure that the NSA agents hadn't picked up our tracks since we'd left the crash site. I'd seen on the USGS contour map of the area the place where we'd stopped, figured it was the safest place to camp since the view from three sides was blocked by the rocky outcrop and our fire couldn't be seen. Not even from above as the top of the escarpment hung over and shielded the ground from overhead scanning.

Lindsey had taken on the job of cook and Adams had made the fire. I was resting against my rucksack, unconsciously rubbing my chest and hips. Dr. Pentelli came over and handed me a cup of black coffee which I took gratefully. One taste and I nearly gagged, it was nasty instant coffee but it was *hot* and full of caffeine.

"You hurting?" he asked quietly. "I can give you a pain pill."

"Will it make me sleepy?"

"Knock you out, probably. It's Oxycontin."

"No. I need a clear head, need to be able to run if necessary," I decided.

"Are we spending the night?"

"I think we have to." I pointed up the escarpment. "Tomorrow, we have to climb up that." He followed my finger up and looked shaken. "You afraid of heights?"

"I'm not afraid of heights, I'm afraid of falling," he admitted.

"Someone will belay you. All you have to do is sit in the harness and hold on to the ropes."

Adams came over holding a tin plate loaded with some kind of rice casserole. "Pork and rice," he offered. "You need to eat something; you haven't taken in much protein the last few days. You want me to set up guard rounds?"

"Not necessary. There's only one way anyone came come in after us and that's exactly how we got here. This is a bottleneck." I took the plate and the spoon, tasting a few morsels and then devoured the entire mound. I felt a warm glow in my stomach and hadn't realized I was so hungry and tired because I was hungry.

"Anyone sore or need medical attention?" Doc asked. No one said anything, especially when the MPs did their macho denials. The two whose names I didn't know introduced themselves to me. They already knew Doc and Jeff.

The shorter, quieter man with gray eyes and light brown hair was named James Rollo and went by Jim. He was an AFC3 with a quick grin and a fondness for his rifle. The other man was around thirty, dark-haired with dark brown eyes and of mixed race. When he spoke, his words were pure Cajun. His name was Pete Lamoreaux. He was taller than me and knew his way around the woods with the ease of a hunter and outdoorsman.

Both of them shook my hand and offered to set up my sleeping bag. I was tempted because I was tired but they had come as far as me and no one was offering to do it for them.

I rolled over onto my knees and froze. The subtle sounds of something approaching from above came to my ears. I kicked dirt on the fire and covered the smoke with my blanket, freezing all of them with a hiss. A yellow and red striped nylon rope dropped from above, just missing my nose by a hair. I put my hand out and felt the vibration of something heavy descending from sixty feet overhead.

The first thing I saw with clarity were the soles of small hiking boots, then slender legs clad in loose black jeans. With fancy white stitching on the pockets. I reached up and caught the rope, stabilizing it as Mairy dropped gently to the ground.

She searched my face in the dark and as she kissed me, the clear area where we stood glowed as if bathed in silver moonlight. She wore a dark down jacket with a tightly cinched hood covering her blonde hair and I slipped the cowl down so I could hold her by the nape of her neck. She pressed herself against me, her hands exploring my body. It was not a pleasurable grope but a measured one---she was checking the state of my healing wounds. When she was satisfied, she stepped back, jerked twice on the line and Robin descended a few minutes later.

Both of them carried extensive backpacks loaded with extra gear. More weapons, Glocks and Sig Sauers, bows and rifles.

"We ran into a few amateurs out on the lower bench," Robin reported. "Took a few toys off them. We figured you might need some firepower. There are more men heading this way."

"Are we safe here?" Jeff asked and I made the rounds of introductions.

"You were supposed to be in Canada by now," I snarled.

"Yeah, well, you weren't supposed to have two hundred plus people after you, Lakan," she retorted. "If you make it ten miles, it'll be a miracle. Leon and George Little Bear called. Both of them said the agencies have gone crazy putting a \$50-million-dollar reward out for whoever brings you in. People are flying here from all over the world. You think you can hide when there are thousands of hunters roaming these woods?"

"I had planned to meet up with George at Little Hat Rock," I said naming a small canyon that skirted the river. There, he was waiting with inflatable boats with which we would cross the river onto the reservation, driving up to the border from there.

Robin shook his head. "There are Rangers patrolling the river and the river crossings. The road between here and there is blocked by National Guards. We came in over Big Top and there are men hiking in the same way behind us."

"How do they know where I am and where I'm going?" I cried in despair.

"Cameron has figured out what you'd do in every scenario you could imagine, Lakan. He *knows* you, he knows how you *think*," Mairy said in earnest. "So, you have to stop thinking like you would normally do."

"How? All I planned for was to get to Canada, disappear on the reservation," I said. "When I thought I had you safe, I made a deal with President Houston."

"*You what?*" It was her turn to get excited. "*What did you promise?*" She was ready to cry.

"I told him I'd give him five years if he promised to leave you, Robin and all the others alone," I mumbled. "He promised you'd be safe and to protect me."

"He'll just use you until there's nothing left, Lakan," she cried.

"As long as you're safe, it doesn't matter," I told her softly. The glow dimmed leaving us in the darkness as Robin snapped the rope free, coiling it as it came down.

"We're tired," I decided. "Do you think we can go on?" I asked as I looked at all of them. Everyone nodded vigorously but I knew that they would say that even if they were on their last legs.

"We go up?" Adams questioned and I shook my head.

"No. That's what I would do if I was me so we'll head down instead. Back to Wyoming." I pointed to the edge of the out-thrust we were presently occupying and too close for Doc's comfort. "That's the only other way down beside the trail we hiked in on. It's supposed to be unclimbable, the rock too friable. The drop is over 400 feet straight down. No one in their right mind would try it when there was a perfectly good trail up."

"We're not climbers," Adams said.

"I know. That's why you're taking the trail back down to Red Lodge. Mairy, Robin and I will rappel down and meet you on the road into town."

They protested but I didn't argue, I waited patiently until they sputtered to a stop and gave up. "You lead them back, Sgt. Adams. I know you are comfortable in the woods and can find your way. You'll be safe until daylight but leave then. You should be hours away from here before the search team gets here. Even with NVGs they won't risk a trek through these woods, too dangerous."

"How can you do this in the dark?" Doc demanded.

"I can see in the dark, Dr. Pentelli. Almost as well as an owl. Just another one of the genetic modifications that Cameron did on my DNA."

I opened the rucksack and went through the contents, pulling out the gear I thought I might need. It even had a pair of climbing harnesses in it but the last few items puzzled me, they were bobby pins and hair clips. So either the climber was a guy with long hair and feminine tendencies or *he* was a *she*. Both Mairy and I pulled on the belts and hung the pitons, carabiners, and jackknife off the clips.

Mairy giggled and took the diamond-studded hair clip, placing it in her own hair. It twinkled like an expensive tiara. She pointed to a deep crack near the edge and told me to rope off that spot. I used the hammer now hanging from my harness along with assorted pins to drive in a medium weight piton of stainless steel into the narrowest part of the crack. Tugging sharply on it, the steel remained tightly wedged gripping the stone. Instantly, my mind engineered a new type that when inserted would automatically engage with a twist of its shaft and lock in place to be released with the opposite twisting motion. It would not engage unless it sensed a secure connection and would telescope down until it reached solid rock. In short, it would be a 'smart' piton that would not come out or release, leaving the climber to a fall.

The ropes were color coded by size and length, I found two that were two hundred feet long and a scant 3/8ths thick but I knew they were rated for over a thousand pounds per inch--- more than enough for our weight. Tying the end to the pin with a belaying knot, I threw the rope over feeling it snake its way down the incline.

Before anyone could blink or stop me, I was hitched and jumped off, catching the wall with my feet some ten feet down. Sheer fall, no ledges, no trees to catch anything, no stopping me from rappelling in ten-foot increments until I reached nearly the end of the lines. At the end

of two hundred feet minus ten feet or so, there was a rudimentary ledge some four inches thick. Just wide enough for my toes to catch and there I secured a second piton, released my belay rope from the first line and secured myself to the piton and then tethered my harness to the lines. I jerked on it as I waited on the narrow ledge.

Mairy was the first down and she stepped onto the small space next to me, looking exhilarated. "Wow. That was fun." She kissed me lightly on the cheek, the tiara still on her head. "Lucky this was here and not another ten feet down."

I pointed over to the massive vertical crack that bisected the base of the cliff. More followed on both sides of us and offered a way down if we wanted to descend what was basically a chimney flue.

"You going that way?" she asked as I threw the next two hundred feet down and felt it hit the ground.

"No, this is faster and safer. You think those macho dudes will return or try to follow us? Or worse, engage the bad guys and try to delay them for us?"

"That would be my guess except they won't risk Dr. Pentelli, one of them will sneak him home if they don't meet up with us. Besides, they haven't any rope, harnesses nor are they climbers." She studied my face in the dark, her eerie blue eyes like mine glowing as if lit from within. "There is no road meeting up with where we're going."

I grinned. "I know. I sent them to Hwy. 37 back towards the east side of Red Lodge, near the Ranger Station."

She laughed and I told her to wait till I hit the ground before she told Robin to rappel down. Kicking away from the wall, I swooped down the line fast enough to make the rope sing. By the time I had reached the boulder strewn bottom, I could feel Mairy's touch on the lines. Two jerks told her to come ahead.

Twenty minutes later, the three of us had leapfrogged onto the ground at the cliff's base and we stared out over an endless sea of trees, mountains, fissures, and huge ramparts. It appeared as if they were giant hands clawing their way out of the foundation of the earth.

Gray, weathered and covered with lichen, they reminded me of the menhirs of England.

"What is this place?" Robin asked me in a whisper. It evoked that kind of hushed reverence once you stood in its midst.

"The maps call it Little Cardiff Valley. It's supposed to resemble the area in Wales where the Picts cut the stone for Stonehenge," I explained. Walking past the first menhir, I noticed petroglyphs carved into the sides.

Hands. Spirals and winged lizards were still legible on the surface of the pitted stones. Traces of red and yellow ochre could still be seen. Some of the local Indian tribes had legends that said a great thunderbird had fought here, knocking the rocks from its nest in a battle of epic proportions. I could well believe it. It was also a tourist attraction that although difficult to reach, still brought the hardy and intrepid to its site. I figured we'd find a trail or road of sorts that would take us out of there.

We were on it making good time and less than ten minutes later, we were heading east into the rising sun.

Chapter Seventy

We stopped for breakfast around 9 a.m. at a small country store that catered to hikers entering the park. The cook was cheerful, the waitress cute as she took our orders for the lumberjack special. Three eggs, bacon, hash browns, toast, buttermilk pancakes and a small

breakfast steak with unlimited coffee was just the ticket and all for \$5.99. We put our faces down and did some serious damage to the pile of food. I heaped ketchup on everything but the toast and pancakes while both of them made fun of my condiments. When the three plates had been wiped spotless with the last sliver of toast, I sat back and politely smothered a burp. Mairy kicked me under the table.

“What?” I protested. “I swallowed it.”

“Hog. Where to next?”

“Into town. There's a BMW dealership that has just released three bikes kept on hold,” I answered checking the quipp. I hadn't expected to need them but I was glad I'd set them aside months ago just in case. Paperwork and license tags were all in order, all we had to do was drop in and pick them up.

“Back into Red Lodge?” Robin gaped. “*Are you nuts?*”

“Sure, it's the last place I'd be right now. I'd have to be an idiot to come back here,” I said. “Even you think it's stupid.”

We hitched a ride with a contract lumber cutter, the same job as Travis Walton who was the guy that said he was abducted by aliens.

“I remember reading about that,” Robin commented. “What do you think really happened?”

“He was taken by stealth helicopters and examined for signs of radiation,” I said briefly. “Same as all those cattle found dead and mutilated. The government is checking how much strontium is in the reproductive organs and the eyes, tongue and nose because that's where most of the radiation accumulate.”

“You sure? Everyone says it's those grays,” Robin protested.

“Nope. I saw the files when I hacked the NSA data banks. It's all done by our government.”

We were silent as we bounced in the bed of the pickup on the washboard road, sitting among the bags of feed, a chainsaw case, wedges, and a crosscut saw. The range chief stopped at the four-way and stuck his head out the window. “Far as I go into town,” he called. “Keep straight, ain't more than a mile before you hit the Walmart and Shopping Center.”

We hopped out and I offered him a twenty but he declined it. “You might need it. Stay safe.”

“How come you're not out chasing after the miracle man?” I asked curiously.

He snorted. “I reckon if God made this boy so perfect, it ain't up to me to hunt him. Crazy fools. How many will kill themselves in these woods hunting for a unicorn?”

With that, he drove off. We kept walking on the road. Surprisingly, there wasn't much traffic nor were there many vehicles in the Walmart parking lot or Shopping Center.

We found the BMW dealership next to a Rite-aid, entered the stuffy showroom to find only one employee kicking back at his desk.

“Where is everyone?” I asked as he sat up when he saw us.

“Out hunting snipe,” he snickered as his lips twisted. “Damn fools. Can I help you?”

“We're here to pick up order 799-05CE. Three BMW K1200s in the name of Tom Horn.”

“Any relation to the bounty hunter?”

“No, not that I know of. I'm from California,” I said.

“Well, everything is in order with your paperwork and we have your three helmets and saddlebags that you ordered. Here are the keys, the bikes are out back, I had the service

department fill the tanks and put your plates on. The modifications you asked for are in place, also.” He handed me the leather pouch with our licenses, tags, and maps. “Follow me.”

We walked behind him and out of the service department door, from there outside to a yard encircled by chain-link fences and razor wire. Three beautiful shiny black and blue bikes waited for us, tricked out with leather saddlebags, windscreens, and plush leather seats. Three helmets with flames, a phoenix, and a wolf design. The bikes were 16 valves with 4 cylinders, a DOHC horizontal in-line liquid cooled engine with a 6-speed manual transmission. Normally, the bike could go 174 mph but with the modifications I had asked for, it could hit 260 mph without blinking an eye. The only thing faster was a Honda Blackbird or the Dodge Tomahawk but those were a very limited model that would attract attention and be hard to forget, not to mention that the average joe couldn't afford a Tomahawk unless he was a millionaire.

Robin and Mairy looked at me, the bikes and needed no urging. Robin claimed the bike with the flames, Mairy took the wolf and left the phoenix for me. Both climbed on and kick-started the engines with a throaty roar and I heard the two of them purr in response.

The modifications I had asked for and paid a hefty bonus were not strictly legal but the salesman had quietly agreed and pocketed the extra 10K. The capability of the bikes was now a killer 260 miles per hour and could out-corner a jackrabbit on speed. Yet, they were also good on dirt.

He shook my hand and pointed down the alley that stretched through the back side of businesses and town. “That way heads out to the state land and dirt bike trails. Cuts off about ten miles of road and brings you out on Hwy 27, past the road blocks. Follow that to the interchange, you can pick up three Interstates, one to Mexico, one to California and another to Canada.”

“Thanks.”

“Your insurance is good in Mexico because I got you a policy through the consulate. There's an ID card in your papers from Juarez,” he added. “They don't honor American companies down there and it can cause problems.”

“Got it.” I threw my leg over the saddle and started the bike. She growled at me like a jaguar and I could feel his eyes on me until we turned a shallow corner out of his view. I wondered how long it was before he would put it together and sell us out.

Five million dollars was a lot of money.

The helmets had built in radios so we could converse and I let them get a mile down the alley before I turned the bike onto a cross street called Palmetier, stopped and told them to remove their helmets. Both of them followed my instructions, kicked the stand down and waited as I ran the quipp over each bike and helmet. No bugs. That done, I opened up the electronics in the helmets and reset the frequencies so that we could speak without the fear of being monitored by any agency or satellite. I programmed another so that we could eavesdrop on the police bands.

Done with that, I handed them back and we started once more down the road out of town. But not by the route that the salesman had shown us. We left town by way of Main St., past the hospital where the crowds of news vans and lazier hunters had given up or hadn't started after us. No one paid any attention to three more bikers breezing through town.

When we hit the concrete of the Interstate, I cranked the bike up to 75 mph and spoke to them. “You guys okay?”

Mairy said shakily, “I'm nervous as hell, Lake. I thought we were sitting ducks in town.”

“You were right, Laky. No one ever dreamed you'd be stupid enough to come back here. Where are all the agents we saw when you were first brought in?”

“Looking for me in the woods or at some other clinic,” I shrugged. “I hope. Remember, they think I’m still wounded and flat on my back.

“We missed our rendezvous with George Little Bear, he has all the gear we need for the rest of this trip. We can’t get it here; it’d draw too much attention.”

“Passports?” Robin questioned. “Won’t we need passports to get into Canada?”

“EDLs are in the pouch. We’ll get passports in Canada from the reservation in Victoria.”

There was a lot of traffic heading into town but not much going our way. We’d done five miles when we ran into a road block but not surprisingly, the police didn’t stop us---they weren’t expecting me to be on a bike after the kind of injuries I’d had nor were they looking for three bikers. They would assume I was being transported by car or ambulance nor would they think I would have headed east away from my intended destination of Canada.

We drove for four hours leaving Montana behind and into North Dakota. Into the Black Hills. I was uneasy with all that openness around me, I much preferred the dense thickets of ponderosa pine, mountain ravines, and cliffs than these barren, open hills of sere grass.

I was grateful for the perplex windscreen. At our altitude, speed and the cold, the wind was a solid knife that ate through our leathers and clawed at muscles making it nearly unbearable. I was afraid to raise my core temperature and heat up my face, hands and feet. The other two must be near to frostbite. I decided to stop at midnight, to continue on was risking a collision with deer or pronghorn, black ice, frostbite or worse.

We had traveled far enough that Bismarck was nearly in our sights and George Little Bear would meet us there if we needed him.

“Real hotel tonight?” I asked. “Shower, bed and real food?”

“Is it safe?” both asked.

“Safe as any place. I’d rather be out camping but that’s what Chase and Cameron expect me to do. Besides, I’m sore sitting on this bike, nice as it is.”

We parked at a truck pull-off lane underneath a sodium vapor light and while both of them dismounted to stretch their legs, I sat on my bike running through the [trivago](#) site. There were quite a few empty rooms in the Clarion and Best Western, hardly any at the Hilton. There, we would be just another group of anonymous faces in the crowd of bikers who’d come up early for the Sturgis Rally. More than a million people were predicted this year. Of course, it wasn’t until July 30th but people were already scoping the place out and getting the town ready for the 76th anniversary of the Biker Rally.

“We can go on to Bismarck or stop in Sturgis,” I offered. “Even though it’s not Rally time, no one would look twice at us. Bismarck, we’d be more out of place unless we checked in at a Best Western or Motel 6.

Mairy sighed. “I vote for sooner. My butt is killing me.”

“It’s killing me too,” I leered. Robin gagged.

“Sooner, Romeo. I need a shower and a beer not necessarily in that order.”

“Motel 6 it is,” I said and found us two adjoining rooms on the 1st floor near the back. A confirmation code scrolled across the vid screen as I set the kickstand down, walked off the stiffness and stretched.

“How are you feeling?” she asked me, picking up my hand. I rubbed her palm and the blue lights flared, illuminating an area the size of a tractor trailer.

“Whoa. That good?” she grinned and gave me a long slow kiss that raised my temp making the field as brilliant as halogen truck lights.

“Hey, bro. Sis. I’m still here!” Robin shouted. “It needs to wait until you can get a room!”

I pointed my finger at him and a streak of blue danced towards him, wrapped itself around his legs and I gave it a jerk. Pulled him off his feet and onto his ass. He went down with his arms flailing, and his mouth open in surprise. Mairy burst out laughing as he climbed to his feet and charged me. I ran grinning, down the side of the shoulder with him threatening dire harm should he catch me. Good luck with that.

Chapter Seventy-One

The Motel 6 didn’t leave the light on for us but it did have our rooms ready. We pulled into the tree-shaded parking lot around 2 a.m. and Robin woke the desk clerk from his nap so he could sign in. He signed the register with the name on his new enhanced driver’s license and was handed both room keys. All the chain hotels had gone to them rather than metal keys which too often were lost and never returned with God knows how many of them floating out in the world. The desk clerk didn’t say anything about his leather cycle outfit but just where the ice machine was located. And that the pool was still closed for the season. Robin rolled his eyes.

“Ya think?” The temperature was still in the 40’s and anyone brave enough to go swimming must have been part polar bear.

“Check out is 12 noon.”

Robin took the keycards and exited where he met us at the corner out of the camera’s sight. Entering the room at the end of the building, we waited for him to give us the all-clear. Once he was satisfied that it was safe, we repeated the process with our room. Both looked the same---a bedroom with bath/shower, mirror, sink and toilet in pale yellow tile. The two queen sized beds were covered with an emerald and bronze coverlet, the walls papered in dark green to match the bedspreads. On the back wall was a row of sliding windows and a wall register that was putting out moist heat. We had a Formica-topped desk opposite the head of the beds, an overstuffed recliner and one of those luggage stands for our non-existent suitcases. A clothes bar hung behind the double-locked door with hangers that could not be removed from the bars. The lights were overhead fluorescents except for the two small hanging lamps over the beds.

Mairy lay on the one nearest the window and I pulled off her boots before I sat on the edge looking down at her. “You go first,” her tired voice said. “Shower. I’m so tired, I’ll do it later.”

“Hungry? Thirsty? I can get you a cold Coke from the machines,” I offered but she was already asleep.

Robin stood in the doorway. “Beer?”

“Bars close at 2,” I reminded him. “There’s a Seven-Eleven down the street, we passed it on the way in.” He nodded. “You okay to drive?”

“Yeah. I’m tired but I can stay awake for that. Sam Adams?”

“Cold Snap if they have it.” He walked out of sight and I stood in the doorway watching until I heard the fading growl of the BMW. He didn’t go long. I watched him come up the drive, round the corner of the hotel with his hands full of dark brown six packs. He raised both packs as he saw me, followed me into the room and eyed his sleeping sister.

“She asleep?”

“Knocked out,” I agreed.

“Want to come over to my room? I bought some peanuts, pretzels, and sandwiches. I don’t want to wake her.”

“I don’t think a brass band could wake her,” I laughed. “But I’m headed over anyway.” I closed the door behind me and made sure it was double locked before I followed behind Robin into his room. When I opened his door, he was sprawled on his bed face down and sound asleep. Not even a shove on his shoulder woke him. The beers were sitting on the nightstand, condensation dripping onto the fake wood tops.

I pulled off his shoes and threw the comforter from the extra bed on top of him, made sure that the key was on the counter and locked up behind me. I stood outside both rooms and drank one of the still cold beers, my eyes on the brilliant array of stars that could only be seen in the clear skies of the mountains and not the cities.

The air was still, cool enough to warrant a coat and quiet enough that I could hear the sound of traffic and TV sets that other motel guests had turned on. What I overheard sent me scurrying inside and turning on my own set to watch the cable news channel. And there it was. Pictures of me, Robin, Mairy, Leon and Mike as well as the rest of the people who had helped me including Roan Horse, the nurse. Luckily, all but George and Leon were out of the country and reach of Chase and company. Worse yet, President Houston was spearheading the effort to track me down; I saw him at the news conference with Chase prominently in the background. He was espousing how dangerous it was for me to remain at large and that I should turn myself in, that I could not hide in a city, town or village nor would the forests conceal my presence anymore. A phone number and a web address crawled across the screen denoting a special task force set up simply for sightings of me and for my capture. This picture faded out with the reward money and the annoying buzz of the EBS, Emergency Broadcast System. He might as well have put out a death notice on me.

“Shit, shit, shit,” I hissed and looked at Mairy. She was dead asleep, curled in a ball under the covers, her body rising and falling gently as she breathed. She slept like a child, emotionally and physically exhausted and I didn’t have the heart to wake her.

Grabbing the blanket off the other bed, I slipped out of the door making sure that it was double-locked before I went up the stairs to the roof. The fire stairs were locked but the quipp deactivated the alarm and opened the lock for me so that I could slip through onto the flat roof of the motel. That it was flat surprised me, this area received a good portion of heavy snows and 6/12 pitched roofs were more common because of the snow loads. Maybe because of the massive heating and AC units on the roof, it necessitated a flat roof. This provided enough light and coverage for me plus the blanket broke up more of my human-shaped profile.

The sky was enormous, a cereal bowl of twinkling rainbow colored stars and diamonds. There were no clouds and it was cold enough to make my breath visible; as if the cold jinn of winter had reached down my throat and pulled forth my very soul. I was grateful for the blanket and huddled underneath its cocoon of trapped body warmth.

I could see for miles. The town wasn’t large enough for skyscrapers and like Phoenix, had spread out rather than up. There wasn’t much going on this early in the morning; it was just barely three a.m. but a few tractor trailers were pulling into the truck stop on the Interstate. Some early morning deliveries were unloading. Bread company vans, newspaper trucks, and the Walmart was open 24/7. There were only six cars in their parking lot. Nowhere did I see unmarked vans loitering, blacked out SUVs or stealth helicopters descending on the town. No suspicious groups of casual shoppers talking into their hands or wearing extra-large hearing aids that snaked under their collars. In fact, it looked damned normal and that worried me.

My quipp vibrated and nearly made me piss my pants. By the time I had fumbled through the folds of the blanket and into my jeans pocket, it had fallen silent but I could read the text in the glow from the screen. From George Little Bear. It read, RUN. He's coming for you.

George knew where we were or would be. He was expecting us to meet him in Bismarck and I hadn't yet told him we'd been too tired to go on or that we'd stopped in Sturgis. Still, I knew Chase could easily pull up all hotel and motel reservations in the surrounding areas and although three people wouldn't necessarily seem odd, the NSA would definitely have someone checking out any new arrivals.

I ran down the stairs and back to the rooms, waking Robin first, letting Mairy have that extra few minutes of sleep. Robin and I wiped down the room for fingerprints and then I raised the air temp inside hot enough to destroy any DNA evidence yet not harm any of the rugs, walls or furniture. Next, I went to my room and Mairy.

She was already awake, washing her face in cold water, pulling on clean clothes and packing the little we'd pulled out of our backpacks. I kissed her.

"You're a marvel. Did you see the news?"

"No. Something in my dreams warned me to run. What is it?"

"Chase found George. Sent me a message on my quipp."

"Just what is that thing, anyway?" She took it from my hand and studied what had once been a lowly cell phone.

"You know that this has more memory and computing capacity than all the computers used by NASA to put men on the moon? Yeah, well, I re-programmed it to tap into and use the satellite coding systems and piggyback my programs. I can go anywhere, get into anything and override whatever I need to for that particular instance or situation. It doesn't actually scan but uses the US, Russian, Chinese and European Union SATS to scan for me in real time. It does emit an electronic pulse that interferes with brainwaves and lets me orchestrate your thoughts. Consider it a 'remote control' for the entire world's Satellite Security System."

"But why 'quipp'?"

"E-Quip-ment Unit Impersonating Program Protocols," I quoted.

"If someone else gets a hold of it?"

I handed it to her and the quipp quivered in her palm, blinked and went dark. No matter how she poked and prodded or shook it, the unit did not turn back on.

"It's broken?"

Reaching over, I plucked it from her and the unit powered up, beeped almost too fast for her to distinguish individual tones yet she heard and translated it.

"Morse code. It says, DAD. Is it coded to your DNA? How is that possible?"

"Coded to the electrical signature of my brain, not my DNA. DNA can be faked, my brain has to be awake, un-coerced and in a particular state that only I know or it won't work," I explained. "So George's only works when he's holding it and not forced to use it. He had time to warn me before it was taken from him."

She shook her head. "No wonder the US Government is after us. Can they track you through George's unit to yours?"

I hesitated. "I'm not sure. If they reverse engineer it, they might be able to."

She grabbed both of our packs and headed out the door. I did the same temperature burst thing with any evidence left in the room leaving it cleaner than before we'd entered.

Robin had the bikes readied for us; he'd checked the fluid levels and the gas tanks. Laughingly, I realized he'd packed the beer in the saddlebags along with the snacks neither of us had opened.

Mairy snatched the sourdough pretzels and opened them. "Great. I'm starving." She tucked the bag on the seat and pushed her bike out of the parking lot and down the street. We followed and only started them when we were out of earshot and camera range of the desk clerk.

Anyway, I used the quipp to point the cameras away from us so there wasn't anything to record. We rode up the street with the lights off until we reached the on-ramp to the Interstate. Once our wheels hit the concrete, we increased our speed to 90 mph. I set the quipp to scan for radar and police presence but we didn't see anything until we were 75 miles away from Sturgis. The traffic was light on the highway; mostly 18 wheelers and the three of us back-doored a convoy of Walmart trucks---riding their slipstreams and using the trailers for camouflage. We didn't drive towards Bismarck yet there was a major increase in police activity and helicopters traveling in that direction.

We decided to stop at the next truck stop for breakfast; all of us so hungry that I swore my stomach was eating its way up to my throat. We'd polished off all the snacks but had left the beers alone.

We ate the biggest breakfast we could chow down. Here, it wasn't called the Lumberjack Special but the Trucker's with gallons of coffee just the way I liked it. We kept our chatter down to a minimum; that was to say nothing until Mairy cleaned her plate.

"We're going after George?"

I sighed and put my hands on the tabletop, thumbing the text on the quipp. I scrolled through the police computer banks and when I found nothing there, I went diving into NSA files and even the White House Situation room's notes. Press files and the Internet and nowhere did I find any mention of George, the accident in Red Lodge or me. There was a total news and information blackout going on which meant it went as high as the President and was coordinated to every level.

"There's nothing," I said frustrated. "Not even any cell phone traffic between Chase and Cameron. They must be relaying orders by landlines and memos. Using couriers which will slow them down."

"Do they even have typewriters anymore?" Robin asked.

"I have a few other tricks I can try," I muttered and typed furiously. The signal went out to the CCTV cameras at Langley and NSA HQ turning on in the Director's office, his personal assistant and Cameron's home and office. All four places showed on the small screen one at a time because all at once the images were too small for details.

No one was in Chase's office, the PA's or Cameron's but the doctor was sitting at his desk at home dictating on an old recorder. I could have hacked into his cell phone or PC and eavesdropped if either had been on but both were conspicuously unplugged and the SIM card removed. An old fashioned Princess phone sat incongruously next to his PC but even that was unplugged from the phone jack. I was able to see him only because I had bugged his home immediately after my first escape.

Reading his lips wasn't easy but I managed to catch enough to know that they had both George and Leon in custody. Mike Faraday had eluded them with his father's help, escaping on the senior Faraday's Lear jet overseas.

Chapter Seventy-Two

I pulled over on the jeep trail and shut off the BMW. Mairy and Robin followed suit as the quiet woods settled around us. Even though the bikes hadn't made it out of second gear or over 10 mph, the engines were still louder than the forest could muffle. We'd kept to the least traveled trails managing to avoid any hikers, Forest Rangers or forestry woodcutters who would surely have warned us that no motorized vehicles were allowed on National Forest land.

The border wasn't far off, maybe another mile down the rough track. It was one of the several crossings that were rarely monitored by anyone. It was only when you hit the paved road further down that the border station came up and we would have to check in with Canadian Immigration.

"What?" Both looked at me and started to jump down my throat. "No! You're not going back for George!"

"I would if it was you," I said softly. "He's being held nearby, they know I'll come for him and they'll make it easy for me to find him."

"Lakan, don't do this!" Mairy cried. "Don't go after him, if you disappear, they'll let him go. They don't want him; he has nothing that can help them to get to you."

"He saved me. I can't do any less for him," I returned.

"Then let us help you," Robin said. I shook my head.

"I can move faster without you and I need to know that you're safe. I lost Rachel because Leon wouldn't let me go back for her. I'm not making that mistake again. Please. Just go down and cross the border. I'll meet you on the reservation when I'm done."

Robin pushed Mairy back onto her bike and climbed on his, starting both engines. He searched my face and I could see his fear deep in his eyes as he struggled to keep it hidden from his sister.

"I am coming back, Robin," I said mildly. "And not in five years, either. Take care of her." I gave him my backpack, keeping only the quipp and the bow that I had carried since the old cabin in the woods. He gave me his quiver filled with arrows and I slung them across my chest like an old time bandolier.

"You taking the bike?" he questioned. "Back to Bismarck?"

"No. Closer to Kalispell."

"Why there?"

"Because that's where the nearest FBI office is; where they'll transport George, where they have enough manpower to corner me. Leave, Robin. Before she can think to follow me," I ordered. "Don't let her follow me, whatever you do."

He nodded once. "I'll keep her safe, brother." Using his bike, he nudged her down the trail and I went the other way, taking the left-hand break off the jeep trail which brought me out on the road. It was faster than their way out and in the opposite direction.

One minute the tires were chewing up gravel and pine needles, the next they were thrumming on macadam that had seen better days. Patched and re-patched, the potholes were winning. Anyone watching me ride the BMW would have thought that I was dancing drunkenly down the road. Luckily, there weren't any cars or lumber trucks coming either way.

I passed through dense woods with National Forest signs. Even passed a few old Smokey the Bear ones that had been shot through with everything from .22 shells to slugs by the sizes of the holes. The 'O's in **ONLY YOU CAN PREVENT FOREST FIRES** had been carefully sculpted out by bullets.

God. I was so tired of pounding my body on the bike even though she was a sweet ride. I was tired of running, hiding in the woods and most of all, I was tired of being hunted as an object of unimaginable power.

I rolled into a decent sized town called Kalispell on the edge of Many Glacier Campground but what I wanted was a larger chain hotel and found one called Sears Mountain Lodge. Small cabins, they were easily booked, easy in and easy out. I could see anyone approaching from nearly all four angles and no one could sneak up on me.

Surprisingly, there wasn't a heavy load of tourists yet, it was still too early in the season. In fact, the pass of Chief Mt. wasn't officially open until May 15th. I knew that where Robin and Mairy had crossed was the Roosevelt/Grasmere Xing on US Hwy 93/BC Hwy 93 and it was open year round with up to a four-hour delay when traffic was busy. As usual, there was talk about widening the road to eliminate the bottleneck between the two countries but so far, that's all it was. Talk.

I didn't unpack but I did hit the showers before I drove back into town heading for the nearest restaurant which happened to be a Denny's. There were no big screen TVs playing, nor news like they had in bars and Pizza Huts, nor did the Denny's have a bar. I didn't order any beer because I knew that I'd be carded and no matter what my ID said, no one would believe I was 18.

The waitress brought me all American waffles with cream cheese, blueberries and whipped cream along with a carafe of coffee. She was too busy to make small talk and barely acknowledged my presence once I started eating. She left the bill and I left a twenty on it which took care of both the tip and the rest.

Food taken care of, I pulled out the quipp and dialed the number for the FBI office that was just two minutes away from the diner.

"Hello. You have reached the offices of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Kalispell Montana. How may I direct your call?"

"This is Lakan Strongbow," I said using the quipp as a phone. After all, that's what it had started out its life. She was silent.

"Are you reporting a crime, sir?"

I laughed. "Lady, I'm the most wanted person in the world and you don't know my name? Shame on you. I want to speak with your SAIC, Camden Delaney."

"Special Agent in Charge Delaney is unavailable," the PR agent said. "Do you know how many fake tips we receive a day, sir?"

I had the answer on the quipp. "Three thousand six hundred and ninety-three," I answered. "And SAIC Delaney is in a meeting with Agents Peter, Scammers and two men from ATF."

She was silent, shocked I think. "So, may I speak to Agent Delaney or would you like me to call his boss?"

"You said your name is Lakan Strongbow? Can you provide me with some verbal ID?"

"What? Like my birthdate? Social Security number? I don't have one, I was born on the reservation. My mother was Agent Rachel Strong and her Federal ID number was G65940B. Michael Hamilton was my father and Sarah Hamilton was my grandmother, I'm sorry to say. Her SS# was 107-98-4951. Director Chase's private phone number is 076-395-0010 ext. 2100."

There was silence for about two minutes and then, I heard the subtle click of a technician running a trace on the line. "Don't bother," I laughed. "I'll tell you where I am. The Denny's just down the road. In Kalispell."

I heard her murmur something and a man's voice with a distinctive accent picked up. His voice screamed Harvard and Boston. "This is Assistant Director Anson, is this Mr. Strongbow?"

"Where is SAIC Delaney? Not that it matters, Assistant Director," I returned. "You'll do just as well."

"He's here, listening in."

"Don't bother trying to trace me. One, you can't pinpoint the device I'm calling from and two, I've already told your switchboard where I am."

"What do you want, Lakan?" he asked. I heard the surprised excitement in his voice. I could also tell that he had put his hand over the receiver and spoke to someone else. I yelled.

"I'm here at Denny's. In Kalispell. I'm not moving, all I want is for you to let George Little Deer and Leon DeCarlos go free. I'll turn myself into the FBI if you agree to that but only to the FBI."

"We don't have custody of either gentleman," the AD said.

"I know that. Chase and the NSA does." I heard the sound of screeching tires outside the Denny's and most of the diners looked up and out of the front windows that faced the street. Big black Escalades parked on rocking springs, doors flew open and scores of agents bolted out. Four immediately secured all the exits and the rest approached the front entrance. I wasn't surprised to notice that they had weapons drawn and their arrival inside caused total panic.

One younger man, blonde and a Fox Mulder lookalike called out in a loud voice. "Take it easy, people. We're FBI." He held up his badge and ID. "We're here to pick up a witness."

Their eyes scanned the crowded interior. I didn't make it easier for them but he motioned for the manager, spoke a few words into his ear and I was pointed out.

I kept my hands on the table in clear view, the quipp sitting there as innocently as a cell phone. They approached slowly, guns held on me with the steadiest hands and coldest eyes I had ever seen.

His eyes were brown, hardened pebbles but the tie he wore with his neat blue suit had little Kokopelli figures on it. "Lakan Strongbow?" I nodded, I already knew his name and his face from hacking the FBI personnel files. "I'm SAIC Camden Delaney. Stand up. Slowly. Keep your hands where I can see them."

I did, kicking my pack out into the aisle. Immediately, one of them grabbed it away as another took hold of my wrists and spun me around. I was handcuffed and after that, in full view of the restaurant patrons, marched out to the first SUV and carefully tucked into the back seat between two pissed-off agents.

"My bike?" I raised an eyebrow. "It's the blue BMW parked in front."

The one called Delaney snapped an order to one of the other team members. He searched my jean pockets, pulling out the keys to the bike.

"The helmet's on the seat," I said helpfully. "I'd appreciate it if you'd pick it up."

They didn't wait for me to hear it start but drove off less than five minutes since they'd walked into the Denny's. Good thing I'd paid for my breakfast up front and left a big tip. Two minutes beyond that, we were pulling into the parking garage of the Kalispell FBI building and I was shoved out, escorted inside and deposited in the interrogation room. There, the handcuffs were removed and I was stripped of everything, inspected by a grim-faced doctor who did not believe my healing wounds and then told to dress in a paper coverall with thin flip-flops on my feet.

After that, I was handcuffed and shackled to the bolt on the floor and table, left by myself seated behind the table with two chairs and a large mirror that I knew concealed the watchers. I let my eyes roam the walls and ceiling, finding all the hidden cameras.

“Have you secured the release of George Little Deer and Leon DeCarlos?” I asked. They made me wait, trying to soften me up. Instead, I took a nap.

Chapter Seventy-Three

I’d only slept for a few minutes before the door opened and the AD entered surrounded by a score of agents. He sent them back out of the room as he threw my backpack on the table top, scattering the contents. My ID, the thousand bucks cash, my spare clothes, a few energy bars, some of my camping gear that I found necessary to keep near me at all times, and uneaten MREs were the only things left inside it. I knew they weren’t stupid enough to bring back the quipp. Even now, I was sure that it was being taken apart micro-circuit by micro-circuit. *If* they had discovered it was more than a cell phone. It could go either way; they might think it was just a cell phone or knowing me and my predilection for creating things, they had started examining it for its other uses.

I wasn’t too worried about that. For all extents and purposes, it was just an oddly re-wired cheap smartphone.

“Are George and Leon released yet?” I asked him, trying to stifle a yawn. I’d been up for 22 hours not counting the short stop at the Lodge. The energy from the shower had long since dissipated and I was *tired*.

“The NSA says they don’t have them but if we turn you over, they’ll make every effort to find them,” Anson reported.

I snorted. “Sure they will. Chase is keeping them in a safe house in Albemarle, on Deacon St. with armed guards. Four inside and four more patrolling the street. It’s a gated community so no one notices extra security people making the rounds. So much for presidential promises.”

“What did Houston promise you? Why are you so important to the NSA and HS? I’ve heard the rumors, what’s the *truth*?”

I sighed. “The rumors are the truth.” I looked him over. He was six foot plus two, two hundred twenty pounds and in fit shape for a desk man. His skin was ruddy with health, his eyes bright blue and sparkling. Even the whites of his eyes and teeth were perfectly white. He wore his salt and pepper hair short, styled with a razor cut and not some \$12 job from Super Cuts. He looked as if he’d stepped out of GQ magazine just moments ago.

“What’s your name?” I questioned and that startled him.

“Anson. Michael Anson.”

“My father’s name was Michael. I never got to know him. Did you know my mother? Rachel Strong, FBI?”

“I’d worked with her in D.C. when we were both new agents,” he admitted.

I pulled on the wrist chains and he hesitated, took out the key and opened the cuffs. I rubbed my wrists and reached for his hand. He jerked it back and I sensed the perturbed emotions of those behind the two-way mirror.

“You’re strong, right Assistant Director? Stronger than me, a 16-year-old boy that’s recovering from major trauma and surgery? Then why are you afraid of me, that I’ll hurt you? Don’t you have a score of agents watching me from behind that mirror and on camera?”

He nodded. "Of course, you're not armed. It's against FBI policy to bring a loaded weapon or any weapon into an interrogation room."

I lunged forward and grabbed him by his shirt front, wadded it as I lifted him off the chair and held him above me so that his feet dangled off the floor. He struggled as I heard the sounds of panicked agents behind the locked door.

"If you kill me," he gasped. "You'll never get out of here alive!"

"I have no intention of hurting you, let alone kill you. I'm just demonstrating part of what I can do even though I'm weak and injured." I set him down on his feet just as the door flew open and agents tumbled over each other in their attempts to attack me and rescue him. Someone grabbed Anson and shoved him to the back of the crowd and before order was restored, I'd taken several punches to the face and belly.

The belly ones hurt the worst, inflicting more damage on already sore and healing muscles. I let them hit me and offered no resistance. The AD's shouts brought abashed and sheepish faces to most of them.

"Holy Jesus!" Anson yelled. "Have you all gone out of your minds? Have you forgotten he's just a child? Or that he's recovering from a serious, almost fatal injury and surgery? Do you want to kill him?" They backed up and he turned towards me. "Are you alright? Do you need a doctor?"

I rubbed my stomach but other than a general soreness from their punches, no further damage had been done to me. He turned to one of the sullen agents who was built like a pro-wrestler.

"Peters, could you lift me off the ground?"

The agent blustered. "Easy as pie."

"One handed?"

The Rock look-alike hesitated. "Probably."

"What if you were 16 and four inches shorter?" Anson questioned.

"If I looked like him? No way."

"Well, he just did. Two feet off the ground and you all watched." He looked at me. "Could you get out of those cuffs and shackles?"

I held up the steel chains and they flopped on the table. I placed Anson's wallet, badge, keys and watch with it. Also, the other agents' Sig Sauers that I'd removed from their shoulder holsters along with spare ammo clips and several iPod phones.

"So, you're an accomplished pick-pocket," the Rock sneered. "That doesn't make you God."

"Doubting Thomas, huh?" I looked him up and down and shrugged. "I don't have to convince you, anyway. Just call Chase and see how fast he scurries here."

I opened my paper jumpsuit and removed the dressings that their doctor had replaced for hospital ones; the staples still held my flesh together. Although I'd healed far enough along for the wound to remain closed, I did need to have the staples pulled. I had a raw, disgusting 12-inch lesion bisecting my chest and another one where the drain from my ribs had been stitched in.

Their eyes popped at what should have left me flat on my back in some medical facility under 24/7 ICU care.

"All you men need to back up and leave us alone," Anson said. "If this boy was going to hurt me, he'd have done it already." He waited for all of them to retreat and most of them did after grabbing all their stuff off the table. Delaney was the only one who remained in the room with his AD. He retrieved his things but left his own weapon on the table. It didn't tempt me.

“You have my cell phone?” I asked casually.

“Cut the BS, Lakan,” Delaney grinned. “We both know that... thing is no cell phone. Just what is it?”

“I call it a quipp.”

“Short for equipment?”

“Sort of,” I answered. “You two gonna do that good cop/bad cop thing or is that just TV? I didn’t have a TV growing up.”

Delaney laughed. “We couldn’t get it to turn on,” he said candidly.

“It won’t. I destroyed it before I turned it over to you. Even if you take it apart and reverse engineer it, you won’t get it to work. I’m not saying I’m smarter than your tech gurus but---” I shrugged.

“But what?” Anson asked.

I grinned. “But I’m smarter than they are.”

“We’ll see,” was all he said and gestured to the door. I stood up and waited. I followed behind Delaney minus my restraints while Anson brought up the rear. I had an instant four-horse escort the minute we exited the room as all four agents fell in around us.

Traipsing down the hallway of sterile white as if we were a mini-parade, we followed a narrow maze of corridors with only a few doors breaking the sterility of the expanse. Making several left turns, we eventually came to a small elevator and Delaney gently nudged me inside as the doors opened. All seven of us crowded in, wall to wall shoulders as he pushed the button for LL3. The doors closed silently, no dings to indicate we were going down but we dropped with that initial stomach wrenching plunge. I felt nothing until the cage settled to a gentle stop.

The doors opened on a gray painted lower level that was their holding area with a sally port into a hallway of cells not with bars but electronic doors with a wired glass see-through narrow windows.

The first pair of agents went first and opened the sally-port into the cell area, keyed in the electronic sequence covering the keypad so I couldn’t see which ones they touched nor could I hear any tones emitted by the pad.

Once the inner door opened, the next pair pushed me out of the cage and herded me towards the cell. The AD waved me in and I went like a good little prisoner.

It was a basic 8x10 cell with a slab covered with a thin air mattress and pillow, a stainless steel toilet w/o a cover and a sink. There was a small built-in shelf table with a chair and a TV bolted high near the ceiling. A metal bookcase in the wall of the right corner with worn out paperbacks on three of its shelves.

No blanket and the AC wasn’t pumping out cold air from the tiny ceiling vent that only a rat could crawl through. No lights that I could control, no privacy and no reasonable chance of escape. Then again, it would take a presidential decree and a court order for Chase to remove me. Or an unsanctioned raid on FBI premises. I didn’t discount any of the three or a dozen other scenarios.

“Are you hungry? Thirsty?” Anson asked. “I’m sending a doctor down to go over your condition too. I believe those staples should come out and I want to make sure no damage was done to you from these overzealous professionals.”

“I ate breakfast at Denny’s,” I admitted. “But I’m still hungry.”

“Are you allergic to anything?”

“Nope. I can eat anything.”

“There’s a cafeteria on the fifth floor. They have a special today---macaroni and cheese or teriyaki stir fry.”

“Both, please. Coffee with cream, extra light and sweet. Pepsi. Couple bottles of water, too.”

Anson relayed the orders to one of the team and slowly swung the door shut. His and Delaney’s faces were the last thing I saw before the metal door blocked my view of the hallway. I sat on the bed, leaned back against the cement gray walls and rested till my food got there.

Chapter Seventy-Four

The doctor wasn’t one I’d seen before, this one was a woman. Pretty with gray tinted dark hair, brown eyes, and fantastic bone structure as if she was a Greek statue brought to life. She came into the cell followed by Delaney who carried a tray with two Styrofoam containers, coffee and a bottle of Pepsi. I confess I had eyes only for the food but good manners dictated that I at least stood up to acknowledge her presence.

“Doctor.” I held out my hand and she shook it once, told me to get undressed as I looked longingly at the food. I was a little hesitant about undressing in front of her but her impatient huff made me hurry. All I did was unzip the front of the paper coveralls and let the top hang from my waist. She eyeballed my bandages and removed them only after she pulled on a pair of purple examination gloves.

“What happened?” She sucked in her breath. “Heart or---?”

“I was crushed by lumber falling off a log truck.”

“A glancing blow?” She picked up a med tray that had come in after Delaney and my lunch.

“No. Four of them rolled over me. 24-28 inches round and fifteen feet long.”

She stopped. “You’d be dead if that was true. Ruptured everything in your abdomen.”

I recited my injuries and she didn’t believe me. “When? When did this happen? How long ago were your surgeries?”

I counted. Surprised, I answered, “five days ago. Seems longer.”

“Bullshit,” she snapped. Delaney stepped forward and held a tablet up to her eyes. He had access to my medical records. It didn’t make for light reading. It didn’t make her believe me, either.

“I don’t believe it,” she muttered as she began the process of removing the embedded staples. It hurt but it was a minor pain compared to how they got there. She wiped me off with anti-bacterial scrub and then gave me a complete physical. Her hands were quick, efficient and gentle. She didn’t poke me hard anywhere in the sore spots.

“Pulse, respirations, BP and temp are all optimal,” she announced. “I’d like to get a sample of your blood.”

Here, Delaney stepped in and demurred. “Sorry, that’s not possible. All we need is to know whether Lakan is healthy enough for a four-hour plane trip.”

“I see no reason why he can’t,” the woman doctor returned slowly. “He’s remarkably healthy for someone who had major surgery only five days ago. Well healed.”

I interjected. “I wouldn’t wait too long to move me nor broadcast how you are going to do it. I guarantee within minutes of an official request for transport, Chase, and the NSA will know. I’m surprised that he isn’t already on his way here.”

“You’re that important to the National Security Agency?” she asked.

I looked at her in astonishment. “Where have you been, doc? In a hole in outer Mongolia since the 90’s? I’m like the most wanted person in the history of the world. More so than Bin Laden and Santa Claus. I’m a package literally worth billions.”

She didn’t answer me. Delaney stepped in and told me to get dressed, we would be leaving in fifteen minutes. “Helicopter off the roof?”

“No. Couldn’t arrange one fast enough w/o using official channels or the FBI chopper which is all computer regulated. We’re taking you out by car.” He waited until we were the only two in the cell. “Taking you out in Assistant Director Anson’s personal vehicle with me and one other guard. We thought the fewer people who know where you’re going and with whom, the safer you’ll be.”

“Don’t trust your fellow agents?” I went through the bundle of clothes that he’d carried in and raised an eyebrow. The clothes were a suit in dark gray, almost my size with a blue dress shirt, black socks and fancy dress shoes. They looked like the typical FBI clone uniform but more expensive than off-the-rack.

“Anson’s?” I asked and shook my head. “Nope. He’s more the blue pin-stripe type. He’s larger than this suit size.”

“It was his son’s,” Delaney said drily. “He died in the war.”

“Iraq or Afghanistan?”

“You’re the genius, figure it out.”

I didn’t say anything but stripped down to my underwear and settled into the suit. It smelled as if it had hung inside a plastic wrapper in someone’s cedar closet. His son must have outgrown it before he went off to fight; his father was both taller and heavier than me and I assumed from the older style of the lapels and cut that the suit was several years out of fashion.

Delaney didn’t say anything when I asked him how I looked but I had my answer when Anson returned. He drew in his breath with almost a sob and visibly staggered. Delaney touched his shoulder and murmured to him. I heard it but pretended I hadn’t.

The two of them hustled me out of the basement, up through the cells and interrogation rooms to a floor that I assumed was the maintenance area as it was full of pipes, electrical boxes the size of small cars and a huge furnace whose vents reminded me of the scenes in *Die Hard* with Bruce Willis. I was sure happy I didn’t have to climb through them with a crazy German sadist/thief/terrorist on my tail. Delaney caught me looking and grinned as I interpreted the look on his face conveying the very same mental image that was in my head.

We came out next door in the basement of another building that smelled like a Chinese restaurant and as we climbed a short set of cement steps, I saw that it *was* a Chinese restaurant, the Golden Dragon. It shared an alley between it and the federal building with a small parking lot that held three cars. Two were beat-up delivery vans and the third was a dark blue Chrysler 300 with regular plates, not government ones. The other item made my eyes widen in glee. Parked next to the 300 was a BMW with Florida plates but it was my bike.

Anson clicked his key fob, turned on the engine, opened the trunk and the doors unlocked. He hurried over, pulled out my leather pants, jacket and threw them not at me but Delaney.

“Get dressed, Cam,” he said and the agent stripped down to his boxers. The pants were tight on him; I was two inches thinner but we were the same height at six foot. Where I was thin and wiry, he was muscled and fit. The jacket barely zipped; he was a 44 long and I was a 36 but I’d gotten it a few sizes larger so I could layer under it. He slipped on the helmet and I heard his exclamation as the HUD graphics stunned him.

“You can communicate with each other and eavesdrop on the police bands?”

“Police, fire, emergency and military channels,” I admitted. I couldn’t remember if I’d encrypted the channels after last talking to Mairy and Robin. I no longer had access to the quipp to do so.

“Annie’s cabin, Camden,” Anson said as Delaney sat the bike and turned the key. Nothing happened until I keyed in the start sequence on the digital pad turning over the system to his control. It started with a sweet roar of the pipes and he left the alley first.

“Get in,” the Director said. I peered in the trunk and saw my stuff, the backpack, bow and quiver of arrows. I grabbed them, threw all in the back seat where I was ordered to sit and buckle up.

Once he was in the driver’s seat, a man came out of the Chinese place and took up the passenger side. Anson’s key fob had already started the Chrysler and he backed smoothly out of the alley onto the main street executing a perfect three-point turn. It was late and there was hardly any traffic which led me to believe that I had been inside the building for less than four hours. Which considering the slow speed at which the government worked was a major accomplishment compared to say---enacting a bill.

I watched behind us as he drove the speed limit down the main avenue. We passed the Chinese place and turned the corner away from downtown following the signs for the Interstate but he took the secondary routes instead. I didn’t see anyone following us and only caught one glimpse of the BMW in front.

“What’s Annie’s cabin?” I asked not remember seeing it on any of my maps.

“A place where we can hook up with a way to get you to Washington safely and swiftly,” Anson returned watching his rear view. The agent in front was not someone I’d seen before or recognized. He wore jeans with a jacket over a blue denim shirt and cowboy boots.

“Who are you?” I scanned my memory for the agents I’d seen in the files of the Kalispell FBI database and didn’t recognize him. I gripped the seat in sudden fear.

“Relax, Lakan. His name is Maven Styles, a US Marshal that I’ve known since I was 12.”

“Twelve? He looks like a Texas refuge and he’s from Boston?”

“Boston? He’s not from Boston,” Anson laughed. “I am. I grew up in Uxbridge. No, Maven was born in North Dakota. I met him when I went to summer camp and we stayed friends, went to Basic Training together and fought in Iraq as MPs. He’s also my brother-in-law. I trust him with my life.”

“He’s not in your files.”

“You hacked my files?” Anson stared at me long enough that he veered out of his lane into the median. Luckily, nothing was coming and he corrected his drift.

“Yeah. So what? Just one more thing that makes me uber-valuable.”

He hadn’t told me what Annie’s cabin was nor where. I spent the next few hours alternating between watching behind us and worrying about what we were driving towards.

Chapter Seventy-Five

He stopped at midnight, pulling off a narrow exit that looped over the highway and back east for a half mile before it curved right and came to a stop sign. After that, he made a left climbing a hill with a second passing lane that led to a gas station and a Stewart’s, pulled up to the totally empty parking lot and shut off the car.

Waking the passenger, he told the Marshal to go use the restroom and scout out the place. As he came back, I heard the sound of the BMW break the country silence---mostly spring peepers and bullfrogs.

Delaney pulled up next to us and Anson lowered the electric window. "No one following you," he said quietly. "No overhead eyes, either. I made a call from the ice cream place on 38 and they called Ray at the bowling alley. He said that all agents were called in three hours ago by some bigshot out of D.C. Wanted to know where we were."

"Did they tell these 'bigshots' we went fishing?" the AD asked.

"Chase Lake," Delaney grinned. I knew where that was; one of the places that I had originally planned to camp at on my trek home. Delaney looked in my window. "How are you?"

"Just peachy. I need to pee." I opened the door in front of him and gently pushed him out of my way. All three of them followed me into the station. I was happy to see the Dunkin Donuts stand inside but waited until after I used the restroom. The Marshal went back outside to the parking lot to watch for trouble.

The Stewart's had six sit-down booths, Anson and Delaney slid in and picked up the menu. They ordered burgers with fries and coffee. I told them the same for me but to make mine a cheeseburger. I slid in on the side where neither man sat and stared at my hands in my lap. No one said anything until the waitress came over. She was an older woman, barely over five feet with gray hair tucked in a bun, wrinkles, and a tired smile. She already carried a carafe of coffee and filled our turned upright mugs.

"Cream and sugar?"

I nodded, both agents asked for Splenda. "You ready to order?"

They asked for the burger special with the works---lettuce, tomatoes, pickles, onions and were told that ketchup was on the table.

"Ten minutes," she promised and retreated to the kitchen. Presently, we heard the sizzle of cooking beef and the aroma drifted towards our noses.

I added cream and sugar to my cup and took a tentative sip. Surprisingly, it was good, fresh not sitting all night on the burner getting ranker by the minute.

"So, anyway," Delaney said suddenly and made me jump. "What can you do? Predict the future? Read my mind? Raise the dead?"

I looked him in the eye. "Still don't believe me?" Picking up my fork, I bared my forearm and dragged all four tines down the length of my skin tearing the flesh. Blood instantly beaded up and it felt like a burn more than a cut. Delaney grabbed my hand and tore the fork out of my grasp.

"Are you nuts or stupid?!" he hissed. He snatched several napkins and blotted up the blood. As he wiped, the wound gaped but the bleeding was already stopping, the skin closing behind. In five minutes, the only sign of the deep scratches were four thin red welts which faded to nothing by the time our meals were on the table.

I ate, suddenly ravenous and finished everything on my plate, eyeballing theirs for leftovers. I ordered another two, one for me and another to go for the agent still guarding the parking lot. Anson didn't say anything as I got up and brought the Marshal his dinner. He told me thanks as he regarded me from under his sleepy eyes that missed nothing.

"How old are you?" He lifted the lid and picked at the fries. He ate them without using any of the ketchup packages. It was un-American to eat fries without ketchup.

"Sixteen."

"Why does Chase want you? And Houston's goons?"

“Because I’m an experiment that they thought failed and escaped,” I answered.

“What kind of experiment?” I noticed that he didn’t say ‘failed’.

“I’m a genetically modified and enhanced human. My mother was part of a study by Dr. Cameron on genetic modifications to a normal human embryo. I was one of 25 pregnancies he tampered with on the reservation. He used Native Americans, alcoholic pregnant Indian mothers trying to fix fetal alcohol syndrome babies. I was his only success.”

“You were a FAS baby?”

“No. My mother didn’t drink. He used her for his control study. She was an FBI agent who had an affair with Director Hamilton’s married son Michael.”

“Michael Hamilton? Holy---does President Hamilton know you’re his grandson?”

“I suppose he does and doesn’t care. Mrs. Hamilton knew and kept it from him. She didn’t care that I was her grandson,” I said. “She kept me locked up for two years.”

“Locked up? What do you mean?”

“I was brain-wiped and raised on her estate for two years thinking I was her son, Blake Hamilton.”

“Brain-wiped?” Anson questioned in disbelief.

“Yeah. Programmed all my memories so that I thought I was someone else, her son. She had her techs remove all my childhood memories and implanted the ones she wanted me to have. It didn’t last and I broke out.”

“You must have had them come back if you found your way home,” Delaney pointed out. “I read your files, there were reports of sightings of you in Colorado, Idaho, Oklahoma and Montana. The news has photos of you in the hospital at Red Lodge where you disappeared under suspicious circumstances. How’d you escape from there?”

“Some friends helped me to get out. I won’t turn them in so don’t ask about them,” I answered briefly.

“You saved a fellow Marshal, TG Muir.”

“You know him?”

“Of him. He handles cases mostly on the east coast. I met him a couple times on a tracking conference for law enforcement. Tracking isn’t something you need much of in the city.”

“Works the same anywhere, just the sign is different in the concrete jungle.”

“You track? Being Native American and all?” He seemed really interested so I showed him a few of my tricks and skills.

The other agents joined us and Delaney sat on the bike while the marshal finished his burger. “How’s she handle?”

He grinned. “Like a finely tuned Quarter Horse. She’s been modified to go faster.”

“Up to 260 mph,” I said and he whistled.

“You expecting the Flash to run you down?”

“No, Black Ops helicopters. Once Chase figures out where I ran to, he’ll send everything after me. He had me tagged once---in three separate ways.”

“ID chips?”

“That and radioisotope blood tags, bone marrow chip implants and a RFID chip.”

“Lakan, you ready to go?” Anson asked from the passenger seat. He had switched places with the Marshal who was now driving.

“I’m coming.” I went for the back seat and slid in.

“Del, you good to go or do you want to switch out the car for the bike?” Anson asked. Delaney told him he could handle another 100 miles.

The Marshal drove faster, hovering around 85 mph consistently even as the speed limit on these back stretches of flat lines was 70 mph. I pitied the agent on the bike, even with the windshield and leather clothing, the wind chill would have been brutal.

I fell asleep waking only as the car slowed drastically and Anson gave the Marshal directions. I saw signs of an off ramp that descended into a valley covered with heavy tree growth. Mostly firs, second growth that would be harvested soon by the size and height of them.

We followed the markers for State Forest snowmobile trails heading deep into the valley and onto unpaved seasonal roads. I watched with trepidation as the Marshal pulled into a small cove cut out of the woods, the place was a 10x14 square foot building, board and batten with a corrugated steel roof. An outhouse sat behind and to the left, there was a four-stall tie shed and a smaller outbuilding that housed a generator.

His headlights illuminated a screened-in porch and a hand-carved sign that read “Annie’s Cabin.”

“So this is the place? Who’s Annie? Cause if this belongs to one of you dudes, there’ll be records and Chase will find us,” I protested as I pulled on the door. Delaney was already there with the bike and unlocking the place. The lights came on one at a time. I guessed that they were kerosene or propane but definitely not electrical. None of the others let me carry anything inside, not even my own stuff. It took me all of 15 seconds to look the place over.

Neat, one room with pine tongue and grooved walls and plank floors, red gingham curtains but clearly a man’s retreat without any of the feminine touches. Two twin beds, a pull-out couch, gas heater on the back wall, table with four mismatched chairs and a sink in the granite counter. A gas stove and oven. The microwave sat on a butcher’s block next to a 12-volt battery and a converter that changed the juice from DC to AC to run the microwave.

There were heavy Hudson Bay blankets on the beds and a quilt laying on the couch but no food or weapons stashed. It looked as if it had been closed up for the season and just now re-opened. I waited to see if anyone was going to cook or had even brought food. They answered my unspoken question when Delaney carried in a cardboard box with bottles of water and pre-made sandwiches, chips, and Oreo cookies. Greedy hands reached in and snatched before I could say ‘wait.’ I was left with cheese loaf on rye. Not my favorite, I looked at it, and then up at Anson. “How long are we gonna be here?”

“No more than overnight. Why?”

“Did you bring more food?”

“Some. We’re not planning on camping out here.”

“What’s your plan to get me back to D.C.? Or to releasing George Little Bear and Leon DeCarlos?”

“The Director of the FBI has asked for a warrant by Grand Jury to release both men into our custody,” Anson said defensively. “A second team will meet us here tomorrow afternoon and take you on to the next safe house.”

“This is a safe house?” I looked around in derision before I dropped the sandwich and went outside. My bow and quiver had been stashed on the porch. I grabbed both and swiped one of the kitchen filet knives disappearing into the woods before they had any inkling of my intentions.

I hadn’t gone ten feet in before I was out of their sight but I could still hear them up till twenty minutes later. By then, I’d slipped on my fletcher’s cuff, fitted the quiver across my

shoulder and found the nearest stream. Following the narrow band of water for a hundred yards, I came to a crossing where many animals had used the easy access to cross and to water.

The trees whispered in the night air. A soft breeze wafted through with a hint of tomorrow's weather, a promise of warmth but no moisture. Even here, there were still traces of snow on the dark side of the mountain. I could feel the weight of a sleeping giant behind me as the earth slumbered.

The deer came out of the brush with a whisper of a hoof in the leaves. I didn't hear it as much as I saw its eyes glow in the faint moonlight. It wasn't a doe but a button buck; this early a doe wouldn't have dropped her fawn yet and I wouldn't take a pregnant deer. Luckily, this one was a young male that weighed around a hundred twenty and the perfect size for me to manage. After all, I had to lift and drag it back to camp.

I sighted and waited for him to turn sideways; a front-on sight could lead to an arrow bouncing off his chest bone and a wounded deer suffering lost in the forest.

He came out, nose twitching as he scented the air but I was downwind as I let the string go and the broadhead hit him in the heart. He leaped forward, ran a few strides and dropped nearly at my feet.

I raised my head to the sky and sang a song of thanks praising the buck's spirit and gift before I cut his throat to bleed him.

The gall bladder I set aside along with the glands in his rear legs before I gutted the carcass. Using the tendons in his back legs, I tied a branch between his hocks and dragged the kill back to the cabin. It was a messy, tiring job hauling a hundred pounds of dead animal on my own. I left the guts for the wolves, foxes and bears whose tracks I had seen by the water.

Chapter Seventy-Six

They'd given up calling for me but had posted a guard. Even with all the noise I was making dragging the carcass no one heard me until I stood behind the Marshal and tapped him on the shoulder. He spun around in shock nearly hitting me with his gun. If I hadn't ducked, I'd have had a new hole in me.

"Jesus! Where the hell did you come from? And where the hell did you go? Michael, Cam! He's back!"

All three of them joined me in the yard as I hung my kill from the hook on the edge of the porch. I started skinning it and Maven helped me. We had the deer quartered and the back strap cut into steaks in minutes.

I cooked for them using what I could find in the cabin and scrounged from the yard. New wild garlic and onions were just coming up and there were plenty of dried spices inside. We ate well; venison steaks pan-fried with rice and dried tomatoes, coffee and Oreo cookies for dessert.

The sun was just coming up when I crawled into bed but not before I warned them to hang the deer meat high enough so that bears couldn't reach it. I heard coyotes howling in my sleep but that wasn't what woke me. No, it was the smell of frying meat and fresh coffee. I rolled over on the couch and nearly fell off onto the floor; I needn't have worried about stepping on any of the three---all agents were up and already eating. I looked around, there wasn't a clock in the cabin that worked, only one stuck at 6:40 that needed new batteries.

"What time is it?" I had a mouth that tasted as if I'd eaten old cigars and gunk stuck to my eyelids. Drool caked my lips and the smell of day-old sweaty men was a tang that oozed from the cabin almost thick enough to see. I suspected that I smelled no better. There wasn't a shower handy to rectify the problem nor was I going to brave the nearest cold water stream.

“Any water?” I asked and Anson turned on the tap. Clear, clean water flowed with a groaning of pipes. He had started the generator and primed the well.

“It’s eleven thirty. I’ve got some warmed up on the stove if you want to wash up and there are new toothbrushes on the porch,” he told me. I used the port-a-potty, found towels and a bar of soap as I made myself halfway presentable. Put on clean clothes that the FBI men had brought with them. Over that, I pulled on a camo pair of coveralls that the owners had left in the cabin. I noticed that the agents had changed into everyday clothes, as well. Jeans, Carhartt shirts, and jackets. Knives hanging from their belts in sheaths and their shoulder holsters with extra ammo clips.

They’d left me gravy with biscuits and coffee, a fairly decent camp breakfast. I ate quickly, not sure when we’d be picking up to leave.

Delaney and Anson acted as if they were waiting on someone. The longer they waited, the antsier they grew. I went outside and was told not to leave the clearing, not that they could have stopped me short of handcuffing me to a tree or shooting me.

I paced the perimeter of the yard listening for any sounds out of the ordinary but all I heard were the normal ones of jays, squirrels, crows, and mice. Anson came out with his face pressed close to his radio and from the frowns, the news wasn’t making him happy.

“Let me guess,” I broke in. “Your second team was compromised and/or is missing. Or you can’t contact them.”

“I can’t reach my agents.” He gave me one of those looks and I refrained from saying ‘I told you so.’

“Any of them or just the secondary team?” Delaney asked. I studied the radio.

“What frequencies are you using? FBI dedicated or something else?” I asked.

“We set something up by burner phone,” the AD said in frustration. “And in code so no one could listen in.”

I rolled my eyes again. “We’re talking about the NSA and their Sonic program. You have heard about Sonic, right? The 24/7-365-day monitoring system of every cell phone, landline and IP address around the world?”

“Of course, I know about it,” Anson said grumpily. “I also know there aren’t enough techs to listen in on real-time even on key phrases like ‘bomb’, ‘nuclear’ and ‘package.’”

“Let’s hope so,” I returned. “For the sake of my continued good health and freedo.”

Anson shouted for the other two to load up and again, the Marshal rode the BMW out first. We sat in the Chrysler and waited for Maven to call back with the okay. Once Anson heard that, he drove slowly onto the dirt road being careful to keep the high crown of the gravel road from tearing out the oil pan. When he hit the pavement, he let out a sigh of relief and hit the gas.

“At least we have a chance of outrunning anyone on the road,” he muttered. We rode down a state highway that meandered through the lower hills of the Rockies before they climbed into the monster driving hazards for which they were famous.

The route he chose bypassed the major cities and made use of backcountry roads. Places where we could land a plane and fly out without attracting too much attention.

“The next stop is at Long Knife,” Delaney said and I looked up from the paperback I’d found at the cabin. It was an old western called “*The Half-Breed*” by Peter Dawson. Well-worn, the spine was broken, I’d nearly finished it even though reading in the car made me sick to my stomach.

“Is that where we’ll fly out of here?”

“I thought I’d put you on the bus,” he retorted.

“Hope it’s a private plane. I need ID for a commercial flight.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re a smartass?” Delaney asked turning around to stare over the seat. His eyes grew huge and I turned to see what had alarmed him.

Coming up behind us was a large box van with a cowcatcher grille up front. It was coming fast, one of the few vehicles we’d seen on the road. Anson hit the brakes and in front of us, I saw a road block composed of black SUVs and police cars. There was no sign of the BMW or the Marshal.

I leaned over the front seat and wrenched the wheel right, screaming in Anson’s ear to hit the gas. Unquestioning, he did as I asked and we flew off the shoulder into the trees and down a shallow slope. Tearing a path through young aspens, it was only my reflexes that kept us from running into a trunk large enough to stop us with lethal force. That and the fact that this area had fallen victim to a forest fire only a few years earlier and had been razed. New growth was only inches thick.

We flew down the slope and disappeared from the view atop the highway. Only when I said brake did Anson hit the brake pedal and the car slewed sideways, rocked and came to a rest on the edge of a deep ravine. The airbags went off and the windows shattered into a million pieces that glittered in the sun.

I bolted from the back seat grabbing my pack, bow, and quiver of arrows. Reached into the front window after scraping the glass out of the way and dragged a shaken pair of agents through. Neither was hurt, airbags and seatbelts had done their jobs but both were in shock, anyway.

“Hey.” I tugged at their weapons and that roused them. “You okay? Grab what you can, we need to run.” I popped the trunk.

Pulling out their spare clothes, gear and what food and water I could carry, I handed them the rest and bullied them into moving. But not before I tossed a lit rag into the gas tank.

“C’mon, you old dudes! Run!” I took off and they followed me into the heavier underbrush below the fire-scarred ridge. I led them down a deer trail deep into the woods opting to put distance between us and our pursuers. When I had done that, I would set about erasing any sign we might have left behind. They stopped behind me when the hollow thump of the car exploding echoed towards us.

The woods folded around us, the trees so close that if the two hadn’t stayed on my footsteps, neither of them would have seen the other. Trees grew thick competing for space, their branches forming skirts around the trunks and thickets that we had to push through. Thickets that scraped our arms and faces, thickets that left our clothes sodden yet the pair kept up with me on the uneven ground.

Pine needles and ferns covered the ground hiding roots and rocks that might trip up an unwary hiker. We were traveling at a run; not paying any attention to what was underneath our feet. We were intent on making as much distance from the pursuit as we could.

We’d gone at a steady rate for an hour; both of them had sweat running from their faces and staining their shirts. Both of them had opened their outer coats and the top buttons from their dress shirts. Both of them were breathing harsher than I would have liked but I put that down to nerves.

I pulled them under a bushy hemlock where we crouched beneath the piney scented branches and caught our breath. I dug through my pack for a map, all I found were my food packs, spare socks and fire starter plus a compass and magnifying glass.

“What are you looking for? Do you know where we are?” Delaney asked. He went through his own stuff and found a state map, creased and folded, fifteen years old or more.

“Will this help? I found it in the cabin.” I barely remembered the area, let alone the topographical contours of this place; I’d seen the map only for a minute or two and that had been Kalispell.

I opened the faded old paper and sighed with relief. It had the towns, state highways, unpaved roads, state parks and national forest with an insert of the area. I was hoping for contour lines to show me the lay of the terrain but the map showed me the rivers and highest peaks at which we now found ourselves.

“Damn,” I grumbled under my breath. “I wish I had my quipp.”

Anson reached into his pockets and dug out a plastic evidence bag with several pieces of what used to be my cell phone. “Can you do something with this?”

I snatched it back. Nothing had been disconnected from the circuitry; the wiring was still intact and the battery in the bag. It was still usable if I could put it all back together. I was working on that when Delaney’s two-way produced static and we heard Maven’s voice come through in a whisper.

“Mike? Cam? Can you hear me? I’m hiding in a barn off the road just down from the roadblock. Over.”

“Don’t answer him,” I said snapping the last piece into place. The unit sampled my DNA and vibrated to tell me that it was functioning. Their faces were solemn in the gloom under the tree and the heat from their bodies made it a bit musty. They looked at me and questioned my last comment.

I scanned the radio’s frequency and located its user’s coordinates. The GPS put Maven firmly five miles down the road past the road block and in the middle of a cluster of large vehicles. Probably a mobile command center. And his friend and brother-in-law were smack dabbed in the middle of it all.

“You sure you know this dude?” I asked with a dry mouth. “Five-million-dollar reward would tempt the righteous.”

I showed Anson the information on the quipp and his face set in grim lines. “What now?”

Reading the map, I located our exact position. We were on the south slope of an escarpment that dropped two hundred feet a hundred yards from where we hid. Called the ‘Little Gorge’, at its base was a swift white-water stream that cut through the gorge and prevented us from crossing over to the western slope. If we hiked higher, we would hit peaks of 12-13,000 feet without the proper gear; i.e. food, clothing, tents or boots.

Descending would bring us back to the road where we were sure to meet with NSA agents. No mention of the Intelligence community of any search underway for me but the Internet and News Stations were still going crazy about my escape. Possible sightings of me entering Canada, of me in Kalispell at the Denny’s and my subsequent capture by FBI agents at gunpoint.

There were pictures taken from the front of the Denny’s where the photographer had panned the crowds. Faces jumped out at me, faces that I saw in the crowd made my mouth dry up instantly, my hand's sweat and my stomach cramp in fear. Aiken’s face stared back at the camera and behind him were Morrell and Andrews. I didn’t see Chase or Cameron but I knew both were in the shadows somewhere.

Chapter Seventy-Seven

I knelt at the edge of the trail and looked over the precipice where deer had made a dip in the trail on the very lip of a hill that would have taxed the skills of a climber from Everest. It would take more mountain goat than human to climb down it yet it was clear that many mule deer had used the path from the erosion left behind in the dirt and scree.

The trees eking out a living were thick enough to hide a human. Barely. The underbrush of ferns, briars, and other plants provided browse for a variety of ungulates. Behind me, Anson and Delaney lay stretched out, thin, parched and weary beyond belief. I had pushed them to the very limit of their endurance. We'd spent the better part of the day and night running from Aiken and his men and now, we were hiding in the dark of the night.

I had found a way across the gorge by bullying the agents with threats of leaving them behind, had managed to carry them across after making a crude bridge with downed tree trunks. I'd walked across while they had sat and slid on their butts.

Delaney had complained of splinters and that he could have just waded in, that the stream was no more than ten feet wide but when I pointed out that it was a Class IV white water, he'd swallowed his protestations and agreed it wouldn't have been as easy as he thought.

"I'm right. I'm always right," I said and he twisted his lips as he called me a know-it-all and asshole in the same breath.

"Hey, old man," I said softly over my shoulder. "How are you two?" My answer was a heartfelt groan.

"I may be old but *I* have the gun." Anson finally had the breath to speak. "How long can we rest?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On how far back Aiken is," I answered. "He tracks almost as fair as I do and you two leave a trail a blind man could follow."

"You'd leave us behind?" Delaney sounded... scared. Course he probably couldn't find his way back without me and knew it.

"I won't leave you out here alone." They were exhausted, none of us had eaten more than two meals in the last 36 hours. We hadn't had time for me to hunt, Aiken's men had pushed us relentlessly.

The trail was steep. Hands and knees steep and I had my doubts that the tired men could handle it. I wanted to find a place to hole up and rest but it would have to be someplace that wasn't on a map or on the Internet. Someplace like a cave or an old mine that had been forgotten.

I checked using the quipp and had just located a few places when the battery died, rendering the device useless. It went back into one of the coveralls pockets along with my essentials---compass, glass and striker stone.

I pushed the bow back onto my shoulder and turned to face them. Behind them was the top of the ridge covered by firs and pines. It was rare that any deciduous trees grew this high and the air was thinner than they were used to, making exertion such as they experienced much harder for them. We were at 12,395 feet above sea level, 7000 feet higher than Kalispell.

"Stay here. I'm going along the ridge to find someplace to rest up where we'll be out of sight and safe."

"No," both said. "Wait for us. We'll be ready to go in five more minutes."

“I’ll be back. I’m looking for an old mine. This area was honeycombed with them. You’ll be safe here. Anyone finding you would have to come from below and you’d see or hear them first. You have your guns. Besides, you’re the FBI, they won’t shoot you, they want me.”

“What about your friends?” Delaney asked.

“I can only hope that your FBI people have them in custody by now,” I answered slowly. “I’m not going back to Chase. Leon and George know that.” I hesitated, left them a full bottle of water and slipped off into the thin cover along the rim of the ledge.

The beginnings of blackberry flowers brought a sweet scent to the air along with the stronger one of cedar, moist earth and rock. I caught the faintest whiff of bear and sulfur coming up from the lower part of the hill, sometimes from above me and sometimes, it smelled as if it were right next to me.

I got careless or tired. My feet slipped on a bare patch of granite the size of a carpet and I fell on my side for twenty yards, sliding off the rock and onto the gravel and loam of a run-off that bisected the slope and went down in a gully I thought we might use to reach the bottom of the hill. Rather than fight gravity, I let myself go in a crab-walk on my butt, stopping on a small hummock of grass and moss.

Nearby was a small spring chuckling out of a cleft in the rock and next to a series of rock slabs that formed a sort of arch. Man-made, not natural, it drew me in with the teasing mystery of all adventurers.

I used my striker stone to start a small fire, broke off a branch from the driftwood that had fallen inside the opening and wrapped a piece of my undershirt around the end using pine pitch to hold it on. And to feed the material like a wick once I lit the torch from the fire. I had to crawl in on my knees but after fifteen feet, the flames soared upwards, indicating that there were an air source overhead and more open space. I stood up carefully as the torch flared to a flame nearly six feet high.

The sputtering flames went straight up illuminating a vast ceiling overhead where soot from larger, older fires had marked the lowest part of the cave. This wasn’t a mine although it bore the marks of humans working it; evidence of natives clearing a space for living quarters. The floor was smooth, relatively clean of debris and the walls were painted with Native American art done in charcoal, red and yellow ochre and white chalk. Images of deer, buffalo, birds and handprints as well as human forms. Spirals of the four winds and other religious motifs native to the area’s tribes.

Exploring the cave, I found another entrance in the rear that offered a secondary escape route but I didn’t take the time to follow it all the way. I did use my nose and sampled fresh air with a hint of willow and wild onion, skunk cabbage and mud indicating that the tunnel probably exited in or near a swamp.

Retracing my steps, I crawled back and through the narrow entrance which reminded me of the layout of an Eskimo igloo and returned to the two agents. Both seemed clearly more animated than when I’d left them and were standing, pacing the perimeter of the small clearing. As I materialized in front of them, both jumped in fear.

“Jesus! Don’t sneak up on us!” Delaney complained.

“You find someplace for us?” Anson asked. I nodded. In a few terse sentences, I told them of the cave and they were game to follow me.

As tired as they were, even after the hour’s rest, they barely made it without serious injury. The worst part wasn’t the slide down the granite slope but the hike up the short trail. Every stone, root and hole seemed to jump out and encounter their dragging boots. At the very

last ten feet, I had to carry Anson with his arm on my shoulder to the entrance and feed him forward towards Delaney. Both agents hesitated at the darkness of the hole.

“Afraid of the dark?” I mocked, knowing that would rouse them. “Don’t be. I already scouted for bears and beasties. There’s nothing in there but old pictures. Not even a limp cave bat.”

Delaney had brought a battery lantern with him and that made it easier to crawl through the tunnel. I’d left the torch at the other end but it had gone out, finally burning out the rag wick.

Once inside, both men made it to their feet and inspected the cave. It was the size of a small dining hall with a ceiling like the vaults of a cathedral. The lantern threw more light than my torch and exposed details I hadn’t seen with my light.

There was an upper gallery with more rooms carved out of the rock and worked stone breastworks. Scattered on the terrace floor were broken pot shards and arrowheads. Some tribe or remnants of one had used this place as a redoubt.

I couldn’t see any way up without building a ladder but Anson found a way. He showed me a series of holes cut in the flat wall beneath the ledge sized for a finger’s breadth and toe width. Like the Anasazi cliff dwellings, you had to start off with the correct hand or halfway up, find yourself unable to reach the next one. Would tire and fall to your death.

“Left foot first,” I said analyzing the possible patterns. “Can you make it?”

“Do we have to? We can rest here and then try when we’re not so tired.”

“Okay, then. Try to start a fire. I’ll bring in some wood but keep it small. Cook whatever you can of anything that’s left to eat. I’ll go find us something more substantial,” I decided.

“Water?”

I dropped my pack and handed them the last two bottles. The empties I had kept in the hopes of refilling them. “Look for a water source in here. Caves usually have some kind of run-off or shafts that have filled. Don’t go into any if you find one---they could be full of eels or have undercurrents that could suck you down so deep no one would ever find your body.”

I showed them how to use a shoelace to lower an empty into a depression.

“Boil it before we drink?”

“There are some iodine tablets in my pack but that’s all we have. Use them sparingly, until I can find a spring.” I hesitated. “Don’t come out unless I call for you. If I’m not back in four hours, climb as high as you can and try to pick up someone on your two-ways. Or your sat-phones.”

“We didn’t bring ours,” Anson admitted. “Even encrypted, the NSA can track us by it. I didn’t plan on being stuck in the middle of Hiawatha-land and without a means to communicate with the bosses.”

“Do you even trust your boss?” I returned. “If your friend could sell you out for five million, what would the Director do for 50 mills? A billion?”

“Are you worth that much?” Anson whispered.

Delaney answered him. “He can raise the dead, Michael. Can you put a price on that?” On that note, I left them on their own.

Chapter Seventy-Eight

I stood absolutely motionless, my arm drew back on the bowstring as the agent passed in front of the buck I had trailed tirelessly for the last hour. It freaked and bolted as it caught his scent, eliciting a rapid response from the man I knew as Morrell. His weapon of choice for

hunting humans was a Tec-9 and he fired it on single shot. The buck took two steps and was down. He cursed, went over to the carcass and kicked it but didn't bother to check if it was dead.

I waited for ten minutes before he moved off and only when his radio crackled did he do so. His conversation was brief, someone else had reported seeing signs of human passage three miles due south of our position. I knew it wasn't from us, we hadn't made it that far or near the ridge that was being described to him.

When I was sure he was far enough away so as to not hear me, I checked the buck. He had hit the animal in the gut but it was still alive and suffering. Slitting its throat, I eased its pain and marked the spot where it lay so I could return to it later.

Tracking Morrell was easy--he was nowhere near the woodsman he thought he was and I made it all of twenty feet from him before I triggered his sense of being spied on. He froze and slowly turned his head around. I was standing in the shadows under a large cedar tree wearing camo. He could only have seen me if I moved and I wasn't stupid enough to do that. I could have taken him then and there, but I was more interested in finding the NSA agents' base camp.

Blue jays squawked to the left of him and distracted his eyes away from my position. His weapon came up so fast that it could have qualified as an old West fast draw. When the noise turned out to be a bear cub, Morrell cursed and backed up, clearly alarmed at its presence. Which meant of course, that Mama was close by. I waited curious as to what he would do, being an Easterner without any idea of what a grizzly was capable of, he had no clue what he was in for and I certainly wasn't going to offer suggestions.

When big Mama bear charged out of the brush, he managed to get off two or three rounds before the grizzly hit him full bore. His scream was magnificent, full-throated with terror and echoed. I would have bet that his fellow agents heard it all the way to Fort Meade. It scared me enough to remain frozen and watch as she mauled him to death, going for his liver and guts, satiating her winter-long hibernation. Two cubs joined her. She seemed to totally ignore the rounds that had pierced her hide. I barely saw any blood on her.

When there wasn't enough left to identify the man, she stood up on her hind legs and afforded me a close-up of the bullet holes. They had merely grazed her heavy bones and not done much damage at all. Bellowing, she stared directly at me.

I spoke in Siouan, thanking her for defeating my enemy and she ambled off without a backward glance, her cubs trailing obediently behind.

There were blood and tissue scattered everywhere. I went through what was left of his gear, removing his weapons, radio, canteen, maps, and sat-phone. The rifle was useless, she had mangled the barrel and no bullet would manage to explode from it without blowing up in your face. Taking the gear was a calculated risk, his remains were clearly the result of a bear attack but bears didn't need cell phones, guns or maps. Aiken would know something; some *human* had taken those objects.

I debated whether to try and backtrack Morrell or bring back the deer to the cave; opting finally to bring needed food to the agents. I found the spot where I'd cached the buck, luckily the bears hadn't touched it.

Dressed and quartered, I managed to carry a side back, leaving the rest up a tree for the return trip. I could have dragged the whole thing but I might as well have started a bonfire with signs depicting my position to one and all.

I moved cautiously, scanning in 360° before I committed to a movement. Because I was being hyper-vigilant, I caught the faintest blur of motion out of the corner of my eye.

Staring past the deer's shoulder hanging on my own, I picked out two men gliding through the woods to my left. Both wore Real-tree camouflage and carried hunting rifles. They appeared to be locals, not Federal Agents and were comfortable in the woods. If they were locals from the Government offices, they would have to be out of the Colorado office stationed near the Air Force Base. They clearly knew how to maneuver in the terrain, wore the appropriate gear and only luck had kept them from spotting me before I had seen them.

If they had been Natives, they would have smelled the deer carcass and recognized the odor of blood.

Once more, the spirit guide of my great-grandfather stepped in to tweak fate. The mama grizzly came between me and the men, forcing them to back up slowly as she rambled her way through the thickets between her and them. She ignored them but they did not stick around to tempt her patience. They were long gone when Morrell's two-way radio crackled with static in a query over his position and failed check-in.

The grizzly looked up from her feeding, saw me, smelled the deer meat and stood to her impressive seven-foot height. I knew she had scented my kill, her nostrils flared and she surveyed me, the intruder in her realm. Dropping back to all fours, she chuffed and went about her business. Rolling logs and digging through them for grubs was the only thing on her mind.

I told her thanks in Siouan and asked for her blessings as I turned my back walking away from a top predator in perfect safety.

Back at the cave, I crawled in after calling softly before I stood. The light from the lantern flickered on and both men flanked me, guns drawn. With me in the crossfire.

"You'd shoot each other," I pointed out as I dropped the meat.

"Looks like it but we angled it so we wouldn't," Anson shrugged. He eyeballed the deer. "You gonna butcher that?"

"Well, our food out here doesn't package itself in nice, neat plastic. So yes, I'm going to cut it up. We can smoke what we don't eat." I deposited my stolen gear on the cave floor and both men went over the collection.

"Did you kill someone to get this?"

"No. I didn't have to. Mama Grizzly did it for me." Delaney picked up the Tec-9 ammo clips.

"Where's the gun?"

"You ever see what a large Grizzly bear is capable of doing to a steel car? She bent that barrel like it was overcooked spaghetti. Anyone tries to shoot with it---well, they'll blow off their face or hand. Or both," I said grimly. "I took what was left that she didn't destroy and what we could use."

"Will the agents know you took them?" Anson asked.

"Once they find the remains, they'll know a bear killed him. Maybe they'll think the bear dragged off the rest. She did maul his pack and his clothes."

"Did it...eat him?"

"Guts and innards," I agreed. "That's one critter you don't want to piss off."

"Of course, you being Indian might have something to do with getting the bear to help you," Anson said and I stared at him. I wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic or truthful so I ignored his comment as I cut the venison into steaks, chunks, and strips. Most of it, I fileted into thin strips, laying them out on Morrell's space blanket.

Back outside in the woods and this time it took me twice as long as normal to collect what I needed because I was both searching for green willows and watching for enemy stalkers.

The willows I found downslope near the beginnings of a small stream. I took a few from different spots so that there wasn't an obvious bare patch. Cutting the lathes close to or under the soil, you would have to be actively searching to find it.

I'd taken one of those parachute cord bracelets from the dead man and used it to tie the bundle of willow switches together which left my hands free for my bow. I must have been a strange looking creature to the animals in the woods.

When I approached the cave, I made sure that it was from a different direction and to leave no tracks. Waiting, I scanned the entrance and surrounding area using the corners of my eyes, the part that senses movement in the unconscious section of the primitive brain. It did not sense danger so only then, did I crawl through pushing the bundle before me.

In my absence, one of the agents had made a small cooking fire and had scrounged camp ware. I laughed. A metal hubcap made a great frying pan laid on the coals and the dead man had obliged us with a few pots from his backpack. Boy scout stuff made of cheap tin and folded inside itself.

They watched curiously as I sat on my haunches and wove the willows into a grill-like lattice that I set against a small, natural overhang in the back wall of the cavern. Transferring a handful of coals, I started a secondary fire making it burn hot and fast so that there was a large bed of coals. Laying the meat on the lattice neatly, I made sure no piece touched another or overlapped as I filled the entire surface of the smoking rack.

"The trick is to keep the fire going and the smoke constant. Don't let it go out or the flames get too high," I said. "I'll bring back more firewood but it'll take me awhile. I can't cut it all from the same place nor pick up all the dead wood."

"Eat first," Anson urged. "You've got to be hungry. Exhausted."

I nodded slowly. "I am but not a good idea. Too full, I'll be sleepy and less cautious. Besides, one of us needs to be on guard." I eyed the cooking steaks and took a small piece. It was hot but waving it cooled it off enough to eat and I chewed slowly.

Venison wasn't fatty, it was a lean meat and this one had come off a deer just out of winter but it was rich and meaty. Juices flooded my mouth. I wanted to sit down and eat the whole thing but my instincts warned me not to do so.

Sighing, I licked my fingers, picked up my bow and crawled back out into the forest.

Chapter Seventy-Nine

I crouched under a blackberry thicket with a bundle of dry, dead branches that lay near my hand. I'd almost been caught flatfooted by four men and I was stuck in the briar patch with my bow on my back. Out of reach. Any movement, no matter how slow, to reach for the bow would draw their instant attention.

They moved ten feet apart and were clearly hunting prey. Human prey. Worse yet, one of them was recognizable even though it had been years since I'd seen him. Aiken. My blood froze as I remembered being in the same situation years earlier and in another state. My hand twitched. I wanted desperately to reach for the bow and nock an arrow yet I knew that any movement on my part would trigger an instant reaction from Aiken.

I assumed that they had found Morrell's remains and from their quiet comments learned that they knew a bear had taken him. One of the three was sure that his death was entirely natural and the other three argued that no *bear* would have any interest in the *human* equipment. Aiken cursed them, warning that voices carried even as low as a whisper.

A blue jay landed near my head, bobbing its bright eye as he stared at me, trying to decide if I was a threat, a meal or part of the environment. He fluttered his wings, maintaining his precarious perch on the thin canes and dive-bombed Aiken as he neared me.

The jay caused a rapid reaction as all four men pivoted but it was Aiken that shot first. I watched in horror as the blue jay was obliterated in a shower of feathers as a silver tube hit the bird.

Their guns were not familiar to me; these looked more like modified hand weapons capable of firing a tranquilizer dart yet I also saw a .308 Weathersby rifle slung across Aiken's back. Now that would take down Mama Grizzly with the right shot and I *knew* Aiken was capable of that.

He stopped, almost past me and turned around to survey the small cleared area where fire and wind had torn through, leaving enough space for sunlight and briars to take over the rough ground.

"Brings back memories, doesn't it, Lakan?" He spoke in a conversational tone. "I remember finding you in a place very much like this once before. Do you remember? I know you're out here, I found your fingerprints on Morrell's gun barrel."

His eyes swept the clearing, searching for the shadow that shouldn't be there, the smallest quiver of a branch where there was no wind. I could not expect help from Tungasila's spirit guide and to pray for help from the grizzly would be to risk her death from a bullet wound.

When a sign *did* come, I almost didn't make use of it---the shock to me was nearly as great as theirs.

A girl walked out of the trees. Clad in pure white ceremonial buckskins, beaded with her hair in braids and feathers, she was an Indian maiden straight out of the history books. She put her fingers in her mouth and whistled, startling all of us. As they swiveled to track her by gunpoint, she ran for the trees.

I saw them shoot her, but not one of their darts hit; they could not for she was a ghost. A *chindi*.

Only Aiken turned back but by then, I had lost my paralysis and stood, brought up the bow and nocked an arrow. Let the string go but I knew it was a miss before he saw me and dove to the ground, shouting for his men to return. I bolted downhill, taking huge leaps that would have impressed an elk yet he was up and after me.

I felt a sting in my thigh and brushed against the coveralls without slowing down. My fingers found a tear in the material and a thin scrape along the outside of my leg with just a small trace of blood. The damage was less than the wound I'd made with the tines of the fork so I ignored it. The trunk dart had only creased me, not injected me with its powerful payload.

I headed for the thickest part of the forest risking a look behind when I thought I had sufficient distance from them. Aiken was still coming, his face in a grimace but he had his two-way at his mouth and was shouting orders and directions into it.

I leaped an old stone foundation, an old cabin had once stood there and all that remained were a few laid stones with trees growing out of what was once a 14x14 square.

"Lakan!" he shouted. "Stop! If you don't stop, I will order DeCarlos and Little Bear terminated!"

Right then, I *knew* that they were already dead and stopped with a roar of grief. Beneath my feet, the rocks shifted and trembled. I aimed and let another arrow go hitting him in the center of his chest just as he triggered his own weapon. I swore that I saw the two projectiles cross each other's path before they hit their intended targets.

Mine struck over his black heart yet he casually pulled it out as if it were a rubber suction tip from a child's toy. His bobbed in my chest over my left lung, rising with my heart beat. I pulled it out, my movements sluggish and there was blood on the tip of the strangely hooked canister that was the size of a woman's lipstick.

My knees wobbled. The other men caught up to him and surrounded me. I raised my bow with an effort; it weighed as much as a grizzly bear. Before I could shoot any of them, three more darts hit me. Time slowed. But not of my doing. This fractured block of time was of drugged perception as a massive overdose of sedative coursed through my bloodstream. I fell to the ground. This time, there was no flying through the air and a water landing to carry me away from capture. This time, there was no Great-Grandfather to save me.

Aiken's face loomed over mine and he tore the bow and quiver out of my hands. He answered my unasked question by opening his coat and exposing a bullet and arrow-proof vest.

"Special made because we know you favor broadheads," he grinned. "Base, this is Geronimo One, the target is acquired. Possible OD, the subject has taken four, I repeat, four doses of Special K."

The light flickered at the edge of my vision. My body struggled to absorb the massive dose of Ketamine that I had taken. I felt time shift again in the middle of his words, his mouth paused midway, his eyes unblinking as I sat up. And fell over. Crawled on hands and knees, my breathing a series of constricted grunts as if my lungs were paralyzed. I wasn't sure how far I could make it before time stretched back to normal. I knew it wouldn't be enough so I kept crawling even when I wanted to lay down and die. Let the waves of sedation take me to that place where life was not compatible with living.

I threw up, each successive wave of retching made me feel worse and in the middle of one bout with my head hanging between my braced hands, spittle and drool strung from my mouth. I looked up to see a jagged side of the mountain broken by huge rocks and gnarled brush that fell away towards a river several hundred feet below.

Here was the ridge and cliff face that I was searching for, the backside of the cave where I'd stashed the FBI agents. For all the good it did me, they were too far to help. I would never make it around to them. Above me, frozen in the air hung a black helicopter with the sides open and men hanging out on ropes and tethers. Some had binoculars in their grip and were in the process of rappelling out, to join Aiken and to find me. It didn't matter that time was frozen in the arctic past, I was too incapacitated to do much more than watch. I didn't have any weapons on me, Aiken had removed all mine and the only piece of equipment I still possessed was the backpack. It had a rigid aluminum inner frame and tough nylon belting. I managed to stand upright and with the last of my strength, threw the pack at the rotors.

As soon as it left my hands, the backpack froze, motionless and unmoving like the rest of the world. Or at least, near me. I was reasonably sure that it affected everything not just those things close to me.

So, I jumped after it in a shallow, desperate dive. As my hands took hold of the nylon, time stretched as the material did, I pushed the frame into the rotors, let go, fell into the dangling rope and soldier just as the incredible stasis broke around us.

The man on the rope screamed in terror, the rotors shrieked in a high pitched howl, metal blades vibrated at unheard of stress as pieces of hot broken steel cut through metal and flesh with equal ease. The chopper exploded. Two of us swung at the end of a rope no longer tethered to anything but air as the rest of the crew followed the burning wreckage to the canyon floor. There, what was left turned into a fireball.

The black-clad BlackOps roper and I managed to spin on the rope, catch a tree's crown and bounced our way from branch to branch. What I remembered most was the familiar smell of pine and cedar before we hit the ground. I fell as a limp doll, unconscious and rubber-limbed as a drunk that came through an accident without a scratch where a sober victim would have been killed. The other agent must have landed near me. But for all I knew, he could have landed on top of me and I wouldn't have known or felt it. I never felt myself touch the ground.

Groans woke me but only to the point that I realized someone was alive. I wasn't sure if I classified as one of the living and I was equally unsure if it was one of the crew members who had survived. It could have been Aiken and I was willing to bet that of all the people on the helicopter and the ground forces, that it would be the NSA agent that made it out alive.

Someone was dragging my unresisting body by the shoulders away from the burning wreckage. The smell of roasting flesh and Avgas caused a retching at the back of my throat. I vomited all over my front and that smell was worse than what was around me.

I couldn't see who was taking me away; all I could see where my feet. Both my boots and socks were gone and from the state of my coveralls, I thought I was nearly stripped bare from the force of the explosion. Whoever it was removing me didn't take any special care as they hauled me over torn metal, broken branches and shattered rocks. The only thing I didn't hit was something on fire. That debris, my rescuer went around.

I tried to speak but my voice was disconnected, my comprehension that of a shell-shocked war victim. He seemed to haul me for miles or for hours and finally, I was dropped under the shade of some tree where it was cold and smelled fresh.

Only then did I see the face of my rescuer and my heart sank. Blackened by soot and fresh blood from a gash on his forehead, Aiken stared down at me with a blank expression and from the look in his eyes, I suspected that he was concussed for he didn't seem to understand what was going on. *I* didn't understand what was going on. To my utter consternation, he asked me who I was and what had happened.

"We crashed," I mumbled and he shook his head leaning closer and closer until I realized that it was because *he* was falling. His head hit me in the face, chin smashing into my nose with a force greater than a punch. My nose broke and blood gushed. Unfortunately, most of it went down my throat making it hard to breathe. I lost what little awareness that I had, floating on a wave of pain, firefly sparks, iron in my mouth and a persistent ringing in my ears.

An equilibrium of sorts was reached as we lay together. Cast adrift from my own senses, I migrated towards his. I saw inside his mind, his hopes, dreams, and aspirations. I saw his brain swelling and dying from the force of the explosion and I was glad. And then, ashamed for even his life was precious. So, I put aside my own dislike and healed those things I could do without taking too much from my own. I healed his broken bones, organ failures, ruptured spleen until all that remained were his memories and swelling brain.

That was the hardest part for me and if I hadn't been down that road before and had the practice, I would have taken too long to repair, losing those memories forever. Many areas of his brain were dark, dead and dying. As I triggered the return of their function, it drained me almost faster than I could recover with each cell and neuron.

As I finished, he shifted off my body and lay next to me in a quiet sleep that was neither sleep nor unconsciousness.

I had to get up and get away before he woke but my body refused to move still bound by the concrete accumulation of animal tranquilizers.

The ground trembled under my back. I wasn't sure if it was more helicopters landing or approaching agents running up to me. I barely suppressed a scream when two people dropped to their knees at my side, hands busy roaming over my flesh and finding spots that hurt when they touched them. There were many.

Their voices were annoying buzzes in my ears and it wasn't until I opened my eyes that I could read their lips. My ears did not work past the loud buzzing.

It was the two FBI men that I had left in the cave, both were armed with Sig Sauers as they checked me over. Anson's lips formed words. "Lakan. Lie still, you're bleeding and your arm and legs are broken for sure. I'm not so sure about anything else. Can you move anything?"

I couldn't hear my answer but I felt the words in my chest. I thought I said, "you have to move me before the rest of their team gets here."

"Your back or neck could be broken."

"Doesn't matter. Is anyone else hurt?"

Delaney must have said something but I couldn't hear it. Anson said, "can you hear me, Lake?"

I watched his lips. "No. I'm reading your lips. My ears are---."

Delaney leaned in towards my face. "The agent in the climbing rig is badly hurt. The rest of the chopper crew are toast."

"Toast? Burnt? All in one piece?" I asked and he shook his head in denial.

"Not enough left to call hamburger," he said frankly. "Even beyond your skills."

"Bring me climber," I said and he said no vehemently.

"Too much damage to move him, Lake. He'd die before I dragged him two feet and you're hurt badly. Too badly to heal anyone but yourself."

I pushed against Aiken and used him to get up, ignoring the sharp surge of broken bones. I had to fight against the two men's protest not to move. Finally, they gave in to my determination and steered me towards the injured man.

It was weird walking without hearing any sound, even the thumping of my own heartbeat was missing. I found the man from the zip line lying tangled in the remains of his rope and downhill from where I'd landed.

Both of his legs were broken in compound fractures and the bones bleeding through the skin told me that one of his major arteries was in jeopardy. Not severed all the way but close from the spurting of blood. I grabbed that first and healed it before he could bleed out.

His insides were a mess. The more I explored, the more I found and each successive healing brought me to the edge of total collapse. I did just enough to keep him stable before Anson and Delaney dragged me away, yelling something but I still couldn't hear them.

Trying to read their lips became nearly impossible as their faces grew darker and slower. I was moving away from them at the speed of sound when I felt myself picked up and thrown over someone's shoulder. The rest of my recollections were fragmented and hazy. As if seen through the lens of a kaleidoscope. I scarcely remembered them, I knew I didn't understand them--they were broken and painful.

Chapter Eighty

Anson slapped my face to rouse me and the first face I saw wasn't either one of theirs. It was Aiken's puzzled face that caught my attention and reminded me of my present situation. He spoke and I still could not hear anything save for a curious rushing sound in both ears. Even my own voice did not come back to me.

Someone must have told him so, for he picked up my hand and placed my fingers on his lips. The better to read them, he thought. His eyes had lost that sharp, harried look but his question stunned me.

“Why?” he asked, his face pale under the sun brown of an outdoorsman. “Why did you save me?”

“You remembered?” I asked painfully, aware that I was a sitting duck and that he could capture me at any time.

“I remember dying. Yet, you risked your own life and liberty to save mine when I was destroying yours. Why?”

“Isn’t it enough that I did?” I returned.

“No. It would have been smarter to let me die. You hate me. I wouldn’t be here now, ready to bring you in.” He looked over at the two FBI men with their weapons aimed at him. I couldn’t see their mouths move but they must have said something to him for he replied.

“I know you wouldn’t let that happen, Assistant Director Anson. Or you think so. My death wouldn’t stop Director Chase or Dr. Cameron from sending another team or coming himself. I’m living proof of the reason that they’ll never stop searching for him. Nothing you can do will stop them.”

“What happened to George and Leon?” I asked in fear for I had to know the answer. To his credit, he hesitated.

“We picked them up in Canada at the border, tagged and released them. They didn’t know they were tagged until we cornered them at the rendezvous point on the river. Mr. Little Bear drowned trying to escape across the river and Mr. DeCarlos disappeared into the woods near there. No one had been able to locate him, even with the tags. We suspect he’s dead, too. The microchip only works if the subject is alive.”

“You didn’t kill him?” I searched his face, reading the micro-tells that revealed if he was lying or not. I saw no evidence that he was telling me anything but the truth before he said it.

“No. But that doesn’t mean someone else didn’t do it.” He paused. “Chase likes to get his hands dirty and Cameron has developed a taste for field work, too.”

“If Leon is alive, he’ll find a way to the rendezvous point,” I said. He held up his hand.

“Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.”

“Why? I thought all you wanted was to capture me and bring me back to them.”

“Lakan, you saved my life. I was dying and you stopped to heal me. I would have forgiven you if you’d just stayed with me until the end. No man should die alone but you gave me life, knowing that I would come after you.”

“Maybe I did it so you would understand and let me go,” I suggested and he laughed.

“You healed my brain and saw my heart, Lakan Strongbow. You think I didn’t see who *you* are?”

He hauled me to my feet, all six foot two of him and held me as I wobbled. While I’d slept or been unconscious, my body had healed enough so that my broken bones were no more than aches yet I was so exhausted that standing was still an effort. Behind me, I heard odd rumblings that became noises, the babbling of everything around me all jumbled together in an onslaught of noise that my brain had trouble decoding. Until suddenly, I heard individual voices.

“I can hear you!” I shouted and there wasn’t silence because I could still hear birds, rustling trees and even the groaning of the earth. My grumbling stomach. With hearing came the sharpening of my other senses.

All of us looked as if we had come through an explosion. We had. Clothes ripped to shreds, torn, soot covered with blood-soaked rags. Faces in desperate need of washing and trimming. Hungry eyes. The FBI men looked a day or so cleaner than I, Aiken the worst. But Delaney and Anson had weapons and gear where Aiken had nothing on him but me. He checked my ears.

“No blood, no concussion. That’s good. Follow my finger,” he ordered and I pushed that digit down.

“I’m healed, no concussive side effects, no ruptured tympanic membrane. Question is, what are you going to do about us?” I snapped point blank. I thought I knew the answer but I wanted him to vocalize it.

“Hell, Lakan. What do you think? You saved my life, you made me the same as the Jacobi girl, like Mike Faraday and the others you healed. We’re part of your underground family now. I could no sooner turn you in than I could myself.” He went through his pants and pulled out a slim sat-phone, obviously one that the two FBI had missed. They had the grace to look embarrassed. Instantly, the two had him under the sights of their guns but I turned slowly and told them to holster them.

We listened as Aiken contacted his home base. They were frantic, trying to get info on the chopper and its crew.

“This is Rogue One, Base. Come in, Base. This is Rogue one. Do you copy?”

There was a burst of static and their voices rose, calling, one after the other so that all were garbled.

“Shut up!” Aiken shouted. “I can’t hear you!”

“This is Chase, Aiken,” a louder voice broke in. “Give me a sit-rep.”

“The chopper crashed,” Aiken reported. “That kid---he did something, threw something big into the rotors and the whole thing blew apart. Jacobson made it out alive, I gave him basic first aid and left him at the crash site. He wasn’t hurt bad, caught a tree on the way down.”

“The boy,” Chase demanded. “How is the boy? Have you acquired him?”

“He’s dead, Chase. We hit him with four doses of Special K and the chopper blades took his head off at the shoulders.”

There was utter silence for a moment. “Cameron said he can use his DNA.”

“No can do. The body burned in the chopper fire. The only thing left is a handful of his hair I snatched off his head before it exploded in the heat.”

I grimaced at the image of my head and brains doing that and nearly yelped as he pulled out a handful of hair, grinning at me as I grimaced back.

“What are your coordinates?”

“Thanks for asking about my health. I’m fine, by the way. A few sprains, cuts and a mild concussion,” Aiken spoke dryly. “I found the two FBI agents. They were left behind by the boy.”

“Bring them in. Where are you?”

Aiken looked around. We were at the bottom of a ridge between two mountains. Both sides were rocky with tall conifers covering most of the slopes but I could see a thin trail winding across the one ridge. “Somewhere over the next ridge. I’ll get back to you when I calculate my position. Out.” He thumbed the *off* button.

Spirals of smoke trailed lazily across the sky, residue from the crash and miles away. We were in Horseshoe Canyon if my memory served me. A box canyon, the only way in or out was directly in front of us and led to a Forest Service road out. The trail I saw on the ridge went only

to a rocky outthrust that stood over the valley and dropped five hundred feet to the Dolores River. It wasn't a route that two desk agents and a previously injured pair could manage.

"They'll be sending another chopper to pick us up," Aiken said. "You should go."

I looked at the pair and interrupted before they could protest. "You can't come with me and I'm not coming back with the FBI or the NSA. I have to find Leon and my friends. Will you let me do all that or are you going to be a part of killing *the god* your doctor has created? Killing *me*?"

Anson looked at me steadily, his face dirty, scratched by briars and limbs with a three-day-old beard. "Don't you know, Lakan Strongbow died in that helicopter crash?" He held out the last of the backpacks with the last of the gear and supplies. Somehow, they had found my bow and quiver, the quipp and two canteens.

Delaney took off his Carhartt coat and placed it over my shoulders, squeezing me as if I were a favorite son. Aiken handed me his maps.

"North is that way." He pointed over my shoulder back towards the wreckage of the chopper. "I would suggest that you avoid that area, Chase will have teams scouring the crash site. I'd go west and then cut back north but don't tell me. If I don't know, I can't lie."

I shook their hands and before I could feel the lump dissolve in my throat, I faded into the brush. I was gone from their sight in minutes but I caught the low murmur of their goodbyes far longer until the slow thunder of approaching Black Hawks drowned their voices out.

Fear made me forget my exhaustion and I made as many miles that night as I could wring out of a body made sluggish by the healings I had performed. Through it all, the sound of the helicopters and men hunting drove me on.

Chapter Eighty-One: Epilogue

I stood at the border between the US and Canada, twenty feet from the degraded fence that divided the First Nation Reservation lands of British Columbia from US soil. Three days of playing hide-and-seek with Chase's men had worn me to a thin shadow. I'd barely had time to eat or drink, hadn't slept more than 15 minutes snatched wherever or whenever I could take it.

Along the way, I'd found signs left by other natives---rock cairns laid in subtle shapes of Abenaki lore, feathers left in places where that species did not live. I heard the calls of marmots and coyotes where their feet did not tread and knew some other Native American shadowed me.

The sound of something large rustling in the trees brought my senses and weapon up. I leveled the bow on the spot, lowering it when a large equine head popped out of the bushes, followed by the rest of a paint horse. A bay paint gelding upon which a boy rode. A youth from the First Nation as the Canadians called their native population.

He wore old, faded jeans, a t-shirt under a ratty old army jacket with the name TSING'ILLI' on it. His hair was cut short, black and spiked over his ears and topknot. His eyes were the black of a snapping turtle and I noted with weary amusement that he held the horse between his knees so that his hands were busy with a .30-30 Winchester rifle. What my Great Grandfather called a bush gun. He spoke in harsh gutturals and I automatically translated as he asked me who I was.

I told him my secret warrior name and he responded in kind, telling me that the others were waiting for me.

"Others?"

He nodded. "Little Bear. DeCarlos, the woman, and her brother. The white men that you sent ahead."

“Little Bear? I was told that he drowned.” I was glad but surprised. He tucked the rifle into a saddle scabbard on the left side of the horse and offered me his hand. I jumped up, nearly missed because I was so tired, settled my rump behind the cantle of what was an old Sears center-fire saddle.

“The border has been patrolled by many white men with guns, infra-red and search helicopters,” he said, the curiosity evident in his bland voice. He was asking who I was that had elicited such a vast response from the government. “They say you are one of the old gods walking the earth. A great Healer sent from Wakan.”

I snorted. “What I am is a tired dude in need of food, toileting and bed. In that order. I can promise if it doesn't happen soon, I'm going to have a tantrum.”

It was his turn to snicker as he kicked the paint and it reared straight up into the air. I slid off to land on my ass in the middle of a patch of briar canes, tearing at my arms and face.

“Oops,” he said, not at all apologetic.

I leaned back on my elbows. “What's your name?”

“Nathan Onadauga.”

“I apologize, Nathan Onadauga. My name is Lakan Strongbow.” He leaned over and gave me his hand, pulling me up and onto the horse's rump once more. This time, I held on as he nudged the paint into a trot through the brush.

Twenty minutes later, we emerged on a hill leading down to a valley that was beautiful, white foamed streams, grassy meadows, and housing that was both practical and blended into the environment. It wasn't the typical poor Indian village. He rode up to a double wide on a cement foundation and around back to a small four stall stables where he told me to dismount. I slid off and he followed, leading the paint inside. There were other animals in stalls, equally as fine as the paint. Only when he was done with the horse's care did he tell me to follow him to the house.

We went in through the back door, into the kitchen. It was spotlessly clean. Around the square pecan table was seated six people I thought I would never see again. Leon, George, Mike, Robin and Maiara all leaped to their feet and hugged me. From another room, the Jacobis and the Senator joined us. In fact, everyone who had helped me was there. Except for Rachel and my great-grandfather but I could *feel* them too.

Marshal Muir came out of the back bedroom and said hello, but it was the Senator who told me what was up to date. He had carried in a laptop, open to a page with impressive seals and dire warnings on top secret clearances. He set the laptop down on the kitchen bar counter.

“Lakan, it's good to see you and in relatively good condition,” he started and I held up my hand.

“Hold that thought. I gotta use the facilities or I'm gonna die.” I ran to the bathroom and sat, letting myself sink into that stage that preceded sleep. In fact, it was the banging on the door from several disgruntled people that woke me. I nearly fell off the pot and called out that I was almost finished, they were determined not to let me have any sleep before they learned what had occurred in the last week.

I washed my hands, sloshed cold water on my face but it didn't help the bags underneath or the tiredness that dragged at my entire body. The door swung open and almost took out the lot of them, even Maiara was hanging onto the jamb.

“Lakan, this can wait until you get some rest,” she said and steered me towards one of the bedrooms. I followed her blindly and let her push me onto a queen sized bed with a soft rose Indian blanket where she pulled off my jeans and tucked the covers over my head. Then, I was

vaguely aware that she guarded the door, refusing to let anyone in the room. I slept for over eighteen hours, not even the hunger pangs of the last two days woke me.

It was, however, the smell of frying onions and garlic that teased my nose and stomach enough to roll over and peer blearily out at the closed door of a bedroom I couldn't quite remember. The walls were tan, painted and the ceiling an off-white with throw rugs made from rag strips. They were colorful and soft on my bare feet. I looked, someone had stripped me down to my underwear. I hoped that it wasn't Maiara that had seen me naked but then, I wasn't too upset if she had. I would rather have seen her in that condition, I would rather have had her all to myself, alone and loving. But, like everything else in my life, that would have to wait until I wasn't afraid for her life and mine.

Getting up required almost more energy than I could muster but I managed. Seems like that was all I did lately, manage.

There were clean clothes in the closet and a neatly folded set atop the pine dresser. It had a mirror behind it on the wall and I stared at myself, not recognizing the raccoon faced scarecrow that stared back at me.

The scared determined look in those eyes haunted me. I was still afraid, still worried that I really hadn't escaped from Chase, Cameron or the US government.

Slowly, I pulled on the clean clothes, smoothed down the t-shirt over my scars. It still hurt to bend over but someone had thoughtfully provided me with slip-on deck shoes. Everything in my size so that they should have fit perfectly but I had lost weight in the week-long chase through the National Forest.

The kitchen was busy, with Mairy behind the stove in an old flowered apron tied in front. She was cooking burgers, bacon, fried potatoes for an army while Senator Lourdes was tearing up lettuce leaves, George was shredding carrots and Mike was smashing garlic bulbs.

Robin looked up and tossed me a beer, Sam Adams Boston Lager. I found a can opener in the silverware drawer, popped the cap and took a healthy swallow. It tasted as good as I remembered. Just about the time that I'd swallowed half of it, Mairy called for everyone to sit down and eat. We traipsed into the dining room and sat wherever at the large oval maple table covered with real linen tablecloth and china plates.

The table was heaped with food---mashed potatoes, gravy, French fries, bacon cheeseburgers on potato bread buns. Homemade coleslaw, potato salad and a huge garden salad. Ice tea, beer, and coffee went round the table. No one sat next to anyone in particular but just grabbed a spot on the long benches in lieu of chairs while Robin and Mike took the opposite head and foot of the table.

Mairy raised her beer and all of us gave her our undivided and eager attention. "I want to thank all of you for helping Lakan and my brother and me in escaping from the Government. Without your help, Lakan would be imprisoned and we would most likely have been terminated to prevent him from escaping again.

"Some of us have given their lives or given up their life to be here. You are not forgotten, your sacrifice will be remembered and celebrated for all our lives. And yet, we are still not safe. Chase and Cameron have made Lakan's capture a prize worth more than anything in recorded history, more than anything in this world.

"Everyone will be suspect; everyone could be tempted to turn him in for the reward." She held the bottle up. "To those who perished and suffered so that we could be free."

All of us drank to those gone but not forgotten and then, dug into the feast. I took some of everything, ate all of it and went back for seconds. After filling my plate, I was aware of a strained silence and looked up to see the entire assemblage staring at me with open mouths.

“What?” I asked around a huge mouthful of mashed potatoes and gravy.

“No one’s ever seen anyone eat quite like that, Lakan,” Mairy said smiling.

“Yeah? Well, I’ve got to replace protein every time I repair something,” I retorted.

“You haven’t healed yet?” Mairy asked, worried. “I thought everything was done.”

“Mostly,” I chewed and swallowed. “Just some residual internal soreness.”

George spoke up. “When you’re done eating, if ever, Lakan, we need to get moving.

“Moving where?” Deliberately, I took another cheeseburger even though that was pushing it. My stomach almost felt too full.

“The Tribal Council wants to meet with us and determine the best place and scenario to hide you,” he answered me. I pushed the plate away and stood up.

“I’m ready.” Mairy moved towards my side and George shook his head.

“Just Lakan and I.” Mairy looked unsettled.

I haven’t had him to myself for more than five minutes!” she complained.

“After Lakan sees the Elders, Maiara, you can have him all to yourself for days,” he promised. He looked everyone in the eye and nodded again as he picked up keys left on the spotless counters.

Mairy kissed me and I felt her hand slip something into my back pocket. Or it could be that she was fondling my butt cheeks, or checking what was inside them. Her eyes misted as she pushed herself away.

“I love you, Lakan Strongbow. Come back to me.”

Frowning, I followed George Little Bear out to a shiny new Dodge Ram pickup and slid into the passenger seat. George told me to put on my seat belt and I obeyed him.

He pulled out and drove past the collection of neat double wides and trailers. All of them had barns with livestock, mostly horses, and cattle. In fact, it looked no different than any village on the rez back home. Except maybe cleaner and more prosperous.

“How far is it?” I asked.

“Not far. About 15 miles down the road. There’s the Tribal Council House, Medical Clinic, and other assorted government buildings. They run things about the same here, except the Council allows the RCMPs to have jurisdiction on Reservation land.”

“That means that they can arrest me?”

He nodded. “But they won’t extradite you if they did arrest you. Especially knowing the circumstances.”

I looked at him. “They know about me?”

He stared straight ahead and there was a pregnant pause before he spoke. “I told the Elders and they went to the Captain of the station. He agreed to listen to you before he made a decision.”

“George---.”

“Lakan, the only way for you to survive is to have some kind of protection from a governmental agency. Canada is the least likely to screw you over.” His gaze softened. “It’s for the best, Lakan. You’d have a chance which is more than Rachel had.”

“George, I tried to go back for her---.”

“I know you did. Both Roan Horse and Leon told me that you tried but she was already gone before Mike got you out of there.”

The truck rolled smoothly down the well-paved road, tires humming as he cruised at 70 mph so it wasn't long before we'd done the fifteen miles.

Coming into the complex was just like driving into any government bureaucracy center. Even the buildings had that sterile boxy look that Federal designers favored.

The truck drove up to one that was slightly less ugly than the rest and George shut off the ignition, opened the door and hopped out onto dusty gravel.

I did the same, noting that the busy parking lot was filled with both rental vehicles and Canadian government sedans. The rez plates were different than the regional BC plates, kind of unique and looked like the ones on Wyoming cars with an Indian chief in a headdress in the center of the license plate.

We walked up to the front doors, smoked glass so that we could not see inside but they were operated by laser sensors and opened as we approached them. There was a sudden pop as the pressurized air inside displaced with the influx of outside air.

The inside was a surprise. It was filled with Native art from more than one tribe. I saw medicine bags and cradleboards from the Cheyenne next to scrimshaw walrus tusks from the Inuit and Tlingit tribes as well as pottery from the Navajo and Hopi and textiles from Incan and Mayan. In the center of the reception hall soared a genuine Lakota teepee, made of lodgepole pines and painted buffalo hides. Painted with victory scenes from the Battle of Little Big Horn.

A woman waited for us, dressed in a neat pair of skintight jeans and smartly tailored blouse with a western motif. She was clearly of First Nation ancestry with black hair and deep brown eyes.

"I am Linda Ponyboy, Mohawk," she greeted in a soft Canadian accent. "Mr. Little Bear, Mr. Strongbow. Please follow me."

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the incredible artifacts and artworks as we marched down a hallway done in subtle gray and sandstone red, the walls covered with paintings and wool rugs that were priceless. She stopped at a door painted gray to match the walls and pushed it open to reveal a conference room, a large table at which a group of 12 men sat waiting.

"Thank you, Ms. Ponyboy," the one at the head spoke as he rose and came around to hold out to hands to George. They introduced each other and then the rest stood as George said my name and the name of my ancestors, stopping as he reached Great-Grandfather's name.

"Please sit. George, you can wait in the next room and Ms. Ponyboy will bring you coffee," the elder who had introduced himself as Nathaniel One Sock said. I asked them to repeat all their names again so that I could remember who was whom.

He started first as George went through the door that I hadn't seen recessed into the wall next to a row of large windows that looked out on the complex and surrounding woods which surprisingly, was closer than I had suspected.

"Please, Lakan. Sit down," One Sock said courteously but I heard the implied order in his voice. He gestured to the last empty chair and I hesitated. Number thirteen.

The chair was hideously uncomfortable. Something under the leather pricked me through the stiff cushion and no matter how I shifted, I couldn't get off it. None of the others seemed to mind their seats as they settled back into the plush black leather.

All of them looked like natives, all were dressed casually with no one in a business suit. With the exception of the spokesman, One Sock, they were all around 30-35, fit and generically the same demeanor which struck me as odd.

“Is it warm in here?” I muttered and ran my fingers around my collar, suddenly sweaty and tight. I swallowed, my throat felt as if I had chewed on chalk, dry and pasty; when I lifted my hand to rub at the lump, it refused to obey my command to rise.

Tingles of heat spread from my back, up my spine to resonate at the nape of my neck. Sudden ice cold numbed my head and I could not hold it up so I did not see the entire table of men stand until they were all gathered around me. My chair flew backward under one’s hand and 12 men circled me. I heard the door open and struggled to rise, to call George to help but nothing I could do or say came to pass under my control. Someone grasped me by the hair and jerked my head off my chest where it had fallen.

Looking into the brown eyes of the man who held me, I was aware that the face belonged to someone vaguely familiar. One of Aiken’s men. Named Andrews or something. He spoke over his shoulder and stepped aside to gather my wrists together, placing me in federal handcuffs.

Cameron’s blue eyes smiled back at me and over his shoulder, Chase and George Little Bear waited patiently for my eyes to focus and acknowledge them.

“George?” I gasped and nearly choked as he stepped aside to show me a woman standing behind him. I knew that face, that slender body but the last time I’d seen her, she was a spirit. “Rachel? I don’t understand?”

“They promised me her life if I brought you in, Lakan. I’m sorry but that and the \$50 million will go a long way towards providing care and hope to the people of Wind River.” He picked up Rachel’s hand and he led her away. She went without a backward glance to me.

“I take it these aren’t Tribal Elders?” I asked past the growing constriction in my throat.

“Agents culled from both our agencies and the Canadian government,” Chase told me. “I have looked forward to this day for years.” Taking out a device from his pocket, he jammed a Taser into my belly, letting the voltage sear my muscles until I could no longer keep my brain active.

“Welcome back to your real world, Lakan,” Chase said and Cameron’s laugh was the last thing I heard before I saw Rachel and George’s departing backs.

The movement made me aware that I was still alive and it brought astonishment with that idea, still alive and with some sense of my surroundings. I knew that I was being transported via helicopter back to the states and from there, into a military transport plane where efficient medics and Cameron kept me drugged and totally immobile. It wasn’t until I was fully conscious that I recognized my last destination as a room done in washable tile so that the blood could be hosed off, bars across the open wall that looked out over an observation deck, no creature comforts at all.

The drugs wore off as Cameron supervised my unloading into a sterile operating suite, slid my unresisting body onto a steel table locking my wrists to restraints at the ends of cross-like arms while my ankles were pulled as far apart as possible.

All my joints ached. I rattled the cuffs and they were more than plastic, leather, more than good old fashioned American steel. These were vanadium steel, hardened tougher than the steel used in the Titan rockets and unless I possessed a laser cutting device, I wasn’t getting out of them anytime soon.

Cameron cut off all my clothes, attached my IVs to a pole welded to the side of the steel autopsy table and looked down at me. “Well, Lakan. We call this the ‘Screaming Room’. Want to know why? After all, you are the star attraction that this place was built to accommodate. I expect that you’ll be providing us with quite the show for the next few years.”

He was right. I christened the room with my agony, blood, vomit, body fluids and curses until my mind broke. But that didn't stop him or Chase for as long as my body supplied them with medical miracles or genetic anomalies for I was his research. His Guinea pig. Those who used me never gave me the opportunity to escape nor did they ever remove me from the restraints or the prison cell. In time, my tortured screams became part of the 'Screaming Room's' legend.

I was more animal than human, existing in a world encompassed by the four walls of the cell and the two torturers in the name of Science and Greed, a sadistic doctor's plaything and source of income for my body's unique blood and cells. I was the 'Screamer' of the 'Screaming Room', lost and forgotten to all the world but most important of all, to *myself*.

The End.