

# The Price Of Betrayal

## By Scribblesinink

### 1 Chapter

"It was my job. *You* were my job."

Rachel was standing a few steps higher on the staircase than he, so he could look her straight in the eye. She stared back, puzzled. She was close enough that he could catch a whiff of her soap: sweet, with a hint of cinnamon and oranges, until a cold draft from the front door blew around them, scenting of autumn rain. He held her gaze, longing to say more and make her understand but words failed him.

And where would he start? With the murder of Simon Lehane, an innocent man whose only crime had been that Manticore needed his identity? No, maybe he should begin with how he'd been ordered to pose as her piano teacher and monitor her father's actions. Or that he broke into her father's files and reported what he learned to his superiors.

Better yet, once Manticore realized that Robert Berrisford was planning to expose them, they'd ordered him to kill both father and daughter—to *send a message*, as they said. Perhaps he should tell her that.

The bomb he'd planted underneath her father's car was armed and ready, and the activation device hidden in the pocket of his jeans. It shouldn't be hard to carry out his orders: all it required was for him to push the button, and—*boom!*—mission accomplished, and he could return to base, to the drills and lessons and the training regime. Until the next mission.

Except... he didn't want to press that button. He didn't want to go back to base victorious if that meant Rachel's blood was staining his fingers. He wasn't sure what it meant: why he felt the way he did, or how he knew he'd reached a line he shouldn't cross. What he *did* know was that his superiors had never expected to see something like it in one of their transgenic creations. Yet it *had* happened: Rachel Berrisford, with her sweet-natured innocence, had awoken emotions in him that he wasn't supposed to have, and that he'd been ill-prepared for.

Bewildering feelings had kept him up all night, unsettled, rending him between the duties he'd been born and bred for—and the responsibility something deep inside himself told him he had. Torn between the urge to finish the mission and his desire to keep Rachel from harm, he made a fatal mistake: having planted the bomb, he'd looked up at the

mansion one last time. And there she had been, framed in the window, collecting her books and backpack, looking so carefree and young and *alive*. Before he could stop himself or think about what he was doing, he'd slipped into the house to find her, wanting nothing more than to tell her the truth and take her away.

There wasn't much time, though. He was no fool; the scientists who sliced his genes together had added a liberal amount of intelligence before they stuffed the cells into a test tube, and he knew a clock had started ticking the instant he snuck into the house. He could hear it count down in his head. Manticore was expecting results; they were waiting for news of murder this morning. And when that news didn't come, once they realized he'd disobeyed them and failed his assignment, they would swarm in like a flock of gulls on a fisherman's boat after it hauled in the nets. Neither Rachel nor her father would be safe until they disappeared and vanished to a place where Manticore could never find them.

And that was why he found himself on the wide marble staircase, lost for words.

It took Rachel a few seconds for his words to sink in, and he could tell the exact moment understanding dawned from the way her eyes darkened. Something died in them; the sparkle that he loved and admired so much, evaporated. Deep resentment, disgust even, replaced it. She didn't understand—she *couldn't*. And she'd never look at him again like she had that night in the pool behind the house a few days ago.

His handlers had been delighted when he told them he'd been invited to the Berrisford house socially. For them, it was simply the perfect opportunity to collect more intel on Berrisford's plans. Little did they know that for X5-494 the night would turn out to be about something else entirely. Having slipped away from the dinner table, Rachel took him to the pool house. Much to his surprise, she suggested they take a swim. After a moment's hesitation, he agreed and for a short time, he'd been able to pretend he was normal, human, and nothing had existed but the girl in his arms, her skin warm and slick and wet against his chest. Truer words had never been spoken than what he told her then: *I like you. I like you a lot.*

The hard scorn in her eyes, so different from the shy gaze she'd offered him when she asked him to turn around before she dared take off her dress, or the quiet challenge they'd held after she dove into the water, cut him to his core. Somewhere deep inside, something let go with an almost physical rip that left him gasping.

Could this be what a broken heart felt like?

X5-494 shoved the question out of his mind. It didn't matter what she thought of him, as long as he could convince her of the truth.

As long as he could keep her safe.

Rachel's hand lashed out. He could've easily avoided the blow if he'd wanted to but he let her slap him. The force of the impact whipped his head around, and his cheek burned hotly. Undoubtedly, there was a hand-shaped imprint on his skin. He deserved it.

He deserved so much more.

Outside, Berrisford was growing impatient. "Rachel! Come on, honey."

Time was slipping through his hands like water.

Rachel gulped a sob, dark eyes brimming with tears. She tried to push past him and escape; but they were still in danger, she and her father, and he *had* to make her understand. He snatched her arm.

For a frightful, endless instant he feared that he had missed, and his heart skipped. Then those enhanced X5-series genetics kicked in and his fingers clamped around her wrist, stopping her in mid-flight. Her forward momentum should've sent them both tumbling down the stairs yet once again his superior strength and balance came to their rescue. Rachel spun around, her feet leaving the staircase for a second before she fell hard against his chest, gasping. Small fists shoved at him, pummeling his shoulders, and he held her tight.

"Rachel!" A note of concern had entered Berrisford's voice.

She screamed. "Daddy!"

In the moment of shocked silence that followed, X5-494 heard a distant *click*, faint enough that only his transgenic hearing would pick it up. He frowned, instincts screaming an alarm. It sounded exactly like—

Before he could follow the thought to the end, the world erupted in fire and heat. The manor shook on its foundations; chips of plaster came loose, showering them with white flakes. A pressure wave surged through the front door, strong enough to crush Rachel against him. He tottered on his heels, the shock blast powerful enough to unbalance even a transgenic, and grabbed the banister with one hand, the wood groaning beneath his grip, while holding the girl tight with the other. He barely managed to keep them both on their feet against the wall of air that shoved at them. Outside, flames roared hotly and thick smoke billowed into the house, carrying the acrid stench of burned flesh and rubber.

Rachel slumped in his embrace, stunned from the explosion. "Daddy?" she whimpered. She inhaled some of the smoke and began to cough. As soon as she regained her bearings, she shrieked, "Daddy!"

She tried to tear herself loose from his hold, the move so panic-fueled and unexpected he nearly let her go.

"Rachel, no!"

He renewed his grip, fingers digging into her flesh until it bruised and he forced himself to let up. He couldn't let her go; she was still in mortal danger. *He* was not the one who had set off the bomb that killed her father. The bomb's trigger device was still in his pocket, the safety on; it would've taken more than a chance bump to set it off. And it most definitely hadn't been an accident like faulty wiring that caused a premature detonation: he was too well trained to make such mistakes. That left only a single explanation for the bomb going off: Manticore. They'd sent a backup team. It was his fault: he'd hinted to his handlers that he was reluctant to kill the girl and didn't see the point.

As soon as they learned she hadn't been in the car, they'd come after her; her death was part of the message they wanted to send.

He shook her, hard enough that Rachel's head jerked back and forth. "Listen to me! We've got to go. Now! Your father's dead, there's nothing you can do to help him."

She wasn't listening; she didn't even seem to hear him. Tears streamed down her face, long strands of loose hair sticking in the moisture on her cheeks. "Let me go! You murderer!" Her voice rose in pitch with each word.

Somewhere in the distance, sirens started blaring.

They had precious few seconds left.

"I'm sorry, Rachel," he whispered. He balled his fist and struck her on the chin. Her diatribe was cut off in mid-sentence; her eyes rolled back into her head and she slumped in his arms.

oOo

They had parked the van a couple of houses down the tree-lined lane, far enough that they were safe from prying eyes and wouldn't raise the X5's suspicions, but not so far they

couldn't see what was happening at the mansion. There were three of them, two in the front and one in the back, dressed in similar dark-colored pants and suit jackets that were designed to blend in. The driver, a sergeant by the name of Hodges, peered through the windshield at a shadow moving along the shrubbery that lined the driveway. He shifted in his seat to avoid a tree branch blocking his view, and raised a pair of small binoculars to his eyes. The fuzzy shape jumped into focus.

"There he is," Hodges commented.

The dark-clad figure was sneaking up to the black limousine, casting furtive glances at Berrisford's chauffeur. The X5 reached the car and crouched down next to it. Though they couldn't see what he was doing, Hodges hoped the transgenic was carrying out his orders and placing a tiny explosives device underneath the car. For an instant, his gaze shifted to a small remote resting on the SUV's dashboard. It was a copy of the device the X5 would be carrying, designed to trigger the bomb underneath the car.

*"We have reason to believe X5-494 might hesitate," Sandoval had told them at the mission briefing. "Your team will be there to make sure Robert Berrisford and his daughter die, regardless. And if need be, to bring back the X5. Alive, if possible."*

The sergeant returned to watching the driveway in time to see the X5 hover beside the car. He was glancing up at the house. Hodges tried to follow his gaze; the angle was wrong, though, and he couldn't tell what the transgenic was seeing. It didn't matter, really. The X5 should be clearing out; he had half his mission accomplished. But instead of vanishing back down the way he'd come, he changed direction and disappeared into the house, unseen by Berrisford or his driver.

"Son of a bitch," Hodges muttered.

"What's going on?" the corporal in the back hissed.

"He's not gonna do it," the third man said. From the shotgun seat he didn't have as good a view as Hodges did, but he'd seen enough. "Where'd he go?"

"Into the house," Hodges said. "Looks like Sandoval was right."

"Goddamned freaks," the corporal muttered. "Can't even properly follow orders."

"Be glad," Hodges said absently. He reached for the key and started the engine. "Or we'd all be out of a job."

Hodges drove the van further up the street and parked next to the Berrisford driveway

where a large bush would shield the car from view. He took the trigger mechanism from the dashboard and waited. His hands were moist. He rolled the window down until a puff of wet autumn air blew in.

*Take them both out*, Sandoval's orders had said. Berrisford's daughter was still in the house somewhere. Where the X5 had gone. What the hell was the transgenic doing?

"Rachel! Come on, honey." Berrisford's voice drifted on the breeze.

"Daddy!" The girl's muffled scream came from somewhere inside the house.

The door of the limousine swung open and Berrisford started to climb out. The sergeant keyed the safety off the trigger. A red light began blinking on the device. *Armed and ready*.

Time was up; he had to make the choice.

Hodges pushed the button.

The explosion was bright enough to sear his eyes and for a long moment the afterglow made it difficult to see anything. As soon as his vision returned, Hodges put the car back into gear and tore up the driveway, tires squealing, the sound muted in the roaring blaze of the burning limousine. Heavy, black smoke billowed from the wreckage and yellow flames licked at the sky. The fire was so bright that Hodges's eyes teared up despite the tinted windshield.

"Get the X5," he told his men. "Quickly. But be careful." Far-off, sirens began to howl.

"Yes, sarge!"

The two men jumped from the car into a blast of hot air, each holding a small stun gun in his right hand. They had all witnessed the X5-series in hand-to-hand combat and knew that without the device, they'd be no match for the transgenic should he decide he didn't want to come with. Each man threw his left arm across his face to avoid inhaling the smoke and vanished from sight. Hodges tapped a nervous rhythm onto the steering wheel, his ears tuned to the approaching sirens.

"C'mon, c'mon, dammit," he murmured. It wouldn't do to be accosted by the local police; it'd be difficult to explain the presence of the US military at the scene of a local businessman's murder; neither his superiors nor Sandoval would be pleased if he let his men end up in a position where they were forced to try.

The fire was dying down and the smoke from the wreckage tapered off gradually, making it easier to breathe. Shapes approached in the mist and Hodges tensed up. As the shadows came closer, he recognized his subordinates and marginally relaxed.

"Where is the X5?" Hodges barked as soon as they were within earshot.

The corporal cleared his throat. "Fuckin' gone," he rasped, blinking red-rimmed eyes at the sergeant. "Couldn't find him. Back door was open, though. Not a sign of the girl either."

"Goddammit!" Hodges cursed. The sirens were close, now. "Get in." He put the car into reverse and raced away, burning rubber in the driveway.

Agent Sandoval was not going to be happy.

oOo

X5-494 wasted no time on regrets and hoisted the unconscious girl over his shoulder. Marveling at how little she weighed, he leaped down the last few steps of the rounded staircase and turned away from the front door. He fled into the kitchen, all immaculate steel and polished oak. Cream-colored tiles gleamed beneath his feet and the faint scent of bacon and eggs still clung to the air, mingling with the smoke from the burning car. He darted past the cooking island, flung open the back door and ran out onto the deck.

Three stone steps led down to an immaculate lawn. The grass was freshly cut to a neat half-inch height and barely a handful of fallen leaves marked the field. Clusters of rose bushes, rare late blooms bright spots of color against their stems, and magnolia shrubs broke the monotony of dark green, while a majestic chestnut, its leaves brown and drooping, stood ready to provide shade in the summer. At the far side of the lawn, a row of evergreen conifers marked the end of the lush garden. He skipped down the stairs and blurred across the grass faster than a human eye could track. Behind him, voices began to rise in the manor's hallway. He struggled through the shrubbery until he reached the brick wall fencing off the property. The wall wasn't high; certainly not high enough to stop an X5, even with the added burden of an unconscious girl in his arms.

He vaulted the wall easily, bending his knees to absorb the impact when he landed. The screech of sirens was growing louder and, dimly beneath it, the squeal of tires reached his sensitive ears. He had to hurry. Berrisford was an important man, with friends in high places; it wouldn't take the authorities long to set up roadblocks and canvas the neighborhood. He needed to get out of the area; he had no desire to fight the entire Seattle police force as well as his own people.

He glanced around.

The street behind the property was only slightly less upscale than the lane the Berrisfords lived on, the smooth asphalt glimmering with the drizzle. Although no fences surrounded the houses, most featured security systems on the doors and windows, and trees and bushes in the front yards hid the buildings from casual view, providing privacy for their owners. At this early hour, the street was deserted, the sound of the explosion having been muffled by the sprawling Berrisford mansion. Cars were parked in some of the driveways, their owners not yet having left for work. 494 scanned them quickly, settling on a silver gray Lincoln Town Car, an older and rather nondescript model.

He scooted across the street and knelt next to the Town Car. Gently, he lowered Rachel's limp body onto the pavement. A large oakleaf bush shadowed them, lessening the chance of someone peeking out their kitchen window and noticing him stealing their car. Hidden behind the shrub and invisible to any occasional passer-by, it took him less than ten seconds to open the car door and hotwire its engine. It rumbled to life, and on the dash the meter jumped to indicate the tank was half full. It should be enough to get them out of the city.

But what was he going to do with Rachel? She was showing no signs of coming around and he worried he might've hit her harder than intended. Although it would be easier to take her to safety while she was unconscious and couldn't call for help, a sleeping girl in the front seat might raise questions at the security check points. And if she regained consciousness while he was trying to get them out of Seattle undetected... She wasn't going to let him take her quietly.

He sighed. There was only one option, really, much as he might dislike it. He pressed the button that released the trunk, slipped back out of the driver's seat, and carried Rachel around. He tied her up with a piece of rope he found in the trunk, making sure the bonds didn't cut into her skin. He should gag her too, he thought, but the only available object was a greasy cloth that stank of motor oil, and he couldn't bring himself to put that anywhere near her face. He would just have to hope for the best.

He molded her backpack into a pillow beneath her head, thinking it might make her a bit more comfortable. She looked peaceful, her eyes closed, her chest rising gently with each breath. A bruise was coloring her jaw. He touched it with a finger tip, softly, regretting having had to hurt her.

*Better hurt than dead.*

He shook off the guilt, locked the trunk and settled behind the wheel. He had to get the hell out of town.



The place reeked of gasoline and scorched flesh. Flashing strobes—blue and red for the police cruisers and amber for the ambulance—painted the grisly scene in a surreal light. Investigators milled about while uniformed officers kept the curious at a distance. It looked like the rich and powerful were no different from the downtrodden, Clemente thought. Give them a disaster to gawk at, and they'd come out in droves, taking a macabre pleasure in knowing it had happened to someone else, not them.

A crime scene investigator was taking photos of the black skid marks in the driveway, evidence of a car attempting to accelerate faster than its wheels could keep up with. She let go of the camera and knelt down with a measuring tape. Clemente waited until the woman had finished her work.

"Anything you can tell me?" he asked.

She rolled up the tape and put it in her pocket. "The tracks are recent," she said. She nodded to the smoking wreckage. "And they weren't made by the limo. The wheel base is wrong. I'm thinking a van or SUV."

"Getaway car?" Clemente said.

She shrugged. "I'll have an initial report for you in a few hours." She reached for the camera again, ignoring Clemente.

Smiling wryly to himself, Clemente continued up the driveway heading for the wreckage. Crime scene investigators weren't known for their willingness to speculate; if she found anything he should know, it would be in her report.

A rumpled white sheet hid a body from view next to the burned-out husk of a large limousine. The chauffeur, Clemente knew. The other victim, Robert Berrisford, had still been alive when the paramedics arrived. Though whether he was to be envied remained to be seen; the industrialist had been rushed to the Harborview Burn Center with third degree burn injuries and it was unlikely he would survive to see the end of the day. Nevertheless, Clemente had ordered two uniformed guards posted at his door; Berrisford was more than likely the intended target of the bomb, and the driver mere collateral damage.

Clemente knelt beside the body and lifted the covering. The victim was barely recognizable as human, and the detective quickly dropped the sheet, swallowing hard. He'd seen a few gruesome sights in his years on the force, but that didn't mean it'd ever

get easy. Climbing back to his feet, he unconsciously wiped his hands on his pants. He glanced around.

Two heavy-set men wearing suits hovered beside the front door of the mansion, talking to one of the uniformed policemen. To Clemente, they came across as angry and embarrassed all at once, and one of them was dabbing at a bloody scratch on his temple with a handkerchief. Clemente wove his way to them through the crowd of aid workers.

"Detective Clemente," he introduced himself. He showed them his badge. "You work for Mr. Berrisford?"

"Yeah," the one with the cut replied. He exchanged a glance with his partner. "Frank Davies."

Clemente gave a nod before he caught the other's eye. The man held his gaze for a long second, seizing him up, then shrugged. "Sean Mason," he said, his tone reluctant.

"Security?" Clemente suggested, once it seemed they weren't going to offer anything further of their own accord.

The two men exchanged another look. "Yes," Mason finally admitted. He stared at the detective hard, daring him to say something. Clemente was too smart to antagonize possible witnesses for mere kicks.

"What happened?" he asked instead.

"I'm not sure," Davies admitted after a moment. "I was near the sitting room when Rachel—that's Mr. Berrisford's daughter—screamed for her father. I ran to see what was going on and saw her with that kid, Simone Lehane. The girl's piano teacher. Before I could reach them, there was an explosion. I got knocked out by the blast and when I came 'round, there was all this smoke and fire."

"And Rachel's gone," his partner said.

"Gone?" Clemente pulled himself straighter. That hadn't been in the initial report that brought him out to the scene of the bombing.

"Yeah. Mr. Berrisford was to take her to school," Davies said. "He does so most every morning."

"She'd gone back upstairs, had forgotten a book or something," Mason added. "I was there, talked to her for a moment before she went back down." He lifted a shoulder. "That's all I

know. She was nowhere to be found, after."

Clemente watched as the coroner's people lifted the body onto a stretcher. "So, what d'you think happened to the girl? Think this Lehane took her?" The name sounded vaguely familiar. Clemente made a mental note to request whatever information Records had on the music teacher, as soon as he'd finished interviewing the guards.

"I guess so. He did seem to have a thing for her," Davies said.

Mason added, "And she for him."

"You think she was in on it?"

"No way." The two bodyguards spoke in unison and Mason gave him another hard stare. Clemente lifted his hands, palms out. *Just doing my job.*

"Rachel loves her father," Davies told him. "After Mrs. Berrisford died, those two grew very close. But lately, Mr. Berrisford..." His voice trailed off.

"Yes?" Clemente prompted.

Davies sighed. "Something was goin' on." He scuffed a toe at the wet ground. "Mr. Berrisford was making plans to send his daughter away. Like he knew he was in danger."

"But he never told you why?" Clemente asked.

"No. Perhaps if he had..." They both glanced over Clemente's shoulder at the wreckage.

"All right," Clemente said. "I'll look into this Lehane." He gave them a card. "Call, if you remember anything else."

"Detective?"

Before Clemente could fully turn away, a pretty uniformed female officer drew his attention. "You might want to talk to Mrs. Rodriguez over there." She pointed. A woman in her middle years sat slumped on the low wall marking a flower bed, not caring at all about the damp flagstones staining her dress. Her hair was still black without a strand of gray in it, a stark contrast with the spotless white of the maid's uniform she wore. He remembered the name: she'd been the first person to call 911 after the car exploded.

"Thank you." Clemente nodded at the officer and walked over to Mrs. Rodriguez.

"Ma'am?" She glanced up, her face pasty and tear-streaked. "I'm Detective Clemente, Seattle PD. Can you tell me what you saw?" He knelt in front of her so they were at eye level. Sometimes it was best to appear imposing when questioning a witness, but at other times empathy and understanding yielded better results.

"I—I was in the dining room," Mrs. Rodriguez stammered. Her English was tinted with a Spanish accent. "There was this noise, an *explosión*." She sniffled. "I ran to the window to see out. And there was fire... and smoke, and... Madre de dios, que la mala Señor Berrisford!" For long moments, she couldn't go on. Fresh tears trickled down her face. Clemente offered her his handkerchief and she took it with a grateful whimper. He waited patiently for her to stop crying.

Several minutes later, Mrs. Rodriguez had managed to pull herself together enough to continue. "I go to the phone and dial the police," she said. "Then the black men came in."

Clemente raised an eyebrow and sat up. "Black men?" he repeated. "You mean, men of color?"

"No, no." Mrs. Rodriguez shook her head. "Las ropas negras. Black suits." She stared in the distance the way people do to try and call up their memories. An instant later her gaze settled on Clemente's face. "One of the men, his eyes... they were... ojos asiáticos."

"Slanted," Clemente understood. "One of the men was Asian." She nodded.

"What did they do? Did they take anything?"

The maid frowned. "No. They looked and left. I hide from them. Then the police came."

"Mrs. Rodriguez, did you see Rachel's music teacher, Simon Lehane, at any time this morning?"

"Simon?" She blinked. "No. Mr. Berrisford, he tell Simon the lessons would stop."

Clemente pushed himself back to a standing position. He patted the housekeeper's shoulder. She was trembling ever so slightly. "You have been a great help," he told her. "We will find the men who attacked your employer and took his daughter. I'll take you to see one of our sketch artists so you can help him draw up a profile of those men in black. You understand?" He thought for a moment to gather up some Spanish. "Un artista del bosquejo. Para dibujar un cuadro." She dipped her head in acknowledgment.

"Si. Si." She grabbed his wrist. "Señor? Por favor, find Rachel." And Mrs. Rodriguez burst into fresh tears.

## 2 Chapter

The silver Town Car rolled swiftly through the uneven, potholed Seattle streets. The engine purred, the gear shift responded smoothly to his touch and the pine tree aroma from the air freshener attached to the rear view mirror competed with the old-leather scent of the car seats. It was almost pleasant enough that X5-494 could enjoy the drive. But the girl in the trunk, the girl who'd come to mean so much to him that he'd abandoned and betrayed the only life he'd ever known, that girl was never far from his thoughts. His ears were attuned to detect any sound over the hum of the engine that might indicate she had regained consciousness. Still, so far, everything was quiet.

He turned left onto Rainier Avenue and merged with the traffic going south. Two police cars were heading north at high speed in the opposite lane, their lights flashing crazily in the morning gloom. 494 tipped the gas pedal a bit deeper; it wasn't far to the city limit. Once he made it past the final checkpoint, he could get Rachel out of her confinement—hopefully before she woke up and found herself locked inside a dark, dank trunk.

Traffic slowed to a crawl. Ahead, three meter high fences marked the city's border, barbed wire running along the top. At an agonizingly sluggish pace, the sector cops checked people's papers thoroughly before waving them through. X5-494 forced himself to unclench his fists from around the steering wheel before he'd snap it. He wasn't worried about himself; the sector cops were bullies, but not very well-trained. It was Rachel who concerned him.

Perhaps, he second-guessed himself, he shouldn't have hidden her in the trunk. If things went wrong, he wouldn't be able to get her out of there. He glanced around, but cars had piled up into a jam behind him; there was no way he could shift Rachel into the back seat without drawing unwanted attention. He was committed, for better or worse.

Finally, the sector cop raised the barrier to let the car in front of him through. X5-494 drove up and stopped next to the cop, a pimple-faced kid not much older than he. The cop wore an air of importance. X5-494 pressed the button that lowered the window and flashed a smile, beaming up at the security camera that registered everyone passing out of Seattle.

"Morning, Officer."

The kid grunted something in reply and held out his hand.

X5-494 put Lehane's driver's license and sector pass in the outstretched palm. He made himself breathe evenly, though mentally he held his breath. The cops would find out

soon that Simon Lehane had been at the Berrisford house this morning, if they hadn't already. And of course Manticore knew everything about his fake identity. Hell, they were the ones who'd sent him to kill the real piano teacher to begin with so he could pretend to be Lehane and gain access to the Berrisfords. 494 hoped they just wouldn't believe that he was still using Lehane's papers.

The pimply cop studied the photograph on the license and bent his knees to look inside the car. "Music teacher, eh?" he said, not attempting to keep the scorn for what he considered a wimpy occupation out of his voice.

"Yes sir," X5-494 replied amiably. He suspected the officer's tastes ran more along the lines of heavy metal filled with screeching guitars than it did Mozart or Händel.

"Go on." With a bored gesture, the sector cop waved the Town Car through.

"Have a nice day," 494 murmured. It wasn't until the check-point had faded out of view in the mirror that he let out a deep, heartfelt sigh of relief.

oOo

Agent Sandoval gaped at the man standing at attention in front of his desk and tried vainly to find words. The sergeant was still out of uniform, and he stank of smoke. Sweat beaded the soldier's brow and he twitched with the effort to remain motionless underneath Sandoval's furious stare.

"Sergeant," Sandoval said at last, "all you had to do was make sure things went according to plan." He struggled to keep his tone low, although fury coursed through him and he hankered to shriek his displeasure into the sergeant's face. "Are you telling me that, not only did you fail at this simple task, but you also fucking lost the *fuckin' X5*?"

Much to his chagrin, he realized he'd failed to hold his temper and was shouting the last words.

Hodges blinked rapidly. "Sir, X5-494 went rogue on us, sir."

Sandoval took a deep breath and pushed himself to his feet. He planted curled fists on the surface of his desk and leaned forward, glaring up at the taller sergeant. "Is that an excuse I hear, sergeant?"

"Yes—I mean, no sir!" Hodges stammered.

"Hmph." Sandoval straightened. "Find him," he growled, allowing some of his anger to

creep back into his tone. "And the girl. I don't care what you have to do, just fuckin' *find them*."

"Yes, sir." The sergeant saluted stiffly, the gesture oddly out of sync with his civilian dress, and performed an about-face.

"Sergeant." Sandoval stopped him as Hodges was about to open the door. "Don't fail again," he said. Once more, he sounded calm, collected, icy. "Or you'll find yourself alone in the basement. While I disengage the cell doors myself." The sergeant swallowed, and Sandoval took a little satisfaction in seeing the way the man's Adam's apple bobbed heavily.

"Yes sir," Hodges said, his voice shaking. Drops of moisture started trickling down his temple. "We won't, sir. Fail, I mean." With a last, anxious glance at the agent, he fled Sandoval's office.

Sandoval waited until the door was closed before he kicked his chair out of his way and strode to the window. He was quivering with the need to move, longing to hit someone or something, to break and smash and tear from sheer frustration. It wouldn't solve the problem, but it'd make him feel better. Over the years, however, he'd learned to keep his temper in check enough that he could settle for simply stuffing his fists into his pants' pockets and grinding his teeth while he looked out over the Manticore compound. At the farthest corner of the quad, a bunch of X6s were practicing martial arts, and a group of X8s were going through a drill exercise. If only any of them had been ready for field deployment, he wouldn't have had to send regular army personnel as the backup team.

If only the goddamned X5 had done as he was told....

X5-494's refusal to follow orders shouldn't have come as a surprise; Sandoval had suspected the transgenic might not be as blindly obedient as Manticore made its supersoldiers out to be. Just look at the way he'd started making suggestions about his orders. It was why Sandoval had decided to send the backup team in the first place: to make sure 494 finished the job, and bring the X5 home for evaluation and indoctrination—or termination. They'd have to scour his ability for independent thinking and emotional attachments from his brain, or he'd be useless for any further deep-cover missions.

Sandoval knew he'd have to report the failure to the Committee, the people funding the Manticore project. It wasn't a task he relished; they weren't going to be happy to hear Sandoval had lost an X5, nor would they be pleased to learn that the transgenic had taken the Berrisford girl to parts unknown. And though the real blame lay with the sergeant and his team, it would reflect badly on Sandoval's own record. Perhaps, he thought, he

could hold off his report a few days. They might catch the transgenic soon and then those people never needed to know. Unfortunately, the chances to catch the rogue were slim: the X5s were trained for escape and evasion, bred to blend in. If 494 didn't make a mistake, they—

A knock on the door interrupted Sandoval's mental argument. He turned away from the window. "Yes?"

The door opened and one of the sergeant's men came in. Sandoval sneered. The soldier licked his lips nervously; at least they had the decency to know they fucked up and that Manticore wasn't happy.

"Sir?"

"Yes?"

"We found something."

"Yes?" Dammit, this was like pulling teeth.

"We intercepted a police report, of a stolen car near the Berrisford place. We believe it's X5-494 who took it."

"Then what the hell are you still doing here?"

The soldier beat a quick retreat. Sandoval glanced out of the window again. Maybe they'd get lucky after all.

oOo

Shortly after they left Seattle, traffic started to thin out. Rush hour was largely over and cars on the highway became far and few. The Lincoln was beginning to be conspicuous and it wouldn't be long before someone reported it stolen or they'd recognize 494's face that he'd shown them so clearly on the security footage.

He needed to find another car.

A sign beside the highway pointed to a large industrial complex. Judging by the thin trails of smoke that drifted up from chimneys, it was still operational, and 494 switched on the blinker, easing the Town Car onto the exit ramp. A few twists and turns later he reached an immense parking lot and steered into it. Cars in all shapes and sizes were parked in neat rows and 494 drove at a crawl through the lanes, looking for a place to dump the



Town Car. In the fourth lane down from the entrance he found what he was looking for, and he quickly drove up into the empty spot.

He killed the engine and got out. The air was cool, and he strained to his ears. There were no sirens that he could detect, just the sound of a semi with a bad muffler going by on the nearby highway, and the shrill cries of sea gulls overhead. He looked around. Dumping the Lincoln was one thing, finding another ride for himself and Rachel quite another. He needed something reliable but not flashy, something that would blend with the rest of the traffic.

The vehicles in the lot were a sorry sight: stained with rust, dented, lights and blinkers broken, and a couple even looked as if they'd collapse before they'd go another mile. Car manufacturing was a thing of the past in post-Pulse United States, and imports were far too expensive for most people. Those who owned a car when the Pulse struck tried to keep it running as long as they could, and after that, they'd walk or hitch rides with those still possessing wheels.

Finally, 494 settled his gaze on a battered Aveo that had once been dark blue but now had faded to the color of a summer sky. It appeared slightly better maintained than most of the cars in the lot, with the wipers intact and the tires still showing some thread. Someone maintained that car with a lot of love and care, and with luck, it would be the end of the day shift before it was discovered stolen.

Rachel was twitching, starting to regain consciousness, by the time 494 lifted her out of the Lincoln. She was warm and limp in his arms and he settled her easily in the passenger seat of the Aveo before cutting the ropes. He was glad she hadn't awoken while still in the trunk. He didn't want to scare her any more than he already had.

He dropped Lehane's papers on the driver's seat of the Lincoln, another blatant clue for those who were looking for him. The Seattle police would want to talk to Simon Lehane, and although it might take Manticore a little while to figure out that he had used the false license after he took Rachel and made a run for it—it went against every protocol they'd ever instilled in him—figure it out, they would.

X5-494 wasn't worried about the police.

Still, best everyone looked south.

He hopped behind the wheel of the Aveo, crouched beneath the dashboard and pulled out the wires. The engine started without a hitch, another sure sign of the care that had been put into the car. 494 grinned and commended himself on a choice well made.

A few moments later, he'd left the parking lot as well as the last remnants of Lehane behind. He planned to circle around the city, finally finding a practical use for Manticore's extreme schooling. Along with piano lessons and common verbal usage they'd crammed the entire United States' topography into his head, along with that of a couple of other countries. Sticking to back roads and country lanes in the hopes of avoiding the security checks, he wanted to head up north, where Canada sounded like a good destination; once he smuggled Rachel across the border, he could look for someone who could provide her with new identity papers. She could have a new life, a safe life, free of Manticore.

Beside him, Rachel mumbled something in a small moan. 494 shifted his gaze away from the road for a moment and watched her eyes drift open. She blinked a few times owlishly, her expression filled with confusion. It didn't last long. As soon as she found her bearings and recognized her situation, she lunged at him faster than 494 would've thought possible. She lashed at him, hitting him where she could; but she couldn't put real force behind it in the confines of the car and it didn't hurt.

It did distract him, however, and the car swerved dangerously. The right front wheel hit the dirt, nearly wrenching the steering wheel out of his control, and he needed every bit of skill he had to get the car firmly back on the potholed blacktop. His heart pounded in his chest. If they crashed the car.... It wouldn't be easy to come by a new ride, and they were still far too close to Seattle for comfort.

Risking his grip on the steering wheel, he reached out, avoiding her flailing arms, and clamped his fingers around Rachel's throat. He tightened his hold, not enough to hurt her but enough to make her grow still, and he eased up on the gas until he could pull over one-handedly.

"Rachel, listen to me." He kept the engine running as he twisted in his seat to face her. "I'm gonna let go, but you've got to stay calm, all right?"

She swallowed, her throat convulsing beneath his palm, and offered a tiny nod. He slowly withdrew his hand, tense and ready to grab her again if need be. True to her word she remained motionless, frozen, her eyes large and transfixed on his face. She was trembling.

494 kept his voice low and comforting. "I know you're hurt and frightened, and angry with me. You have every right to be. But—"

"What do you want, Simon?" she whispered. "You killed my father, you kidnapped me. Is it money you want? I can get you money. If you'd just let me go—"

"No," he interrupted. She flinched, and he continued more calmly, "I'm not after money. You probably won't believe me, but what I want most right now, is to keep you safe." He

paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts. "Your father, he knew things. He threatened to expose my bosses to the Senate. That's why they sent me, to stop him."

"And you killed him," she said softly. "Because that was your job."

"Yes."

"Do you always do as you're told?" she asked. "Kill people just because someone says so?"

He blinked, surprised. "I'm a soldier. I'm—"

She uttered a bitter laugh. "And you think that makes it all right? Simon, you're a murderer. A cold-blooded killer."

He shut his eyes briefly. The scorn in her voice hurt him in places he never even knew existed. "Rachel, whatever you believe me to be, please believe this too: I don't want to kill you. Even though they told me I should. I'm trying to keep you safe. Will you at least trust me on that?"

The silence stretched. 494 grew uneasy beneath the weight of her gaze. At last she said, "Yes." A beat later she added, "For now."

That was good enough for him. "Thank you." He turned back and put the car into gear before pulling out onto the road again. "Oh, and Rachel? I think I should tell you: my name's not Simon."

oOo

The trip from the crime scene back to downtown took Clemente longer than he would've liked. Mrs. Rodriguez sat in the passenger seat, twisting a handkerchief between her fingers and staring out at the rain that spattered onto the windshield. She appeared to still be in shock from the attack on her employer and Clemente wondered how much use she'd actually be in the investigation. Still, he had to follow any lead he had. Heaven knew he had precious few clues to begin with.

At last, he could turn the departmental cruiser into the lot behind the downtown police station. He opened the door for Mrs. Rodriguez and helped her out. She didn't speak; she appeared caught up in her own thoughts, and Clemente's Spanish had grown too rusty to comfort her in her own language. She followed him willingly enough when he took her elbow to lead her into the elevator and up to the fourth floor.

"Rick," he called out to the sketch artist. Rick, a tall, narrow-shouldered man with a few

strands of hair trying to cover a balding scalp, scurried over. Ink stained his fingers.

"Mrs. Rodriguez? This is Rick," Clemente told her. "He'll help you remember what those men in black looked like, and then he'll make a drawing of them. All right? You go with him now, and I'll talk to you later."

"Si." Her voice was soft, the answer muttered. Clemente exchanged a look with the other man, and shrugged. He watched as Rick led Mrs. Rodriguez away, offering to get her some tea to calm her nerves. She was in good hands; the sketch artist was used to working with crime victims and tended to put them at ease quickly. That, Clemente thought, was his greatest talent, more than his ability to translate the vague descriptions into recognizable sketches of suspects.

The door to the interview room swung shut behind the pair, and Clemente turned away to take the stairs down to his third floor office. He shared the windowless room, all drab brown walls and water-stained ceiling, with another detective. His colleague must have gone out on a case of his own, however, as Clemente found the office deserted, the lights off. He switched on the fluorescents, blinking at the glare, and sat down on the seat behind a dented metal desk. The chair creaked beneath his weight as it settled; the City of Seattle wasn't willing to spend much of its funds on its police force's comforts.

Despite the rundown state of the furniture, the computer on Clemente's desk was one of the newer models, though, and it'd give him access to all kinds of databases, which held information on just about every US citizen—post-Pulse privacy laws were far more lenient than they'd ever had been in the old days.

It made his life a lot easier a lot of the time. Whether it had made the world a safer place, however...? Clemente had his doubts about that.

Pushing away the philosophical thoughts, he hit the on-button. It took the computer several minutes to finish booting up, and another minute to log him into the system, but at last the search window for the National Crime Information Center appeared.

*Lehane, Simon*, he typed. The disk started to whirl as the computer connected with the database, the cursor changing into a hour-glass, and Clemente went to get himself a cup of coffee. He liberally sprinkled sugar over the brew in the hopes of masking the horrid, bitter taste of the surrogate that came from the machine.

By the time he returned, his computer had finished searching the NCIC database. The screen showed there were twenty-three Simon Lehanes listed nationwide. Yet only one in Seattle, Clemente saw to his satisfaction. He hit *Enter* to call up the records and—

"What the hell?" he said out loud. He put his coffee to the side and stared at the screen. The man who stared back was most definitely not the handsome young man he'd seen on the security camera's footage from the Berrisford mansion. Clemente reached for the back button, thinking he'd accidentally accessed the wrong listing, when his gaze fell upon the data listed below the photo.

*BORN: July 7, 1996.*

*EDUCATION: University of Washington School of Music.*

*OCCUPATION: music teacher (piano).*

Except for the photo, that information fit to a tee what little details he knew about the man. Lehane, or whoever he was, was gradually making its way up from *Possible Witness* to *Person of Interest* on Clemente's mental list. Of course, goofs happened all the time, and it wasn't unheard of for the system to have the wrong photo attached to someone's file.

Clemente scrolled further down the page.

*DECEASED: August 19, 2018. See SPD report for further details.*

The mysterious young man pretending to be Lehane jumped up another couple rungs on the list in Clemente's mind, making it all the way to the top, right where it said *Suspect*.

Clemente clicked the link to access the police reports about Lehane and quickly scanned the text. *Murdered...found in his room...wallet missing...* Clemente's brow furrowed, and he skipped to the last few paragraphs.

*CAUSE OF DEATH: strangulation...possibly garroted...*

*CASE STATUS: unsolved, open.*

He leaned back into his seat, ignoring the protest it wrenched from the old chair, and blew out air through his teeth. The man who had taught Rachel Berrisford Chopin and Mozart was either an entirely different piano teacher to go by the name Simon Lehane—or an impostor who'd taken on Lehane's identity after he was so brutally murdered.

Clemente pinched the bridge of his nose and reached for his coffee. He grimaced as he took a sip; the coffee was lukewarm, and he set the cup aside again.

*Occam's Razor.* The simplest solution was usually the right one; he'd put his money on the piano teacher being an impostor. But that still didn't tell him *who* the kid was, and *why* he'd done it.

Clemente got up and dug through his pocket for the disk that held a copy of the footage from Berrisford's security system. Too bad the blast of the explosion had knocked the cameras out, so they had no clear images of what happened afterwards. At least the unknown man calling himself Lehane was clearly visible in some of the early frames. He'd drop the disk off at the CSI-department upstairs, ask them to enhance the frame and put out an APB on Lehane. He'd have his answers as soon as they captured the man.

The Berrisford bombing was barely a few hours old, and already it was turning into a very odd case, Clemente decided while closing the door behind him. He dumped the coffee in the sink and the cup in the trash before dashing up the stairs two steps at a time.

And the case was getting stranger with each piece of information he collected.

oOo

The bell of nearby St. Joseph's Church chimed one o'clock. Colleen Hamm took to her seat at the head of the table in room 307 of the Hart Senate Office Building and gestured for her assistant to shut the door. It was time to formally begin the subcommittee meeting; senators lived on busy schedules and she couldn't afford to keep everyone waiting because of one committee member who was still missing.

Todd—she always thought of her assistant by his last name since she couldn't bring herself to use his given one, Quentin—reached to close the double doors of the meeting room.

Before he could finish, a burly man in his fifties brushed him aside and shoved the doors back open. "Sorry I'm late," he said, planting his briefcase on the oak table.

"Paul," Colleen greeted him. Despite the way he rushed in at the last minute, Senator McKinley, representing the State of Washington, was dressed immaculately in a dark blue suit and stiffly straight tie. The faint whiff of expensive cologne hung around him. Colleen waited until he'd collected a sheaf of papers from of his briefcase and settled himself on the dark green velvet of the meeting room chairs.

"Ms. Hamm?"

Colleen dipped her head at Todd to give her consent. Todd slipped out of the room, closing the doors behind him. The secretary on Colleen's left sat with her pen poised to a notepad, ready to take notes. For the benefit of the minutes, Colleen announced, "The subcommittee on Ethics in Genetic Research has now been opened. Thank you all for making time in your busy schedules to attend." The secretary started scribbling furiously, while Colleen's fellow senators nodded at her in acknowledgment.

She glanced around the table at the gathered men that formed her subcommittee. Aside from McKinley, the subcommittee consisted of an aging Republican from Texas on his fifth term in the Senate, and a young Democrat from Massachusetts. They were an odd bunch to be guarding the ethical aspects of genetics. The Massachusetts Senator, a member of her own party, was likely to back her on most things, just as McKinley would oppose her every chance he got; he had done so often enough in the past. Once again, she wondered why the west-coast senator had volunteered for a chair in the subcommittee in the first place when he held so little interest in ensuring genetic research wouldn't cross ethical boundaries.

The trade-off between ethics and science had been an ongoing argument ever since stem cell research and gene splicing really began to take off after the human genome had been fully mapped, several decades ago. And Colleen had to admit that a lot of progress had been made: many hereditary conditions could be repaired before they even manifested themselves, and stem cell therapies were used to treat ailments that once had been incurable. Still, the controversy had raged ever since scientists first started harvesting stem cells from human embryos and cloned sheep into identical twins. It was like a forest fire, sometimes blazing hotly, other times subdued and underground. Her committee had helped put an end to the worst transgressions beyond what should be morally and socially acceptable—or so she'd mistakenly believed, until recently.

"I'd like to discuss the procedure for next week's hearings," she told the subcommittee members. "Do we have our witnesses confirmed?"

"Yes, we do," the Texas senator said. "The first meeting's set for Tuesday at 10am. That's —"

A knock on the door interrupted him and Colleen raised an annoyed brow. She'd left specific instructions not to disturb them, so this had better be important.

"Come in," she called. The door opened; Todd's face was set in a serious frown. He scurried around the table and leaned down to whisper into her ear.

"Ma'am... I just got a call from the Seattle police."

Colleen started in surprise and leaned away a little so she could meet his gaze. "The police?"

"Yes ma'am. I regret I've to tell you this, but according to them, there's been an assassination attempt on Robert Berrisford this morning."

"Oh my God," Colleen breathed. The blood drew from her face. "Is he... is he all right?" Robert had not only been a dear friend for many years, offering her a shoulder to cry on after she divorced her husband, he was also the star witness in the subcommittee's hearings scheduled to investigate accusations of a secret government project involving illegal cloning and gene splicing.

"No, ma'am, he's not." Todd hesitated a moment. "He died upon arrival at the hospital."

"Lord, have mercy," Colleen murmured. She felt faint with shock, the news of a good friend's death like a blow to the chest. A loud buzz resounded in her ears. It wasn't loud enough, however, to block out Todd's next words, though once she heard them, she wished she hadn't.

"Ma'am... about his daughter... she's gone missing. They believe she's been kidnapped."



### 3 Chapter

Before he left the security disk with the computer whizzes so they could capture a still of the impostor, Clemente stopped at the Records Files And Data Center to put in a request on the dossier for the Lehane murder. The murder, the bombing, Rachel's disappearance, it was all tied together, he just knew; and if he wanted to get to the bottom of this, he'd need to find out all he could about the Lehane case. That's where it started.

"I'll get right on it, Detective," the clerk, an older sergeant who'd lost his left arm in an accident some ten years ago, said. "If you like, you can even wait for it."

"Could you have it delivered to my desk instead?" Clemente asked. "I gotta swing by the Photolab to drop off some sec cam footage first."

"Sure, no problem," the sergeant said. He turned away and disappeared into a dungeon of dark alleys and ceiling-high stacks that sagged beneath the weight of hundreds of labeled cardboard boxes. The air was thick with dust and the moldy smell of old paper.

*Astounding*, Clemente thought, watching the sergeant go. Despite the ongoing trend of storing everything onto hard drives and disks, police records were still kept in hard copy. Probably a good thing, too, or they'd have lost everything when the Pulse hit and shorted out all electronics.

With a shake of his head, he threw off the idle notion and made his way to the tech experts. He told them what to look for and warned that the footage was less than clear. They scoffed at that, filled with arrogance, and informed him they'd have everything ready for dispatch in thirty minutes. Clemente thanked them, and headed back to his office on the third.

Before he reached the staircase, someone called him back. He swiveled in the direction of the voice. "Yes, Rick?"

The sketch artist offered him a couple of oversized notepad pages. "I've finished with Mrs. Rodriguez. Put her in a cab back home."

Clemente glanced down at the sketches. The men in the drawings weren't very well defined. In fact, they could be just about any male between the ages of twenty and sixty that wandered through the Seattle streets. He sought Rick's eye, one eyebrow raised in question.

The artist shrugged. "I'm afraid she didn't make a very good witness," he said. "I think she

was too much in shock to take a good look at them. The only things she remembered were the clothes and the eyes. Not much to go on."

Clemente sighed. "Thanks, anyway." He wondered if it'd help or hinder his investigation to release the drawings and put out an APB on the mysterious men the housekeeper had seen. It could as easily turn into a nightmare as it could turn up useful clues. He could just imagine the number of reports of possible sightings flooding the system, making him expend precious manpower on false leads while the real murderer escaped.

He was still turning the matter over in his mind by the time he reached his office. The sergeant from the records room was waiting for him. He glanced up as Clemente entered.

"You got the Lehane files?"

"Um, no, Detective." The clerk scuffed a boot against the linoleum. "I... I couldn't find them."

"Couldn't find them?" Clemente echoed. "What do you mean?"

"The records you requested weren't where they were supposed to be. I mean, the box was there, labeled an' all. But the files... they're gone."

Clemente ran a hand over his face, feeling as if Murphy was playing havoc with his investigation. "How's that possible?" he asked. "Someone else took the file out?"

The sergeant rolled his shoulders and his stump twitched. "Could be. Or could be it's been misplaced. Happens, ya know."

Clemente let out a breath and sat down heavily on the desk chair, which groaned dangerously. "Well, thank you anyway, sergeant."

The clerk murmured another apology and made for the door. Before he cleared the doorway, Clemente called him back. "Sergeant? Can you at least tell me who the detective on the case is?"

The sergeant turned back around. "Yeah." He seemed relieved he could tell Clemente something. "That'd be..." He glanced down at a computer printout in his right hand. "Shaver."

oOo

Growling with frustration, Agent Sandoval flung the file folder back onto his desk. That

was the third time he tried to read the report about a micro-chip retrieval mission to Budapest, and he still couldn't tell whether it had been successful or not. It was hard to concentrate on other mission briefs; his thoughts kept going back to the Berrisford fiasco, and he'd caught himself several times with his hand reaching for the phone, ready to dial the investigating teams and demand an update on the situation. Yet, he knew better. It wouldn't do to show them his own nervousness, and if there was news, they'd tell him.

He wished they'd have something to report to him soon.

As if on cue, the phone began to ring and Sandoval started with shock. For a long second he gaped at the phone, all of a sudden irrationally reluctant to pick it up.

He shook himself—*don't be an idiot*—and grabbed the receiver. "Yes?" he barked into the mouthpiece, not bothering to hide his impatience.

"Agent Sandoval."

Sandoval gulped. The voice on the other end was deep and cold, devoid of emotion; this was the voice he'd been dreading to hear ever since Sergeant Hodges reported his team's failure. The one he hoped to not hear until *after* the transgenic was caught.

"Yes sir." He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and waited. Sweat broke out between his shoulder blades, even though the room was cool.

The caller remained quiet for a long time and Sandoval started to squirm in his seat. Then, "You failed us." It wasn't a question.

"Sir, Berrisford is dead, as ordered."

There was a brief guffaw on the other end, its total lack of humor skittering like a writhing snake around Sandoval's insides. He swallowed again.

"Yes. We know. That's about the only thing you did right. We also hear the daughter has disappeared. Didn't our orders say to kill both Berrisford and the girl? To send an unequivocal message to anyone else who might consider coming forward and speaking out?"

Sandoval's hand clenched around the receiver, slippery in his palm. "The X5 I assigned to the job, he—"

"You sent an X5?" If possible, the nameless voice in Washington grew even icier.

"Ye—yes, sir. I believed this was the sort of mission—"

Again, the caller interrupted Sandoval's stammered explanations. "If that's the case, why are the Seattle police on the lookout for two men whose descriptions are remarkably similar to one of your Special Ops teams?"

"Sir, that's—" Sandoval tried to work moisture into his mouth. He wished desperately for a glass of water, or a cup of that disgusting ersatz that passed for coffee. Anything to wet his tongue and lubricate his vocal chords. He hated sounding like a dipshit recruit getting chewed out by a drill sergeant. He cleared his throat. "I had reason to believe the X5 might not follow through, so I sent a backup team."

"I see. Where's the X5 now?"

Sandoval scrunched his eyes shut, mentally wishing for Sergeant Hodges and his men to spend eternity in hell. "At large, sir." It came out a hoarse whisper. He shifted the phone to his other hand and wiped his palm on his leg.

There was a long pause. "I presume you're doing everything to find him?"

"Yes sir. Of course sir. We've got a few leads, and we know how those X5s think. It won't be long before we have him in custody."

"See to it," the man ordered. "We can't afford to have the project's existence revealed at this time." He didn't need to add that failure in locating X5-494 wasn't an option. "And Agent Sandoval? Do keep us informed. The Committee doesn't take well to learning of developments second-hand."

"Yes sir. I will, sir. And if I may..." Sandoval's last words died on his lips. The beep-beep in his ear told him the caller had hung up. Slowly, his fingers trembling, Sandoval replaced the phone and dug through his pocket for a handkerchief. Wiping his face, he let out a heavy sigh.

If they didn't find the rogue X5 soon, he was going to find himself in deep, deep shit.

oOo

Clemente's phone rang. He reached to pick it up and pressed the blinking light for the active line. "Clemente," he announced himself.

"Detective, I've got one of the sector patrols on the line. He called in with regard to your recent all-points bulletin." The young female dispatcher tried hard to sound professional

but her use of the full term gave away her inexperience with the police jargon.

That was fast, Clemente thought; the dispatch to be on the lookout for the man calling himself Lehane had been sent out less than fifteen minutes ago. "Please, put him through." He reached for a pencil and a notepad; perhaps he'd finally get his first breakthrough. He could do with some good news after the recent setbacks of useless witnesses and disappearing files.

There were a few clicks on the line as the dispatcher made the connection, and then the sector cop came on. "Detective? This is Officer Pitman, badge number—"

"Yeah, yeah," Clemente interrupted the officer impatiently. "Dispatch said you got news for me?"

"Yes sir. I'm assigned to the Rainier Avenue city limit checkpoint. I believe I saw the man you're looking for pass through here earlier this morning. The piano teacher?"

"Lehane," Clemente said. He sat up straighter.

"Yeah. I remember thinkin' that was a rather wimpy job for a young man to have, ya know, that's why I remember."

Clemente refrained from commenting on the officer's prejudices. Instead, he scribbled the officer's name and location on his notepad "Are you sure it was Lehane?"

"I don't remember his name, sir, but yes, I'm positive this is the same guy as the man in your APB. I double-checked with our security tapes. It's him all right."

"Was there anyone with him?" Clemente asked, holding his breath.

"No, sir. He was alone."

*Damn.* "Do you remember the car he was driving?"

There was a brief silence. "Not really, sir, sorry. And the cameras only photograph the drivers, not the cars. But it looked to be something light colored. Blue, maybe, or gray."

Clemente rummaged through the papers on his desk. "Could it have been a silver-gray Lincoln Town Car?"

Again, Pitman was quiet for a moment. "It might've been, yes, sir."

"Okay. Officer Pitman, you did good. Thank you. I'll have someone over to pick up a copy of your camera's footage in a short while."

Pitman's gratification at Clemente's praise came across loud and clear. "Thank you, sir."

After he'd hung up on the sector cop, Clemente chewed the butt of his pencil for a moment, thinking. He didn't have definite confirmation on the stolen car yet, but he'd bet big money that it had indeed been Lehane who snatched the Town Car right around the time Berrisford's limo blew up. Question remained, had he taken Rachel too?

Clemente reached for his phone again. As soon as Dispatch picked up, he gave orders to send all available manpower to the south of the city. "And do we have air coverage?" he asked.

"Yes sir. I can direct a couple of drones that way."

"Do it."

He stared at the picture of the man calling himself Lehane that he'd taped to his wall. "Soon, my friend," he muttered. "Soon."

oOo

Several hours had gone by since the bomb had been detonated, and X5-494 had grabbed the girl and disappeared—and they still hadn't found the transgenic. Sandoval popped a couple of tranquilizers as the stress of waiting by the phone slowly got to him. He felt like he needed a shower, but he was reluctant to leave his post. Way he saw it, it was going to be a close call: they found the X5 soon, or he'd be called down to Washington to answer to the mysterious people who really ran Manticore. He figured if that happened, chances were he'd never make it back. The thought was enough to make him swallow another pill.

He was looking out across the quad, gritting his teeth and contemplating whether or not to call Hodges for an update when the phone on his desk rang again. Torn between his eagerness for good news and the dread of another Committee call, Sandoval nearly jumped out of his skin.

Heart pounding in his chest, he was on the phone before it could ring a second time.

"Tell me you found him," he snarled, not bothering with a greeting.

"I was hoping *you'd* tell me that," a gruff male voice said in his ear.

Sandoval let out a breath. "Lydecker." At least it wasn't Washington.

"I hear you lost one of my kids," the colonel went on.

"He turned rogue on us," Sandoval said, trying to make it sound more like an accusation than an excuse. "And for the record, I always thought it was a bad decision to send X5-494 on long, deep-cover solo missions. He's got a history of—"

Lydecker didn't let him finish. "Let's leave the blame game for later," he said. "I'm really pressed for time right now. How close are you to capturing him?"

"Close," Sandoval lied. "He's been seen heading out of Seattle; we intercepted a police call. He's going south."

Lydecker was quiet for a moment. "Seen," he repeated slowly, more to himself than to Sandoval. "Agent Sandoval, please tell me you didn't send everyone available to chase after him down the coast."

"Of course I did," Sandoval snapped. "The dumbass used his undercover ID even after it had been compromised. It's only a matter of time before we find him."

Lydecker barked a laugh. "Not if you continue looking south, you won't." He sounded almost proud.

"What?" Sandoval shifted the phone to his other ear. "What do you mean?"

Lydecker sighed as if tired. "If one of my kids gets *seen* while on a mission," he said, enunciating each word distinctively like he was speaking to a retarded person, "it's because they *want* to be seen. The boy's sent you on a wild goose chase. I'd look in the opposite direction,, if I were you."

And with those words, Lydecker hung up, leaving Sandoval to gawk at the phone in his hand, his mouth open for a retort. "Goddammit," he shouted into the empty office.

He punched in the number for Communications. "Get me Hodges," he yelled. "Now!"

oOo

Several hours away from Seattle, the gas meter's needle had dipped into the red and a small warning light had begun blinking. 494 kept one eye on the road and the other on the light, as if he could will it to stop blinking. If they didn't find a way to fuel up soon,

they'd be stranded. Not a good situation while in enemy territory.

Just as his delicate hearing picked up the first tiny hiccups in the engine that meant it was starting to pull in air instead of gas, the pale green and blue logo of a service station appeared on the horizon. And even better: it was open, and didn't announce *out of gas*, like several of the other places they'd passed along the way.

494 smirked with satisfaction; it looked as if luck was with them.

He pulled into the graveled lot, parked the Aveo at the pump and switched off the engine. The place doubled as a convenience store and small diner, with a glowing sign in the window that said they served breakfast all day.

Since he'd expected to return to Manticore after finishing the job, 494 didn't have much money on him, and he'd need most for the gas if he wanted to make it all the way to Canada. For himself, getting nourishment wasn't an issue at the moment, nor would it be for a long time; he could forgo food and water for days before it would start to affect him. But Rachel.... She was human; she had needs that he must see to or she'd get sick.

He did some mental calculations and decided he could spare a couple of bucks. At least until he figured out how to get more cash.

"Hungry?" he asked.

She gave a little shrug. "Maybe a little," she admitted after a moment's hesitation.

"Stay here," he said. "I'll see if I can get you anything."

Rachel glanced at the store front where the service station attendant had slid from his stool and was ambling over at his leisure to fill up their car. "What if I scream?" she asked quietly, shifting her gaze to 494's. There was a challenge in her eyes.

The X5 held her gaze. "Then I'd have to kill them," he said just as softly as she had. "And we run again."

Rachel studied his expression. After a moment, she gave a shudder and looked down at her hands. "I believe you." She wrapped her arms around herself, as if she was cold. "I won't scream. I promise."

He nodded and climbed out. The place reeked of spilled gasoline and exhaust fumes, an assault on his sharpened olfactory senses. He tried not to gag.



"Fill 'er up?" the attendant asked. He pushed back his baseball cap and ran a hand through greasy strands of hair while he glanced into the car. His eyes lit up at the sight of Rachel, and he licked his lips self-consciously. Some primal emotion that he didn't recognize surged through 494 and he found himself fighting the urge to snap the guy's scrawny neck.

"Hey!" he growled. He shot the man a furious glare once the attendant, nearly half a head smaller than his customer, had dragged his gaze away from the girl and looked back up. A glimmer of fear sparked in the guy's eyes once he met 494's gaze, and the X5 pressed his lips together in grim satisfaction. He'd behave himself, now.

"Yes, fill her up," 494 snapped before he ducked his head and told Rachel, "I'll be right back."

The choice of food the store offered turned out to be limited to a couple of stale donuts and bagels that were hard enough to bash someone's head in with. 494 settled on the donuts and added a packet of pork rinds as well as two styrofoam cups of bitter-smelling tea; it was all he could afford on the few dollars he had in his pocket.

After he paid for the gas and food, he collected his purchases and left the store, the little bell over the door jingling as it fell shut behind him. On the road, a battered old Ford backfired as it rolled by, the sound loud in the quiet of the day. Overhead, thick gray clouds hung low, threatening more rain. 494 hoped the weather would hold a while longer; he hoped to make it to the Canadian border before darkness.

As soon as 494 neared the car, he knew something was wrong.

Rachel was gone.

She wasn't in the passenger seat any longer. 494 spun around, scanning the area. The lot was empty, there was no sign of the girl. Inside the store, the attendant was leaning over the counter, talking to the clerk. Rachel wouldn't have run, would she? Not after the warning he gave her. Because if she had, if she warned anyone.... It'd be next to impossible to lay another false trail for Manticore.

494 put the tea on the roof of the car and dropped the donuts in the driver's seat, trying to come up with a strategy. The station attendant...could he have anything to do with Rachel's disappearance? He remembered the hungry way the guy had looked at her.

He glanced back at the store. Having finished his talk with the store clerk, the attendant had taken up his seat outside the door again, leaning back against the wall on two legs. 494 fixed him with a stare and the man shifted nervously, avoiding meeting 494's eyes.

The X5 made a beeline, grabbed the attendant around the throat and slammed him up against the wall. The chair clattered to the ground.

"Where is she?" he growled, putting his face within inches of the other man's. The attendant gulped, his eyes crossing slightly as he tried to focus on 494's face. They were filled with fear, and 494 flashed back to training sessions in the Manticore woods. Chasing convicted criminals, hunting them down, killing them. They'd had the same look in their eyes, right before he snapped their necks or squeezed hard enough to cut off their air. He'd never enjoyed it, but it had been expected of him.

This time, however, things were different. If the guy had done something to Rachel, he'd gleefully kill him and never bat an eye.

"Gah...." The man tried to get out a word, and 494 realized he held him so tightly, he couldn't speak. He let up the pressure a little, and the attendant drew in a shuddering breath. "Jeez, man," he panted. "She's out back. Had to go, you know."

"Go where?" 494 lifted his hand a little until the man's feet left the concrete and he dangled in his grip.

"Restroom." It came out a high-pitched squeak. 494 scrutinized the man's features, searching for the truth.

"S—Simon?"

494 glanced over his shoulder, a wave of relief washing through him. Rachel stood a few feet away, her backpack dangling from her shoulder. Her eyes were round and dark, though, and she sounded a little breathless as she gasped, "Please, don't...."

494 let go and the gas station attendant crumpled onto the oil-stained concrete, gasping for air, one hand rubbing his throat. He coughed. "Dammit, dude, what the fuck's wrong with you?"

"That'll teach you to look at a girl like you did," 494 told him coldly. "You should consider yourself lucky. Next time, I might not let you go so easily."

"Please, just let's go." Rachel grabbed his arm and tried to tug him toward the car. He could tell by the way she kept glancing back at the service station attendant she feared he might still change his mind and kill him.

"Yeah," he said, taking deep breaths, adrenaline fading already while he allowed himself to be led to their car. "I was worried about you."

"You were worried about me," Rachel repeated. She looked up at him, searchingly. "Simon, you nearly strangled that man."

He gave a self-conscious shrug. "I thought he'd done something to you. If he had...." He didn't finish.

Rachel cocked her head, weighing. "You're really serious, aren't you?" she asked quietly. "About protecting me."

"Yeah." 494 opened the passenger door and waved her in. "From that guy, and anyone else that wants to hurt you. Rachel, you don't understand. If they get their hands on you...." Again, he didn't finish.

She gave a shudder, and climbed into the passenger seat without protest. "Who are they?" she asked. "Those people that you murdered my father for?"

494 rounded the car, got the cups from the roof and squeezed himself back behind the wheel. From the corner of his eye, he caught the attendant watching them with a dark look, one hand still rubbing his throat.

"We got to go," he said, placing the cups in the cup holders between the seats. "Before they call the cops. Here." He offered her the donuts. "Eat."

Rachel eyed the stale donuts with distaste.

"Eat," he repeated as the car bumped back onto the road. "It might be your last meal for a while."

He felt more than saw the doubtful look she cast him. "I used up the last of my cash," he explained. "So until I can get more, donuts it is."

Rachel leaned down and rooted around in her backpack. A moment later she held up a pale pink wallet. "I got some cash. And credit cards."

494 gave her a wry half-smile. "We can't use the credit cards; they'd track 'em. But the cash will be useful. How much you got there?"

Rachel counted. "About a hundred dollars."

It wasn't enough. But it might buy them more gas, another meal, and a place to stay while he figured out how to get more cash, and identity papers. He settled more comfortably

into his seat. Up ahead, a faded sign told them they were entering Cascades National Park. Canada was still miles away.

oOo

Clemente drummed his fingers on the armrest of the leather chair and ignored the desire to look at his watch again. He didn't really have anything to complain about—he was warm and dry, the seat was soft beneath him, and the coffee the secretary had given him was of outstanding quality, a rarity these days. Then again, Seattle's mayor wouldn't be satisfied with anything less than the best, of course.

The problem was, Clemente had better things to do than cool his heels in City Hall. He had a case to solve, a missing girl to find, and a murderer to apprehend. He wanted to look into the misplaced Lehane file, longed to learn what results came from Pitman's camera footage, and wished to hear if anyone had more information on the strange men in black the housekeeper had seen.

He glanced at the secretary, a middle-aged woman in a business suit, who sat typing something at the computer with long, red-painted fingernails. After she'd ordered him the coffee, she hadn't looked at him again once. A phone that never stopped ringing and her computer screen kept her busy.

Clemente shifted on the soft, padded leather, and sighed.

Again, the secretary's phone rang. She listened for a moment, said, "Yes sir," and looked up to catch Clemente's eye. "You can go in, Detective. Mayor Beltran will see you now."

Clemente hopped up, checked that his tie was straight, and opened the door the secretary indicated. The room he entered was large. An expanse of thick, woolly carpet covered the floor, and floor-to-ceiling windows provided a grandiose view of Smith Tower and downtown Seattle. In the distance, the gray waters of the Puget Sound glistened beneath equally gray skies.

A heavy oak desk stood in front of the window, angled in such a way that anyone seated in the leather swivel chair behind it could keep an eye on both Seattle as well as the door. Tall bookcases filled one wall; a sitting area with a couch and several armchairs another. Two men sat in those chairs, their legs crossed, smoking cigars. The room was misty with the smoke—*Cuban, if I'm not mistaken*, Clemente thought.

"Come on in, Detective," the mayor said jovially, waving his cigar to order Clemente closer. Athletically built, with short, wavy hair that had only just started to turn gray at his temples, he looked younger than his years, as if the burdens of office didn't weigh on

him much. Often accused of corruption, and one election year even of being responsible for the disappearance of Margaret Curran, another candidate running for the office, Beltran was nevertheless on his fifth term as Seattle's Mayor. He was also the man responsible for the ongoing state of martial law that still ruled Seattle almost a decade after the Pulse.

Clemente tried not to think about those things too much as he walked across the room, the springy carpet muffling the sound of his footsteps. If he allowed himself to ponder such matters.... His wife, bless her soul, had often asked him to resign from the force, but she had passed two years ago, and he was content to keep his head down and do his best to make sure that anyone he arrested was actually guilty of the crime he accused them of. It was the best he could do.

"Mayor Beltran." Clemente nodded in greeting. "Chief Sullivan." He offered the Chief of Police another nod. A short, thick-set man, Albert Sullivan grunted in reply around his cigar. His face was flushed even more than usual, and Clemente suspected the cigars were a follow-up indulgence to hard liquor over lunch.

"Detective, what's the situation on Berrisford?" the mayor asked without further niceties. Clemente noted they hadn't offered him a seat, and so he stood at the edge of the sitting area, trying to keep his eyes from watering at the pungent smell of fine Cuban cigars.

"Sir, the forensic reports haven't come in yet, so there's not much I can tell you about the bomb itself. But we have APBs out on several possible witnesses that were seen at the scene."

"What's this about the piano teacher?" the police chief asked. "Do you think he took the girl, what's her name?"

"Rachel," Clemente said. "And yes, that's a definite possibility I'm looking into. He's been sighted leaving Seattle on Rainier Ave heading south. We're concentrating our efforts on the area just outside of the city now."

"Find them," Beltran said. He no longer looked quite so jovial. "And find Rachel Berrisford. It'd be a sad day when terrorists get away with murder and kidnapping in my city. I won't have it, you hear."

"Yes sir," Clemente said. He didn't mention that the mayor never seemed so concerned when it was the commonalty that ended up murdered or missing. But then, those regular people didn't provide campaign funds, did they? He paused for a moment. "Sir... there's something else that's odd about this case."

"Oh?" Mayor Beltran raised an eyebrow.

"Yes. The piano teacher, Lehane. Except Lehane is dead. He was murdered a couple of months ago. But the case file's missing, it seems. I wonder—"

"Ah." Beltran blew out a cloud of smoke. "Leave it. Undoubtedly an administrative mishap." The corners of his mouth curled up. "Albert has been begging me to upgrade and automate the filing system for years. Perhaps he's right."

The police chief snorted. He puffed on his cigar, studying Clemente with beady eyes.

"But sir—" Clemente began.

Chief of Police Sullivan sat up straight. "You heard the mayor, Detective. Forget this so-called murder case. Probably a case of mistaken identity. It happens. You find those terrorists, and find the girl. And do it soon. Spare no effort, you hear?"

Clemente knew a dismissal when he heard it. "Yes sir," he said.

"And keep us posted," the mayor added.

Clemente promised he'd do so, and left the room. Inwardly, he seethed. Damned politicians and their games. There was definitely something fishy about Lehane's murder, and he was certain deep down in his gut that it tied in with the bombing and the kidnapping of Rachel Berrisford. He just didn't have a clue as to how.

Yet.

## 4 Chapter

Though it was too early for the sun to set, the overcast weather made it appear close to dusk by the time 494 turned into the parking lot of a small roadside motel in Oroville, Washington. The Canadian border was a mere few miles to the north, and before the Pulse hit the town had been a thriving border community, its main source of income agriculture and tourism. However, boarded-up storefronts and rundown fast food places told a story similar to that of many small American towns: the Pulse had changed everything and sent the United States into a downward economic spiral, until it resembled nothing so much as a third world country where tourism was a luxury very few could afford.

Although legitimate trade had taken a turn for the worse, 494 was hopeful the locals made do with less than legal means, and someone somewhere would be able to provide them with false papers. With a new name and in a new country, Rachel would be safe.

He drove up to the manager's office and killed the engine. A single fluorescent that had not yet burned out illuminated part of the parking lot while the rest was cloaked in gloom. Except for a rusty Volkswagen at the far end, just outside the circle of light, the lot was empty; he didn't need to see the lit-up sign that said *Vac ncy* to know the motel's proprietor would be pleased to see them.

He cast one last glance at Rachel, but she gave no indication she even noticed they'd stopped. His brow creased with worry. During the long afternoon, after they'd gassed up, she'd slowly grown more and more despondent, staring out at the landscape without answering any of his questions, and he didn't know what to say or do to make it right. She'd been through a lot, he knew that. His betrayal, her father's death, her life turned upside down all of a sudden. Still, it was better than the alternative. If only he could make her understand that.

Making sure he could keep an eye on the car—he didn't want to have a repeat performance of the earlier scare he got—he walked into the office and rang the small bell to announce himself. He glanced over his shoulder, but Rachel hadn't moved.

"Yes?"

The proprietor of the Red Apple Motel turned out a round, pink-faced woman of middle years who wore an old-fashioned apron with yellow flowers. He offered her his best smile.

"A double room, please."

She glanced past him at the car and he shifted nervously. He didn't know how far Manticore's tentacles stretched, or how well the Seattle police had taken the bait he'd left them with Lehane's trail. If they'd figured out it was all an attempt at subterfuge.... Well, chances were his and Rachel's pictures had been plastered all over the news.

But the woman smiled pleasantly back at him. "She's pretty, your girl. What brings you to Oroville?" She offered him a registration form and a pen, and he scribbled some made-up name on the lines.

"Just road-tripping," he said, thinking hard and fast. He remembered a wooden sign beside the road as they entered the town, the paint peeling. "You know, driving the Okanogan Trails - Scenic Byway, take in the sights."

She gave him the key for room 3A. "Don't see many people 'round here for that no more," she said. "Used to be a popular trip, though. You know, before."

"Yeah."

He paid for the night using most of Rachel's cash, snatched up the key and flashed the woman another smile as she wished them a good evening.

He drove the car across the lot, parked in front of the room they'd been assigned and walked around to open the passenger door. "Rachel?" He had to shake her before she gave a shudder and looked at him. Her eyes were empty.

"Come on, Rachel. We'll stay here for the night. I'm gonna get us some papers so we can make for Canada. You'll be safe there."

She numbly allowed him to help her out of the car and lead her into the ground floor room. The carpet was threadbare and the single queen sized bed sagged in the middle. A faint odor of decay hung in the still air, but the room was moderately clean and from the tap in the bathroom streamed clear water.

"Do you need the bathroom?"

"What?" She slowly lifted her head.

It was the first response out of her all afternoon. "The bathroom." He pointed. "Do you need to use it? Then please do so now."

Rachel looked at him a moment longer, then obediently went in and locked the door



behind her. A short while later he heard the toilet flush and the faucet being turned on and off. The door clicked open. He was pleased to see she had recovered enough to wash the dried-up tears off her face. Her hair was still a mess, and she was dragging her fingers through the tangled strands.

"Did you bring my backpack?"

"Yeah." He offered her the bag and she rummaged through it until she had located a small brush with a wooden handle. She went back into the bathroom to stand before the mirror and started brushing her hair.

He sat down on the bed and dragged her backpack close, looking for her wallet and sorting through pens, textbooks, a lipstick. He discovered a small, light-blue cardboard box of... well, something. He shook it curiously. Something rattled inside.

"What're you doing?" Rachel snatched the box with one hand and grabbed the backpack with the other. She shoved the small box deep into the backpack. Anger and embarrassment turned her face pink. "Stop snooping, that's my stuff."

"I was looking for a photo." Though a little startled by her outburst and feeling ashamed for reasons he couldn't name, he was secretly glad to see some of her spirit return. "Of you. You got any kind of ID on you?"

She closed the straps on her backpack before tilting her head enough to watch him. "Why would you need that?"

"We gotta get across the border," he said. "You'll be safe in Canada. But you'll need papers."

"My passport's back home," she said, her voice trailing off; he could see the hurt cross her face as the mention of home brought back painful memories.

494 gave her a half-smile. "You couldn't use it, anyway," he said. "Don't want to leave a trail, remember?"

"Then how...?" she asked.

"You'll need a new passport," he explained. "This close to the border, I'm sure I can find someone to make you one."

"A fake one, you mean," Rachel said, finally getting it. "You want to get me a false passport."

494 nodded. "Yeah. And for that, I'm gonna need a picture."

Rachel studied him a moment, her face unreadable. Then she pulled a plasticized card from her wallet and showed it to him. "Will this do? It's my school library card."

He took the card from her. About the size of a credit card, it gave her name, the name of her high school in Seattle, and a photo. She looked a bit younger in the picture, but 494 thought it'd be recent enough to use.

"Yeah. Thanks." He got out his pocket knife and worked the tip beneath the plastic layer that covered the card, careful not to damage the photo. After cutting away enough of the plastic, the photo came free. He pocketed it, and snapped the knife shut.

Rachel was watching him, hugging her backpack to her chest, her expression blank. 494 checked her over for a moment before he went into the bathroom and returned with one of the frayed towels. He started tearing it into long strips of cloth. Rachel's eyes widened.

"What...?"

"Come here," he said, guiding her around the bed and nudging her to sit down. "I have to go out for a while. I can't risk you running off and alerting anyone." Before she fully comprehended, he had her hands lashed together at the wrists and tied with strips of terry cloth. He proceeded to tie her ankles together.

She squirmed beneath him, fighting, trying to kick him. "Hey! You can't do this! Simon, please. I won't run, I promise. You can trust me." Fresh tears welled in her eyes and spilled over onto her cheeks. He reached up and gently brushed them away with his thumb, hating what he had to do to her; he knew that if he didn't, she'd run as soon as his back was turned, and he would've risked everything for nothing. He sought her gaze and offered her a sad look while he continued knotting the strips of towel around her ankles.

"I told you, my name is not Simon. You can call me 494."

She stilled, her brow drawing down in puzzlement. "A number? I should call you a number?"

He gave a small shrug. "That's my designation back at base. If you really want a name...." He thought for a moment. "Call me Cade. It's what my unit used to call me when we were kids." He tested her bonds, making sure they were tight enough to hold her but not tight enough to hurt. "I'm really sorry for this. I'll bring you back something to eat. Pizza

all right?"

Before she could reply, he put the last strip of cloth in her mouth and tied it behind her head. She mumbled something that was unintelligible through the gag. He drew the curtains closed and switched on the small television in the corner. "Sorry," he said again. "I won't be long."

She glared at him over the gag, and although it pained him to see the contempt in her eyes, it was better than the earlier blankness and he smiled to himself. Rachel was a strong-willed girl; she'd be all right.

Assured that his charge couldn't get them into trouble, 494 left.

oOo

Outside, darkness had snuck up on Washington but the business of governing did not end with the sunset. All over the District of Columbia, lights blinked on in old office buildings, centering around the brightly lit US Capitol building. The blackout after the Pulse hit had struck Washington DC just as hard as the entire Eastern seaboard, but the city had been among the first to get its power restored. And looking out of her office in the Russell Senate Office Building across Constitution Avenue, it looked to Senator Hamm that not much had changed since the days of yore.

But appearances were deceptive, she knew. Beneath the surface, *everything* had changed. Though the United States were still intact, one country ruled by a federal government, the balance of power had shifted dramatically and the senate wasn't nearly as influential as it once had been.

She sighed and pulled the blinds closed, shutting out the glaring patch of light that was the Capitol. Returning to her desk and slipping into her chair, she drew one of the file folders near and flipped it open. It was hard to concentrate on the report, though. Her mind kept drifting to the news about Robert. She still couldn't believe he was dead. Once upon a time, after his wife passed, she'd entertained hopes that perhaps, over time, they might become more than friends. But it never materialized, and Robert kept himself occupied with his business and raising his daughter, Rachel.

Rachel...

Colleen pushed the folder away and leaned back in her seat, rubbing at her eyes. Poor, poor Rachel. Not only had the girl lost her mother, she had now lost her father as well. And who knew what other horrors she was being forced to endure? Colleen had spoken to Seattle's mayor earlier. He had assured her that no effort was being spared to find

Rachel. However, she'd heard in his voice that he wasn't hopeful of finding the girl.

She could make a wild guess as to who was responsible for Robert's death, and why—only in the privacy of her own mind, of course; without proof, it wouldn't do to make accusations. But kidnapping Rachel made absolutely no sense. Not any more. With Robert dead, he could no longer testify before her subcommittee. So, why take his daughter?

Or had the poor thing been nothing but collateral damage?

She remembered happier times, before the Pulse when Rachel and her parents often visited their summer home in Martha's Vineyard. She'd have to call her own daughter soon, and tell her about Robert's death, and that her best friend had gone missing. Colleen kept postponing the call, hoping that Rachel'd be found soon, so she could bring her daughter some happy news along with the devastating call that Robert had died.

She was so deep in thought, that at first she never noticed that the little red light on her phone had started blinking. Once she caught it, she snatched the phone from its cradle, hoping for something good.

"Ma'am?" It was Todd. "I've got Mr. Robinson on the line. He wishes to speak with you directly."

"Please, put him through." Colleen's heart settled back in her chest. It wasn't the news she'd been hoping for. Gerald Robinson was another industrialist who'd been asked to testify and she could hardly refuse to speak with him. She feared what he had to say, though.

"Gerald. How are you?"

"I'm well. Colleen, I wanted to say I'm sorry about what happened to Berrisford. I know you and he were close."

"Thank you." She snapped up a pencil from her desk and started toying with it. "What can I do for you, Gerald?"

"It's...." He hesitated. "I'm afraid I won't be able to make it to the hearing next week."

Colleen closed her eyes. A beginning headache throbbed, promising worse before the night was over. Gerald Robinson was the third witness to withdraw his promise to testify. And after Robert, he'd been her second key witness. "Oh?"

"Yeah...." She could hear his discomfiture over the line. "Something's come up. In our

London branch. Something I need to deal with myself. In person."

"I see."

"I'm sorry. Take care, Colleen."

Robinson had hung up before she could put another word in. She suppressed the urge to slam the phone down and instead lowered it gently to its cradle, flipping the pencil back on the desk. The case was gone. With Robert Berrisford dead, and Anton Castillo, Jo Morris, and now Robinson pulling out, there was hardly anyone left to testify. She could subpoena Gerald, of course, and the other witnesses that had pulled out. But what good would that do? They were scared, frightened by what had happened to Robert, and forcing them to come before the subcommittee would only result in them lying under oath. It wouldn't reveal the bad practices she suspected were taking place in various government facilities for genetic research. Nor would it reveal how government funds were sluiced to black ops and shadow front companies.

She reached for the phone again. "Todd? Please send a message to the subcommittee members. I'm postponing next week's hearings until further notice."

"Yes ma'am."

Colleen leaned back in her chair. Now, what was she going to do?

oOo

X5-494 strolled down the main road toward the small town center of Oroville, pretending to be a young man without much of a care in the world. In reality, he was taking in and cataloging every little detail of his surroundings, just as he'd been trained to do. From the boarded-up storefronts and faded store signs to the broken windows and rusty cars sitting on wheel-less rims, nothing escaped his attention. A train went by on the nearby railroad, horn blaring in the darkness. The evening was full of wood smoke from the fire places that had replaced central heating systems after the Pulse put most public services in disarray.

Once he neared the center of the town, the streets grew a little busier, with more people scuttling about despite the drizzle that had started falling from the sky. Most avoided eye contact with each other, though there was the occasional scantily dressed whore, who called out to anyone passing by. In fact, he thought as he sidestepped the slumped body of a drunk passed out on the sidewalk, it didn't look much different from the Seattle streets after dark.

It had been different once. They'd told him and his fellow soldiers all about the Pulse, which hit the United States so hard back in '09. Of course, to 494, it was simply hearsay. At the time, he'd been cooped up in the Manticore headquarters in Wyoming, practicing the fine art of assassination and close quarter killing on convicted criminals. At least that was what he had been doing until they'd dragged his ass, and that of his unit mates off to reindoctrination after another group of young X5s had jumped the fence and escaped.

They'd tried to stamp out the spark of independence, the ability to think for themselves, hoping to make the X5s rely solely on their handlers while out in the world. 494 smiled grimly to himself: they'd failed in their endeavor. The simple fact that he was on the run, with his mark in tow to get her to safety, was proof of that. If only he could continue to elude them, get himself some money and some fake identity papers for Rachel....

He'd need to use every skill and trick they'd taught him about how to survive on his own. Escape and evade. It was one of the X5's specialties.

He'd reached the far end of the small town, and beyond the road was dark and forbidding, leading past a sign that said *Canada 4 miles* and into a forest of tall, dark spruces. 494 turned to head back. He made note of a liquor store that was open, the aging guard eyeing passersby with suspicion, as well as the quickie mart with the barred windows that was still in business as well.

"Hey, handsome."

A woman snatched his arm, long nails digging into his flesh through his jacket. She was underdressed for the cold October night, in a tight miniskirt and wearing a sleeveless tank-top beneath a thin denim jacket. Her eyes were rimmed with kohl, and her mouth painted red. "Whatdaya say we have us some fun?" Her fake smile held a hint of desperation and 494 caught a whiff of liquor on her breath. He shook her off.

"No thanks."

She pouted. "Oh, c'mon. I'll make it good for ya."

He shook his head and hurried on.

"Screw you," she snarled after him, all false amicability gone from her voice.

He quickly turned off the main road, exploring the smaller side streets, and after a few minutes of examining various bars and lit neon signs, he made his choice. Above the bar he'd picked, a yellow and green sign advertised *Budweiser* and red letters blinked on and off, spelling the word *pool*. Or what he assumed should be 'pool'; one of the o's refused to

come on, leaving a rather odd-looking *p ol* instead. In front of the building, parked half on the sidewalk and half on the road, were several muddy and dented pickup trucks and a couple of regular cars. Light spilled from the doorway.

494 tugged up the collar of his jacket, rolled his shoulder to loosen muscles and schooled his features into a combination of naivety and self-confidence that was far more suitable for a young man his age than the wary soldier's look he'd worn all day.

He pushed through the door, pupils widening instantly to adjust to the deeper gloom inside. The smell that assaulted his nose was a mixture of unwashed humans, stale beer and burned burger. A few wooden tables, their surfaces scarred with overlapping rings, filled the front room, and stools were lined up before the bar. Three men in faded flannel shirts occupied the stools, hunching over small shot glasses and glancing up briefly as he entered. In the back of the room, a couple of pool tables had been set up in a row, a bare light bulb above each of them, casting circles of bright light onto the frayed green felt. Only one table was occupied, a pair of rough-looking types wielding cues around it.

494 frowned. Not exactly the crowd he'd hoped for, or that the number of cars outside had hinted at. He hesitated. Perhaps he should look for another place?

"What can I get ya?" the bartender asked before he could make up his mind and walk back out. She was a tired-looking woman, her hair in a gray bun and mouth downcast in a continuous pout. She kept wiping the surface of the bar with a dirty cloth even as she glanced at him.

"Scotch," he said, the first thing popping up in his mind. He flinched inwardly, remembering when Berrisford had offered him a drink, a mere few days ago, right before he'd told 494 he was going to send Rachel away. Berrisford had known something was up, even though he hadn't had a clue how far Manticore had already infiltrated his life.

The woman studied him for a moment and for an instant he worried she'd ask for some ID to ascertain he was even old enough. But she gave a little shrug, not really caring, and nodded before she turned away to produce a glass and a bottle from somewhere beneath the bar. 494 climbed upon a stool, giving a curt nod to the man on the next seat. He ignored 494 and continued to gaze into his own drink.

The door opened again with a blast of cold, damp air, and two men came in. They were a little better-dressed than the other patrons in the bar, instantly drawing 494's attention. He'd been trained to notice anything out of the ordinary, and he figured the two newcomers, in their leather coats and shined shoes, were an uncommon sight in this kind of dive. The guy on the left was tall, with shoulders nearly as wide as the doorway. He had the crooked nose of someone who had it broken a time or two, marking him a fist

fighter. The other man, who'd been the first to come through the door, was of smaller built, with slicked-back hair and steely gray eyes. A gold chain glimmered in the open neck of his shirt, and—494's eyes zoomed in—a gold watch was on his wrist. Both men hesitated when they noticed him watching, so he turned back to his drink and pretended to have no further interest in them. He took a sip of his scotch instead.

The smaller of the pair, clearly the one in charge, rolled his shoulders before he walked past the bar and the pool tables. 494 followed his progress in the fly specked mirror. He disappeared through a door in the back wall, while his companion took up position in front of it. Light spilled out for a moment and 494 caught a glimpse of a dim, narrow room, a table covered with cards and piles of money, and men wreathed in cigarette smoke around it. His heart rate picked up and a surge of adrenaline shot through his veins. He'd stumbled onto a high stakes poker game; he'd been briefed on those once for a mission to Las Vegas. If he were lucky, there might be thousands of dollars on that table.

Perhaps his instinct in picking out the right bar was better than it'd first seemed.

494 finished his scotch, ordered a beer, and wandered deeper into the room until he reached the pool tables. He passed by the first table where the two rednecks had just broken for another game. They gave him a cursory glance, seizing him up and dismissing him. Both were thick-set, with the eternal tan and deep wrinkles of men used to working outdoors. Farmhands, or tree loggers, he surmised.

As 494 approached the door to the back room, the burly man slouching in front of it straightened to his full height, glaring at 494 through narrowed eyes. The message was clear. *Stay away, boy.*

494 hesitated. He knew he could take out the guy with one hand tied behind his back if he so desired. But that'd would draw too much unwanted attention.

There had to be another way to get into that room.

oOo

After the door clicked shut, Rachel remained still for several minutes. Although he'd left the light on the bedside table on, the room was covered in darkness and it took her several moments to grow used to the dim light. The television mounted to the wall in the corner emitted a flickering bluish glow that didn't help her to see better. Gradually, her eyes adapted, and despite the deep shadows in the corners, she could see the rundown room clearly: the faded flower-patterned curtains, the scratched writing desk, a creaky chair before it.



She strained to hear any sounds from outside, but the noise from the television made it hard to discern anything other than the loud hip-hop beat that came from the speaker. She knew why he'd turned on the TV: any sounds she'd manage to make through the gag would be muffled by the music.

A frightened moan welled up in her throat and she swallowed it down. Now was not the time. She was alone; Simon—no, not Simon, her *captor*—was gone. If she was going to escape, this would be her best chance. Rachel twisted her hands and tried to kick her legs, testing the strips of terry cloth that bound her. They didn't give, and her movements became more frantic. She had to get away!

Her breath came in little hitched gasps and she yanked at the bonds. But she quickly learned that her efforts resulted only in the knots growing tauter, and the terry cloth started to dig into her skin painfully.

She slumped back on the lumpy mattress, panting and sobbing with frustration. She'd only made it worse; her wrists hurt, and she was no closer to escaping than before.

She grew quiet again, trying not to move, as if that might loosen the bonds miraculously. She'd never expected it, but she wished he'd return soon, so he could untie her.

Alone in the gloom, with nothing much to hold her attention, Rachel found her mind meandering, unable to concentrate on any one thought for long. In the blink of an eye, her life had been thrown into chaos. A life that perhaps wasn't too exciting, but that she had liked nevertheless. A life of school, homework, piano lessons and dinner with her dad, or, sometimes, playing hostess to his business associates.

And then that had all changed. One minute, she'd been collecting her books for school, the next, her world had gone up in a blast of fire and smoke. Her mind was still reeling, trying to catch up with the new reality.

Her father was dead.

And the man she'd fallen in love with, the man who'd kissed her so shyly and tenderly that night in the pool house that she could not help but question if he'd ever kissed a girl before, that man had murdered him.

Fresh tears formed in her eyes, and with the way her hands were bound, she couldn't even brush them away as they fell down her face, tickling her nose. She tasted salt on her lips. She turned her face into the pillow, letting the worn cotton soak up the moisture, squeezing her eyes shut to banish the tears.

It helped a little, and after a few minutes she turned back onto her side and took a few deep gulps of the stale motel room air.

The noise from the television changed, the incessant beat interrupted with an evening news' jingle and a female voice-over announcing the day's headlines. Rachel paid little interest to the reports from overseas; she cared not for the Asian stock markets or the European Union's latest labor dispute. Then the anchor mentioned her name, and she went rigid.

*"Robert Berrisford, industrialist, died today in a brutal attack that the government denounced as an act of terrorism."*

Rachel wriggled around on the bed until she could see the tiny screen. Lying on her side the way she was, the angle was awkward, making her feel a little dizzy and nauseous. A photo of her father popped up in the left hand corner of the screen, overlaying an image of her house and her driveway, filled with flashing emergency lights and trails of smoke. She raised her head from the bed and stared at the screen. Another photo appeared beside her father's, and she inhaled sharply as she recognized herself. It was a school photo taken about a year ago.

*"Rachel Berrisford has been missing since the attack, and it is feared she has been taken by the terrorists. Even so, no demands of any kind have been made as of yet."*

The effort of keeping her head up became too much, and Rachel let it drop back on the mattress, keeping her gaze glued to the small television screen.

*"The Seattle police have refused to comment on the ongoing investigation but sources inside the department say that investigators are looking for a young man—"*

A third image popped up, next to hers. It was a grainy black-and-white photo, yet even so, she recognized him instantly; it was Simon. Or rather, the man who'd called himself Simon. They knew. Hope flared in her heart. They *knew*.

The anchorwoman continued.

*"—a piano teacher by the name of Simon Lehane. He was seen at the scene of the crime shortly before the bombing. Lehane is wanted for questioning as a possible witness. Our source declined to say whether or not he is also a suspect."*

The three photos stayed on the screen a few seconds longer before a 1-800 phone number replaced it, along with the request for anyone who had any knowledge about the missing people to call. Rachel committed the number to memory, so she'd know where to call if

she ever got the chance to alert the authorities.

The news continued with political coverage from Washington, informing the public that some senate subcommittee or other had been postponed its hearings in the wake of the Berrisford bombing, but Rachel was no longer listening.

She tried to make sense of the news report. The police said it was an act of terrorism that killed her dad, but Simon—Cade (and wasn't that a strange name? Although it was better than a number, she decided.)—claimed he was a soldier and that he'd acted on orders. Orders were giving by the government, weren't they? Why would they want her father dead?

It made no sense.

Strange as it was, she had to admit she believed him. Or at the very least, she believed that *he* believed what he told her. She shifted on the mattress, trying to find a more comfortable position, wriggling her fingers to keep the blood flowing. Rachel realized Cade'd known what he was doing. He could've pulled the strips much tighter when he tied her up, but he hadn't. He'd made the bonds snug enough that she couldn't get loose, but not so tight that the blood flow to her hands was cut off.

She only had herself to blame for that.

She remembered what he'd said, that what he was trying to do was save her life. That his orders had been to kill her, and that he hadn't wanted to follow those orders. Could he be telling the truth? She recalled the fear in his eyes, the brief moment of panic when he'd thought the gas station attendant had hurt her. That had been real, hadn't it? And that night, in the pool, when he'd claimed.... She simply couldn't believe that had been a lie, either.

But if what he said was true.... Then maybe calling the cops as soon as she got the chance wasn't the best thing to do. She groaned; a dull headache was slowly building behind her eyes.

Suddenly she started awake. Auntie Colleen! She hadn't talked to Colleen since early summer, but her dad had. And Colleen was a senator; she'd know what to do, wouldn't she?

Yes, she'd try to call Colleen as soon as she could.

With her mind made up and a clear course of action determined, Rachel relaxed into the mattress. There wasn't anything she could do until Cade got back.

Soon after, she sank into an exhausted sleep.

## 5 Chapter

494 backed away from the big guard with an apologetic half-grin. He turned to watch the pool players for a few minutes. They'd taught him the game in training, when they were prepping him for undercover work on the outside. It hadn't been a difficult game to learn, everything a matter of physics and math, and recalling the rules took him a mere few seconds. Once he was confident he remembered them all, including how to bend those rules to his will, he put down his beer bottle on the edge of one of the unoccupied pool tables and selected a cue.

After racking the set of colored balls, he broke, nearly cutting a swath in the already threadbare green table cloth.

"Oops," he chortled at his own clumsiness, and took another chug from his beer.

With a bit of exaggerated care, he continued to try and sink the balls, missing more often than not. He squinted along his cue as if to determine it was straight. With a frown, he replaced it with another and continued his solitary game. At his next attempt, the object ball bounced over the rail, clattering to the floor.

"Oh, crap," 494 swore.

"You don't look like a player."

494 glanced up. The two farmhands had abandoned their game and were watching him fumble. 494 shrugged self-consciously. "I'm just messin' about," he said.

"You ain't sayin'," one of the men, in a red checkered shirt and faded jeans that rode low on his hips, said with a grin. He ran a hand through dirty-blond hair. "Look," he said, walking closer. "You're really banging those balls. Try hittin' 'em with a little less force. You got more control that way."

"Really?" 494 asked, widening his eyes. "Thanks." He turned back to the table, leaned over and chewed on his bottom lip in full concentration while peering alongside his cue. He gently tapped the cue ball. It hit the eight, which slowly rolled across the surface to disappear into the side pocket. 494 whooped with joy.

"See that?" He turned back to the two guys. The one in the red shirt offered him a gap-toothed smirk, while the other hid an amused snicker behind his fist. 494's face lit up. "Hey, you fancy a game?"

The two rednecks exchanged a look. Redshirt shrugged, and his buddy met 494's gaze. He barely managed to hide the greed in his expression. "Only if we play for keeps."

"Sure." 494 shot him a dopey grin. "Why not? What's life without a bit of a challenge, eh?" He stuck out his hand. "I'm Jake, by the way."

"Jimbo." The man's hand was so large, it nearly swallowed 494's. His grip was firm and calloused; he was a man used to hard labor. "This is my cousin Burt." He indicated Redshirt.

"Nice to meet ya," 494 said. "So, how much did you wanna bet? Twenty bucks?"

Jimbo scoffed. "Ain't worth my effort. How 'bout two hundred?"

494's brow furrowed as he pondered the offer. "All right," he agreed slowly, as if reluctant. "Do I get to break?"

"If you want," Jimbo said generously. Burt scowled.

oOo

Clemente dumped his half-eaten TV dinner in the trash with a wry shake of his head. Almost a year had gone by since Debbie passed, and he still hadn't gotten used to eating alone. The silence of the house, the sense of emptiness, it was enough to kill his appetite every damn day.

Perhaps he should get a cat. Give himself some company.

He rinsed off the utensils, wiped the counter clean, and turned off the light in the kitchen. Back in the living room, he switched on the floor lamp next to the brown leather easy chair and poured himself two fingers of moonshine whiskey. It was a far cry from pre-Pulse quality but it burned pleasantly down his throat nevertheless. He settled in the chair, swirling the liquid around in its glass, his thoughts drifting to the Berrisford case.

No matter how he tried, something didn't add up. But he'd be damned if he could put his finger on it. His gut told him that Lehane was the key to the whole thing, but the mayor had all but ordered him to leave the teacher's murder alone. Clemente sighed. He leaned forward, set the glass on the coffee table and snatched up the notepad holding his case notes.

They'd finally found the stolen Town Car in a lot south of the city, the fake Lehane's license abandoned in the front seat. Whoever the guy was, he'd switched cars in the lot;

and sure enough, shortly after the evening shift had taken over, someone had reported their Aveo stolen. The amount of time that had passed between the last sighting of the man pretending to be Lehane and the time the APB on the stolen Aveo went out was huge. If he'd been driving all day, he could've gotten about as far as Sacramento. And that was assuming he'd gone straight south....

Clemente flipped through his notes, re-reading paragraphs here and there at random. He'd often found that thinking too hard actually blocked off noticing the hidden clues, the next step to take in an investigation. No, better to let his mind wander a bit, let the subconscious do its job.

He took another swallow from his drink, pondering the fact that the Lehane case file seemed to have been misplaced in the archives. There wasn't a cell in his body that believed that was true. These days, missing files generally meant that somebody *wanted* them to go missing. For whatever reason. The days that the Seattle Police had been about protecting and serving the general public, like the oath he'd sworn twelve years ago, had evaporated right along with the American economy in the atomic blast of '09. Oh, there were still good people on the force, and solving robberies and street crimes was still a large part of their work. But cases like these.... They stank to high heaven.

Who'd been the first officer on the scene of Lehane's murder? The one that had called it in? He browsed the pages of his notepad, looking for the name the desk sergeant over at Records and Files had given him.

Curtis Shaver.

Clemente's brow drew down in thought. Something about the name...? And suddenly it came to him. Shaver was the cop who'd been gunned down trying to stop a liquor store robbery on his day off, wasn't he? When had that been? A month ago? Something like that.

He ran a hand over his face, trying to dig up what else he could remember of Shaver. He'd had a wife, a beautiful, tall woman with ebony skin. He remembered seeing her at the funeral ceremony for the fallen officer. He'd been awarded a posthumous meritorious service medal, if memory served.

Clemente pushed himself to his feet and got out the phone book. He soon found what he was looking for. Dona and Curtis Shaver were listed with an address over in Sector Eight. He hoped she hadn't moved after her husband's death.

Like he never had, after Deb died, even though the house was too big for a single man.

A few minutes later, he'd dialed the number and made an appointment with Dona Shaver first thing next morning. Lehane was a lead. And Shaver was dead. He'd be a terrible investigator if he didn't follow it up.

Satisfied that he had done all he could—at least for that day—Clemente settled back on his chair, using the remote to turn on the television and watch the news. As expected, the Berrisford bombing was one of the main stories of the day.

He pressed his lips together with satisfaction as the blurry security camera picture of Lehane popped up on the screen. "You won't find it so easy to hide, now," he muttered at the young man on the screen.

oOo

494 lost big in the first game. He got trounced in the second, and ended up six hundred dollars in the red.

Pretending to be caught up in the game, 494 kept an eye on the guy watching the door. The big guard had relaxed his stance and was ignoring the three men near the pool tables. Twice, the door to the back room had opened, emitting a cloud of cigarette smoke; once to allow the guard to pass a full bottle of Jack the barmaid brought to someone inside, and a second time to let a tall, grizzled man wearing a cowboy hat leave. He'd been grumbling below his breath softly, but not soft enough that the X5's superior hearing couldn't pick it up. The guy'd seemed a sore loser.

Both times the door opened, 494 had pretended to line up a shot, using his enhanced vision to zoom in on the room unnoticed. He was fairly certain now of the number of men inside the room—four players, two guards inside the room, plus the one outside the door—and that there was money to be had. The bills had been piled high on the table the second time the door opened.

Seven to one. Those were odds he could handle.

Jimbo was smirking from ear to ear, in his mind already spending the money he'd won and seeing nothing wrong with beating the metaphorical crap out of a young man who looked as if he'd imbibed a beer or two too many. Burt, on the other hand, had started to wear a little dubious frown, watching the game with growing anxiety. 494 wasn't sure if he'd sniffed out something was wrong, or if he were just worried that the dumb kid from out of town wouldn't be able to pay up. In either case, 494 knew he'd taken things as far as they'd go. Time to finish it. Bigger game was waiting for him.

"One more," he begged. "Double or nothing."



"I don't know," Jimbo said. He turned to Burt. "Whatdayathink?"

Burt shrugged. "Looks to me like you're in over your head, kid. Better quit while the quittin's still good."

494 shook his head. "My girlfriend'll skin me if she finds out I lost most of our cash," he whined. "She's mad enough with me as it is. Please, you gotta gimme a chance to win some of it back. I think I can do it. Unless," He cocked his head, blinking blearily up at Jimbo, "you're not good for the money?"

The bigger man's eyes darkened with anger. "Line 'em up, boy," he growled. "I'ma beat your ass."

To hide his grin, 494 bend over the rack and put in the balls.

It was Jimbo's turn to break, and the man sank three balls before missing the pocket on the fourth. 494 brought his enhanced motor skills out to play. Gone was the clumsy youth that hit the balls too hard or nearly tore the cloth on every second shot. One after the other he quickly landed the balls where he intended them to go, and the game was over in a few short minutes.

"Uh oh," he said as the last ball rattled down the hole. "You lose. I win."

Jimbo glared at him, pushing up into 494's personal space and towering over the slighter built soldier. It was easy to see how the farmhand thought that'd scare 494, and it might've worked, too, if he wasn't so confident in his abilities. "You little fuck, you sandbagged me."

494 shrugged. "Not my fault you're gullible and greedy both at once." He held out his hand, palm up.

"Like hell I'm giving you my fuckin' cash," Jimbo snarled. He started to pull back his arm for a swing, but 494's hand shot out and grabbed the man's wrist. He clamped down until he felt bones grind against each other. His easy-going humor was gone, and he knew he looked as dangerous as he was. Fortunately, the effect wasn't lost on Jimbo. The big man winced at the pain in his arm, and a glimmer of apprehension appeared on his face.

"Consider it twelve hundred dollars for a lesson learned," 494 said quietly. From the corner of his eye he saw Burt move and he twisted Jimbo's arm a bit further in warning. Burt stopped. "Never judge a book by its cover. You'll live longer that way."

"Aaight," Jimbo whimpered in pain. With his free hand, he fished a crumpled roll of dollar bills from his shirt pocket and offered them to 494. "That's about six hundred," he said. "All I got on me."

494 took the roll and examined it. "You know," he chided, "you really shouldn't bet money you don't have." To make a point, he tightened his grip.

Jimbo moaned, "I'll get you the rest later. Promise."

"We got a problem here?" The bar's bouncer, a man a head taller and twice as wide as 494, with a bald head and muscles straining against his black t-shirt, trundled over.

"Nope. No problem. Right?" 494 let go and Jimbo rubbed his bruised arm.

"Yeah. I mean, no. No problem." It came out a barely discernible whine and Jimbo stomped away, Burt on his heels. 494 knew they'd be back—and not with the rest of the money, either. It didn't bother him much that the redneck couldn't pay what he owed; it hadn't been about the little money he could make from a hustle. Besides, either he'd be done and gone before they returned, or he'd handle them.

"Hm." The bouncer shot 494 a warning look, and he returned the glare with a friendly nod before wandering back to the bar's main area. He ignored the look of grudging admiration from the guard at the back door.

He ordered another beer.

"You're not from 'round here," the bar woman commented while she planted a green bottle, its surface beaded with moisture, in front of him. It wasn't a question. "Or you'd be more careful who you'd go messin' with. Jimbo's not exactly a good loser."

494 shrugged. "Thanks for the warning. I'll manage." In a moment of inspiration he added, "You're right, though. Me and my girlfriend want to get to Canada." He lowered his voice and said, "We're gonna get married."

The hard look in the woman's tired eyes softened for a moment, and he flashed her the silly grin of a man in love. It didn't take much effort; he only needed to think of the girl he'd left behind in the motel room. It wasn't until he recalled *how* he'd left her that the grin threatened to turn into a sickly grimace.

"You can't just cross the border," she said. "Not anymore. Not without proper papers and a permit."

He sighed and sagged a little on the stool. "So we discovered. I'm not sure what to do," he confessed, thinking on his feet and making up the story as he went along. "Her parents, you know...." He let his voice trail off.

"I see." She turned away to bring one of the customers at the far end of the bar another beer before she returned to 494.

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the bar. "There's someone who might be able to help you. Assumin' you hustled Jimbo out of enough cash." She clucked her tongue, and 494 understood she didn't like the guy much.

He brought his face closer to hers, an all-ears pose, and she continued, "Go see Rodrick. Lives a couple blocks down, red house, green door. He sometimes helps people like yourself, stranded on their way to Canada. Tell him Emma sent ya. His help don't come cheap, though."

"No problem," 494 said. "And thanks."

He emptied his bottle, paid for the drinks and left.

Outside, it had started to rain in earnest, wetness slicking the pavement. The street was deserted and 494 hunched a little deeper into his jacket to ward off the chill of the damp night air. He thought for a moment. The bar would have a back door, or a service entrance. If he could locate that, perhaps he could access the back room without anyone being the wiser—except for the card players, of course.

He turned another corner to find a rat-infested alley, overflowing garbage cans causing a stink. His nose wrinkled in disgust, his keen olfactory senses unhappy with the assault. Breathing shallowly through his mouth, he slunk along the alley, grateful for his ability to see in the dark almost as well as in daylight. It made it easy to avoid bumping into any of the cans and create a ruckus.

As he'd expected, the back door to the bar was locked, but that wasn't much of a hurdle for a well-trained Manticore operative. Within seconds after he set to work, he heard the tumbler click. He slowly pulled the door open, hoping the hinges wouldn't squeak. An instant later he found himself in a pitch black, narrow hallway that reeked of cigarettes. Muted voices reached him from behind another door at the end, a glow of light from inside the room filtering through the cracks and outlining its form. He smirked to himself. Easy as pie.

He crept to the door, listening closely and determining by the sounds—breathing, cards shuffling, feet scuffing—that there were indeed six men inside. Not much of a challenge,

especially not with surprise on his side. He tried the door handle, pleased to find it unlocked. He took a deep breath and flung the door open. He had a moment to notice stunned men turning his way, mouths dropping open for a shout, and from the corner of his eye he caught one of the guards going for a gun.

The gunman was the first to go down.

Before the men inside could fully react to the intruder, 494 had them all knocked out. He waited a moment to see if the sounds of falling bodies had alerted the guard outside of the room. Nobody came in, and 494 reached over the limp form of the skinny guy who'd first alerted him to the existence of the room. He swept the piles of dollar bills on the table into a bigger heap. He didn't have time to count, though there were several hundred dollar bills in the pile, and he suspected it'd be enough to pay the forger and get Rachel and him safely to Canada.

He looked around, and found a brown paper sandwich bag, stained with grease. It'd serve.

An instant later he had stuffed the money into the bag. One of the men on the ground moaned, slowly regaining consciousness.

There was a knock on the door leading to the bar. "Boss?"

Time to go. Unseen, unheard, 494 slipped out of the back door and into the alley.

oOo

It was past midnight, later than he had planned, when he returned to the hotel room. He put the box with the promised pizza on the desk, the smell mouth-watering, and kicked the door shut with his left foot. The meager light from the bedside lamp and the television was enough for him to see the room as clear as day. Rachel was on the bed where he'd left her. She was asleep, though dried tears stained her cheeks.

"Rachel?" he whispered.

She flinched, and her eyes popped open, dark and fearful.

"Shh, it's me," he said and watched her features relax ever so slightly. What he wouldn't give to never have to see such fear on her face again.

He sat down on the bed and quickly cut through the strips of towel that held her. They were tighter than he remembered tying them, and he frowned. "Are you all right?"

"What took you so long?" she asked, her voice still rough with sleep. She struggled to sit up. "My hands are numb." He took her hands in his to rub them gently in an attempt to bring the feeling back; he was surprised when she let him and didn't pull away. She hissed as the blood flow was restored, and he knew how much that could sting. His heart ached for what he was putting her through.

It took a few minutes before the tension melted from her and he knew the pain had abated.

"I got us something to eat," he said, after she'd pulled away and was sitting cross-legged on the bed, watching him with a curious look on her face. He grabbed the pizza box and put it on the bed in front of her. It was cooling down rapidly, the cheese congealing atop the filling, but Rachel snatched up a slice and wolfed it down in a couple of bites. 494 took it as a good sign that her appetite had returned

She took another slice, bit off a mouthful, then looked up.

"Don't you want any?"

494 hesitated. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a proper meal—sometime the day before, before he'd gotten his final orders and started on the bomb—and had to admit he was feeling hungry. But to share a pizza with her.... It seemed not right.

Rachel scooted back until she could lean against the headboard and drew up her legs. The pizza box bounced on the mattress as she moved. "Sit," she said, pointing. "Eat. You need to keep your strength up too."

He quirked a brow at her change of attitude, and lowered himself onto the corner of the bed, reaching for the box.

"I saw the news," she said around a mouthful of pizza, nodding at the television. "They're looking for us. For you."

He froze.

"They showed your picture and all."

How did they...?

Before he finished the thought, the answer came to him: the security cameras. They must've caught him when he sneaked into the mansion to get to Rachel. His mouth curled in a wry scowl. A good thing he hadn't returned to Manticore; they'd have

punished him severely for slipping up like that, surely.

Then again, if he'd done as he'd been ordered, the cameras would never have caught him in the first place.

"Why are you grinning?" Rachel asked. "I thought you said they mustn't find us, that it was dangerous."

"I wasn't talking about the police when I said that." He got up and stuffed the empty pizza box in the trash can beside the door. After he returned to the bed, he offered Rachel a plastic bag with the brightly-colored logo of the all-night quickie mart printed on it.

"I got you a few things you might want," he said.

She shot him a quick glance that he couldn't read before she upturned the bag. A genuine smile curled her lips at the sight of a toothbrush and toothpaste tumbling out. She scooped them up and put them beside her on the bed before shaking the bag until the next item fell out. It was a plastic-wrapped tourist shirt that, judging by the amount of dust on the plastic, had lain about for years. She unwrapped it. Blue letters, the paint crumbling with age, announced that Oroville was the "Inland Gateway to the 2010 Winter Olympics". Rachel arched a brow at him.

"It was on sale," he muttered. And small wonder; after the Pulse, those Olympics never even happened. And from the pile left in the store, the owner couldn't *give* those shirts away and hope to be rid of them before the next decade rolled around.

Rachel dropped the T-shirt next to the toiletries and fished a pair of brown socks from the bag. She made a noise that held the middle between a sob and a giggle. "Socks? Simon—I mean... Cade.... What were you thinking?"

He shrugged, feeling the weight of her gaze. "I wasn't sure what to bring you," he said shyly.

She watched him through her lashes, twisting the socks in her hands. "You really do care," she said, wonder in her voice. "It wasn't all a lie, was it?"

He shook his head, remembering the weeks he spent teaching her how to play the piano. How her fingers danced over the keys. The talks they had over coffee. That night in the pool house.... "No. Not all of it."

She just looked at him, with those large, brown eyes until he could no longer take her scrutiny and started to turn away.

"Next time," she said softly, "remember underwear." She blushed as she said it, no longer looking at him. Before he could think of how to reply, she'd collected the toiletries and the shirt, and disappeared into the bathroom. A moment later, he heard the shower running.

## 6 Chapter

Rachel slowly drifted up out of a deep sleep. She stared in confusion at the unfamiliar water-stained ceiling. Soft light filtered through strange flowered curtains, and the lumpy mattress sagging beneath her weight wasn't her own.

Where was she?

Then it came to her, and she shot up straight, heart thudding in her throat.

Daddy....

Full realization fell down on her, taking her breath away, and a small gasp escaped her.

"You all right?" someone asked, his voice gentle and a little rough with lack of sleep.

She looked in the direction of the voice. Cade—she still found it hard to remember his name wasn't Simon, but she'd be damned if she called him a *number*—was sitting upright on the single chair by the window, watching her. There were bruises beneath his eyes, and stubble showed on his chin.

He looked as if he hadn't slept at all.

"All things considering," she said cautiously, "yeah."

He gave her one of those quick, sad smiles that had made her fall in love with him in the first place, and that she wasn't entirely sure wasn't genuine. "Get dressed," he said. "We gotta get out of here."

He tugged at the curtain, brushing it aside barely enough to create a small gap. He peered through it. Something in the tone of his voice and the careful way he surveyed the parking lot warned Rachel of the urgency he felt, and she obediently stuck her legs into her jeans and slipped on her shoes. Her back pack was on the desk before the mirror and she made her way over to it while Cade straightened the curtain and got to his feet.

A moment later, she was running her brush through her hair, a few quick strokes to loosen the worst of the tangles, before she slipped on her jacket, and said, "I'm done." It had to be the fastest she'd ever finished up in the morning, and her dad would be.... The thought died as she remembered.

Cade had collected their few things in the plastic shopping bag, and pulled open the door,



indicating with his hand that she should wait a moment. After he'd stuck his head around the corner, he gestured again. Their car—funny, how she thought of it as theirs, when she knew full well he'd stolen it somewhere near Seattle— was a few feet away, its grille staring her in the face. "I want you to go straight to the car," he said. "Ok? Don't—"

"Cry out for help?" she interrupted. "Yeah, I got that." She couldn't help the bitterness that crept into her voice and felt a twinge of satisfaction when he flinched.

"Rachel...."

She didn't look at him, instead brushed past and darted to the passenger side. She was surprised to find the door open. Cade shook his head at her and glanced around the room one last time as if to check they hadn't forgotten something—or to see they left no trace, she wasn't sure which.

A few minutes later, he'd driven by the office, checked them out, and they were slowly rolling along the main street of the small town. "Where we going?" she ventured after a few moments.

"Shopping," he said, turning the car into the parking lot of a drugstore. The colors of the storefront matched the logo on the bag in the back seat. "So you can get whatever other things you need. It'll be a few days before I can get us into Canada, and we've got to hole up somewhere for a while. Somewhere safe."

"Oh." Rachel didn't know what to say to that, so she followed him into the store without another word.

The store wasn't very large and the aisles were cramped and narrow. It had a little of everything, but not much choice in brand names. She collected a few more toiletries: shampoo, another box of tampons, some lotion. A rack on the wall at the back of the store held stockings and women's underwear, and although the cut seemed more suitable for grandmothers, she collected a few pairs of panties that didn't seem too horrendously old-fashioned. She browsed through the bras next, but couldn't find any in her size, so she decided she could make do with sink-washing the one she was wearing.

When she returned to the counter, Cade was waiting for her with a shopping basket filled with snacks and food and drinks. He offered her a red fleece sweater that had *Oroville* embroidered upon the chest in flowery script.. "See if this fits you," he said. "And you should get another pair of jeans, if you can."

"Oh," she answered, her voice small. How long did he think they'd have to hide from whomever he thought was after her? She turned away and trudged back through the

store to the clothes section.

A few moments later, she returned with a pair of dark blue jeans hanging over her arm. The store didn't have fitting rooms, so she'd held it out in front of her and decided it should fit well enough. She'd already put on the fleece, the weather being chilly this far from the ocean. Cade gave her an appreciative smile that made her stomach flutter despite her firm determination to dislike him.

"How're you going to pay for this?" she murmured while she followed him to the register.

"Don't worry about that," he said over his shoulder, and planted his basked on the counter.

The elderly lady who was working the register rang everything up. "Sweater too," Cade told her, and indicated the fleece Rachel wore. She blinked in surprise; she should've said something herself, but he was quicker.

"That's two-hundred-forty-six dollars and thirty-seven cents," the woman said. She looked up at them, and her eyes narrowed. "Don't I know you from somewhere?" she asked.

Rachel was standing close enough to Cade that she sensed him go rigid. He was practically humming with tension, and she could feel it coming off of him in waves. She held her breath. She wanted to reach out to him but didn't dare; there was no telling what could tip the balance and set him off.

"Yes, now I know!" the lady said with a widening smile. "Aren't you that toothpaste commercial guy? The one that goes lalala white?" She singsonged a television commercial jingle.

"No, I'm not," Cade said tightly. Rachel felt some of the tension drain from him and she slowly breathed out.

"Oh," the woman said. She sounded disappointed. "You do look just like him."

Rachel giggled, her own nerves needing to find some release.

Cade paid the woman from a wad of cash that made Rachel widen her eyes in shock. How had he come up with that much money? Rob a bank?

She waited until they were outside, walking back to the car, before she dared ask. "Cade... the money.... You didn't... kill anyone, did you?"

"What?" Cade shot her a startled look over the roof of the car. "No." She couldn't tell what he was thinking. "Contrary to what you seem to think," he added after a moment, "I don't enjoy killing people. Come on, let's get breakfast, and I'll tell you."

On the northern edge of town they found an IHOP that had clearly seen better days. The waitress was friendly enough, however, and brought them to a table with a view of the parking lot. Mountains shimmered in the distance, their tops hidden in the gray clouds. Rachel suspected that it would rain some more later in the day, once those clouds came down from the high peaks.

After studying the menu, Cade ordered a stack of blueberry pancakes with a side of bacon.

"Waffles, please," Rachel told the waitress. "And do you have orange juice?" That earned her a startled look.

"Sorry, hon. We ain't even seen an orange since oh-fifteen, I think. I got apple juice, though. Local brand."

"Oh. Yeah, apple juice's fine."

Cade waited until the waitress was out of earshot before he leaned over the table and said in a low voice, "So, you want to know how I got the money?"

Rachel nodded, surprised he really meant to share. Thus far, he'd only told her what he thought she should know, and nothing else. Her eyes widened in disbelief as he proceeded to tell her how he'd relieved a bunch of high-roller poker players of their cash.

"So," she said, trying not to smile and finding her mouth twitching regardless once he was finished, "you robbed a bunch of criminals?"

He nodded seriously. "That about sums it up, yes."

"Isn't that kind of... you know, dangerous?"

Cade shrugged. "What can they do? Go to the police."

Rachel giggled. "I guess not." She grew serious. "What if they want revenge?"

"They never even saw me," Cade said curtly. She got the sense he didn't really want to discuss it any further. She was saved from coming up with a reply when the waitress returned and placed their orders on the table. The waffles smelled delicious, and her

stomach growled. Rachel was reminded she hadn't eaten anything but half a pizza last night and she dug in, making any further conversation impossible.

oOo

The instant they walked out of the door of the IHOP, Rachel noticed Cade tense up. He halted in his tracks, alert, gesturing for her to stay put. "What is it?" she asked, keeping her voice low without really knowing why.

"I don't know," he replied, speaking slowly. He sounded distracted, just like her dad did whenever she'd told him stories about her school day and his mind was occupied with a problem from work. Absent-minded.

Two men stepped out from between the parked cars. Both looked to be as wide as they were tall, with short-cropped hair and tanned skin. Rachel's breath caught; they were tapping wicked-looking two-by-four bars against their palms, and the threat was obvious.

Cade drew Rachel behind him. Instinct told her to move closer to him, something that surprised her as soon as she realized she was doing it. Wasn't Cade the one who'd murdered her father and abducted her? Tied her up? Assured her he'd kill more people if she so much as tried to call out for help? And still, faced with the two rednecks, he made her feel safe.

"So, pretty boy, we meet again." They took a step forward.

"Fancy that," Cade said lightly.

Rachel whispered, "You know them?"

He answered her in a low voice, out of the side of his mouth. "Played some pool with 'em last night. They lost." Out loud, he told the two men, "C'mon, fellas. You don't wanna do this." Rachel must've been the only one who heard the dangerous undercurrent in Cade's voice, because both men took another step forward, hefting their makeshift weapons.

"Way I see it," one of them said, "you owe me six hundred bucks."

"Really?" Cade lifted an eyebrow. "Funny. I thought *you* owed *me*."

Anger flared in the guy's eyes and Rachel drew in a sharp breath. Why was he baiting them?

"Like fuck, yeah," the man growled.

"Boys, boys." 494 inched sideways slowly, tugging Rachel along, until he had the wall at their backs. "Tell you what, I'll let you off the hook for that six hundred you owe me, and you do the same for me. Call it quits. Deal?"

Confusion clouded the man's face. "Wha...?"

"Jimbo, he's messin' with ya," the second man muttered, loud enough for Rachel to make out the words. Jimbo's face flushed with fury.

"You little shit. Think I'm a fool? Pay up, now. And we might let you and your pretty girlfriend go." Jimbo shot Rachel a look that made her skin crawl. It wasn't lost on Cade, either.

"Rachel, get back inside," he ordered over his shoulder.

"But...." she began.

He nudged her backward, and she nearly tripped over her own feet. "Now!"

Something whistled through the air, and Rachel let out a cry of surprise. With a loud thump and the tinkle of broken glass, a baseball bat smashed into the nearest car. It'd have hit Cade in the face if he hadn't dived to the ground and rolled immediately after shoving her toward the door.

Rachel stood frozen. Two more men had appeared, both as big as the first, and they were surrounding Cade. She had no idea where they'd come from.

"Inside, Rach," Cade yelled, crouching, while the four farmhands slowly circled around him. She hesitated a moment more. Going inside would be like running away. There was no way in hell he could handle four guys, each of which loomed a head taller, all by himself, was there?

Rachel never fully understood what happened next. What her eyes told her, her brain simply refused to believe. Cade sprang into action, and moved in a blur of color. The next thing she knew, the four guys were on the pavement, cradling heads and broken wrists and dislocated shoulders, moaning in agony. Cade stood among them, not a scratch on him. He wasn't even breathing hard. He dusted off his hands, and looked at her.

She realized her mouth was hanging open, and she snapped it shut. She'd never even made it back inside.

"You okay?" he asked, holding out his hand to her.

"Am I—?" She gaped at the men. "How did you—?"

He took her elbow. "There's no time," he said. "Someone'll have called the cops."

He shoved her into the car and gunned the engine. As the dark blue Aveo bumped out of the lot, a police car swerved into it, sirens on, lights flashing. Rachel caught a brief glance of the officer's face as he passed them. Cade watched the squad car disappear in the rear view mirror, and nodded to himself.

"Looks like you were right," Rachel said, and he glanced at her briefly before directing his attention to the road. Silence reigned in the car for several long minutes. Cade drove them south, out of town. Finally, curiosity got the better of her.

"Where we going?" Rachel asked. "Canada's the other way."

He glanced at her again. "We've to hide for a few days, until our papers are ready. There's a lake in the woods, a few miles from the road. There are cabins. I checked."

"Oh." It was all she knew to say. She settled in for the drive, staring at the potholed asphalt without really seeing it. In her mind's eye, she saw those four big, strong men go down in an instant. She snuck a sideways look at his profile. He'd shown her glimpses of so many people: Simon, the sweet piano teacher; Cade, her kidnapper. And now... had she seen 494, the soldier?

oOo

The day broke over Seattle, lightening from full darkness to dismal gloom. Thick, gray October clouds whisked by overhead, threatening rain but driven by the winds so fast, they never got the chance to let go of their loads. Clemente held his coat tight to his throat as he hastened to the car in his driveway.

It was government issue, so he'd have to account for every mile he drove in it, but that wasn't hard. After all, his job took him all over town. And nobody'd ask questions if he drove to Sector Eight to visit the widow of a former Seattle PD officer so he could ask her about a case her husband had been working on, would they?

He quickly drove across town, the detective badge making the sector checkpoints a mere nuisance as opposed to the real hindrance they formed for Seattle's populace at large—that being the point, of course: preventing any undesirables from easily making their way around. In any case, it didn't take him long to reach the Shaver house.

It turned out to be a low-slung bungalow on a quiet side street lined with bare-limbed trees. They'd shed their canopy in preparation for the winter, covering the sidewalk in a thick brown carpet of leaves that muffled his footsteps and smelled of rot as he got out of the car and walked over to the front door.

It opened before he could knock.

"Detective Clemente?"

The woman in the opening was Dona Shaver; he recognized her instantly from the funeral. A tall, slim-boned woman, she looked much better than she had during her husband's memorial, where she'd been withdrawn, her ebony skin carrying a sickly gray cast, and her eyes red from crying. Today, she wore a white blouse that stood out starkly against her skin, and dark blue slacks.

"Yes, Ma'am."

She smiled a row of even white teeth and pulled the door open wider. "Please, come in, Detective."

He stepped over the threshold. "Please, call me Ramon."

She lifted a perfectly shaped eye brow at that. He shrugged. "This isn't quite an official visit."

She directed him into the living room, pointed at the couch and disappeared to make coffee. He glanced around the room. It was neat, with well-oiled wood furniture and throw pillows covering the sofa. A row of framed photos stood on the mantle of a cold hearth, and he recognized her husband in a few of them.

Mrs. Shaver returned and offered him a mug of hot brew that almost smelled like real coffee. She settled herself in an easy chair standing at an angle to the couch and crossed her legs. "What brings you around, Detective?" she asked.

"I was looking into some old cases," Clemente explained. "And I noticed that your husband was involved in a murder investigation when he died. That of a young piano teacher."

"The Lehane case," Dona Shaver said softly. Clemente started.

"You heard of it?"

She nodded. "The case had Curtis very involved. Sometimes, I'd wake up at night and find him gone. He'd be sitting in his study, with nothing but the desk light on, going over the files again and again." Her mouth curled in a sad half-smile. "It wasn't even his case anymore."

"How's that?" Clemente sipped from his coffee. It was strong, and too sweet, yet not too bad for the crud that passed for coffee these days.

"Curtis was first on the scene," Dona continued. "But a few days after, his captain told him he was off the case, that another department would handle it. Curtis was mightily miffed." She smiled wistfully, as if at a memory. "He was that kind of man, you see. He asked the captain to at least keep him in the loop." Her smile faltered. "And that's when it happened." She turned to look out of the window. Clemente waited, even though he itched to ask her about her husband's files, the ones he'd studied at home in the middle of the night.

"It was so senseless," Dona whispered.

Clemente knew she was speaking about her husband's murder.

"I hear he got caught up in a robbery?" he prodded.

She turned back to him. "Yes. He just went for donuts. Some punks came in to hold up the store and started shooting for no reason. It wasn't as if Curtis was trying to stop them or anything. He was off duty, didn't even have his sidearm with him. He knew better than that." She paused, swallowed. "They never arrested anyone."

"They didn't?" Clemente was surprised.

She shook her head. "No. The store owner couldn't tell them a thing. They'd been wearing masks. He couldn't even tell if they were black or white."

"Hm. I'm sorry."

The words were empty but they were all he had. Although each fact in and of itself was perfectly innocent, those facts added up to something he really didn't want to contemplate. Still, he couldn't help but think it. Yet why burden the widow with the suspicion that her husband's death wasn't a freak accident, a slip of fate?

He sipped from his coffee and grimaced at the lukewarm liquid. They were quiet for several minutes before Clemente cleared his throat. "I...um... I'd like to see your husband's



files on the Lehane case," he said quietly.

Dona gave a start, as if she'd forgotten he was there. "Sure. I boxed them up, expected someone from the department to come by and get them, but so far, nobody has."

Clemente smiled. "I'm here, now."

She smiled back. "So you are."

She got up and gestured for him to follow her. She led him deeper into the house, to a small back room where an old desk took up most of the available floor space. Shelves lined the walls, filled with detective novels and thrillers. A shoe box stood in the middle of the desk. Dona pointed. "It's all in there. I'll be glad to see it gone."

"Thank you." Clemente collected the box and tucked it under his arm. "If there's anything I can do...?"

She offered a grateful smile but shook her head. "I'm all right. The department's providing me with a small widow's income, and I have my own job. But thank you."

A few minutes later, he was sitting in his car, the box on the passenger seat. Clemente hesitated a moment, imagining this was how Pandora must've felt before she opened her box, then reached over and flipped the lid off. The box was filled to the rim with paper: computer print-outs, Post-its, and notepad sheets filled with a scrawling hand and numerous doodles.

He browsed through the pages. The call had come late morning, several months ago. Lehane had been found dead on the scene, his hair still wet from a shower, a towel wrapped around his hips. There were no signs of break-in, no signs of a struggle. The only items discovered missing from the scene were Lehane's wallet (minus his driver's license, which had been carelessly discarded) and his glasses. Clemente pursed his lips. It looked almost as if someone murdered Lehane to take on his identity.

He dug deeper into the box until he located a copy of the autopsy report and pulled it out. He quickly scanned the coroner's findings. Simon Lehane died from strangulation and the coroner suspected a garrote had been used.

Clemente whistled through his teeth as he read the next line of the report: the force of the attack had left Lehane's neck broken. It took considerable strength to do that to a man.

He pulled out his cellphone and dialed the number for the city morgue. Perhaps the

coroner who'd handled the case—he glanced at the report: a Doctor Peterson—could tell him more.

Instead, he hit another brick wall.

"I'm sorry," the woman on the other end said after he'd identified himself and asked to speak with Dr. Peterson. "There's nobody here of that name."

"He'd have examined the body of Simon Lehane," Clemente said. "Murder case, couple of months ago." He spelled out *L-e-h-a-n-e*.

There were a few minutes of silence, and he imagined the woman at the morgue browsing through the records. Then she came back on.

"I'm sorry, Detective. There's no file under that name either."

Clemente hung up.

oOo

Half an hour later, of which fifteen minutes were spent getting bounced around on a dirt track that looked as if nobody had driven along it since the Pulse, Cade finally stopped the car and killed the engine.

Rachel got out and looked around. They were in an open space in the forest, the smell of sap strong in the air from the drooping pine trees surrounding them. Through the trees, Rachel could see the silver glimmer of a lake. At one end of the clearing stood a small, wooden cabin, its roof overgrown with moss and grasses, the log walls stained dark with rain. A narrow porch held a rusty swing chair.

"We'll be safe here for a few days," Cade said.

"Whose cabin is this?"

He shrugged. "I don't know." He hopped up the steps of the porch and knelt close to the lock. It clicked open an instant later and he pushed open the door.

"Whoa, you can't do that," Rachel said, shocked. "That's... I don't know... breaking and entering?"

Cade shook his head. "No breaking involved. Trespassing, maybe. But who'll know? Nobody's been here for a while, and with winter approaching, I doubt anyone will be

around soon. It's perfect. Besides, we'll only be here for a few days. We won't break anything, I promise."

Reluctantly, Rachel followed him inside. The windows were coated with dust, and what little daylight filtered through didn't do much to light up the place. Even so, she could still see that on her right, there was a sitting room with a couch and a couple of easy chairs, placed in a half circle around a cold fireplace. On the left were a small kitchen and dinner table. The far end held several doors that stood ajar, and she suspected they led to bedrooms and a bathroom. The air was stale and damp, and heavy with mold. Her nose wrinkled.

"It smells funky." She ran a finger across a cabinet and held it up to study the layer of gray dust on her finger tip. "It needs cleaning. I don't think anyone has been here this summer at all. Maybe even longer than that." She no longer felt so guilty about breaking into someone else's house.

Cade nodded and went back to the car while Rachel continued to explore the small cabin. As she had expected, she found a bedroom in the far back corner, and a bathroom with a cracked sink next to it. She grimaced at the shower stall; the tiled floor was covered in black streaks of grime.

*No way I'm gonna shower here*, she thought to herself with a small shudder. Sponge baths at the sink would have to do.

She wandered back to the living room to find Cade in the small kitchen area. He'd brought in the supplies they bought in the town and was putting them on the counter. His back was to her, and she could watch him unnoticed. He moved with an easy grace that had attracted her to him from the first time she'd laid eyes on him. She glanced at his hands while he juggled the cans of food they'd bought, and remember how those slim fingers once showed her how to hit the keys exactly right—and recalled how they'd felt on her skin, that night, after her father's dinner party.

A shiver ran through her. She should hate him, she told herself. Or at the very least, be afraid of him. But oddly, and despite her better judgment, she didn't do either. Instead, watching him, butterflies fluttered around in her stomach. She bit her lip, willing them away.

Cade turned suddenly, as if he felt her eyes on him. His face twisted in an odd grimace as he tried to suppress a yawn, and Rachel realized that, although he moved in the same way, he looked a far cry from the well-groomed piano teacher that had visited at her home. He was pale-faced so that a smattering of freckles stood out, and his eyes were blood-shot and dark.

"You look like hell," she said. "Did you sleep at all last night?"

He shook his head. "No. Haven't slept in..." His brow furrowed. "...a long time."

"You should, you know," Rachel said softly. "Get some sleep, I mean. What good are you gonna be to me if you drop dead from exhaustion?"

He cocked his head, looked at her for a very long moment, and she felt as if she were being weighed and measured. Uncomfortable beneath his scrutiny, she shuffled her feet and tugged the sleeves of her new sweater a little further down her arms. It was chilly inside the cabin; not exactly cold, but far from warm. Cade glanced away, looked at the couch, and back at her.

"I'll be good," she promised, as if she could read his mind. "You don't even have to tie me up again, I won't run." She gave a soft, wry laugh. "Where would I go, anyway? We're in the middle of nowhere." Miles from the nearest town, with nothing but dense forest in between.

Outside, it started to drizzle, the smell of raining mingling with the musty scent of the old cabin.

Cade made up his mind. "Wake me in a few hours," he said. "Wake me right away if you hear anything: car, boat, helicopter..."

She nodded. "Promise."

He settled himself on the couch, wrapped an old, faded throw around himself. A few minutes later, his breathing evened out, telling her he'd fallen asleep.

Rachel poked around in her back pack until she found what she was looking for, and went outside, sheltering from the rain underneath the leaking porch roof. She was a little surprised Cade hadn't taken it from her, seeing how adamant he was about keeping her from calling for help. Perhaps he didn't realize what it was, or maybe he hadn't even seen it. After she caught him going through her back pack and had yelled at him, he'd seemed embarrassed. Perhaps he never thought to look. In any way, she was grateful. Her father had given her the device a couple of weeks ago, with instructions to use it only in case of emergency.

If this didn't count, she wouldn't know what did.

## 7 Chapter

Clemente greeted the guard near the entrance of the parking garage beneath the Seattle Police headquarters. The barrier came down behind him and he slipped the car into an empty slot and got out. He left the shoe box on the passenger seat and collected his notes on the Berrisford case before he turned toward the elevator.

As soon as he reached his office, his phone rang.

"He wants to see you," the voice on the other end said without preamble. She didn't say who *he* was, or even give her own name, but Clemente recognized her as the aging secretary of Chief of Police Albert Sullivan. "Now," she added, and disconnected before he could say anything.

Clemente's brow crinkled. He dropped his case notes on the desk, hung up his coat, and went back to the elevator. The chief's office was at the top floor, with a wide view across downtown Seattle and Fifth Avenue. While he waited for the elevator to arrive, bobbing on the balls of his feet impatiently, Clemente wondered what Sullivan could possibly want from him. He'd been called into the mayor's office only the day before. They couldn't possibly expect him to solve the case in twenty-four hours, could they?

The secretary waved him in, glaring at him over the rim of the glasses perched on the tip of her nose, as if having to call him was a personal affront to her. He shrugged it off, knocked, and opened the door.

Sullivan wasn't alone; Captain Haskill, Clemente's immediate superior and in charge of the Homicide Division, was with him—as were two civilians dressed in neat, dark suits. *Feds*, Clemente knew the instant he laid eyes on them. His apprehension rose another notch.

"Sir? You asked for me?"

"Yes, Detective. Where do we stand with the Berrisford investigation?" The chief leaned back in his swivel chair. Everyone else remained standing.

"Well, sir, there are APBs out on the piano teacher and Rachel Berrisford. We found the stolen Town Car yesterday afternoon. Another car was reported stolen from the same lot, and we suspect Lehane, or whatever his name is, took that. I haven't seen the forensic reports yet; I just came in. I followed up on something else this morning."

Sullivan lit up a cigar. "Ah, yes. The supposed murder case of Lehane. Did I not tell you to

drop that?"

How did they know? "Yes, sir, but—"

Sullivan straightened, waving his cigar around, trailing smoke. "Well, no matter. The Berrisford case has been transferred into the hands of the NSA. These two gentlemen," he indicated the agents, "will take over from you."

"But—"

"That'll be all." The chief dismissed everyone with a hand gesture. Clemente sought Captain's Haskill's gaze, looking for support, but she gave a slight shake of her head and a minimal shrug. She was a good department head; she'd probably already exhausted every argument possible. Sighing, Clemente followed her out. The NSA agents were right on his heel.

"Capt'n, what's going on?" Clemente asked as soon as the door had shut behind them. "Why are the NSA gettin' involved?"

"Berrisford's murder is a matter of national security," one of the men, wide-shouldered and a few inches taller than Clemente, said. His steely eyes dared Clemente to contradict him. "If that's not enough for you, Detective, we suspect Rachel Berrisford has been taken across state lines. That makes the kidnapping a federal case."

For the FBI, maybe, but the NSA? Clemente wanted to say more, but stopped himself before he could speak up. It would just be a waste of breath; he knew the futility of trying to convince them. Besides, they weren't the ones calling the shots either. The NSA agent was right about one thing, though: with more than twenty-four hours gone by since Rachel disappeared, chances were she'd left Washington State a long while ago. The bombing, however, that should still be his, shouldn't it?

"Berrisford was scheduled to appear before a senate committee," Captain Haskill said quietly, reading his mind and forestalling his protest. "The government believes someone didn't want him to testify."

Clemente's shoulders slumped. Yes, that'd take the case right out of Seattle PD's jurisdiction. He knew a lost cause when he saw one.

"I trust you'll hand these gentlemen all your case notes?" she added.

Clemente nodded. "Of course. This way, please." They followed him closely, like dogs heeling as he led them back to his office. Or perhaps they were afraid he'd hide or

withhold evidence if they didn't keep a close eye on him.

oOo

True to her promise, Rachel shook him awake a few hours later. Before 494 was fully conscious, his hand had shot out and clamped around her wrist, instinct making him act on a perceived threat.

He let her go with an apologetic shrug as soon as he realized who she was, and where they were. She rubbed her bruised wrist, goggling at him, her eyes wide. "Sorry," he said weakly. "Force of habit. Next time, just call me." She was lucky grabbing her wrist was all he'd done. Last time someone had shaken him awake like that, he'd been ten, and it had been an orderly. The guy ended up in the hospital with a broken jaw. Ever since, nobody shook an X5 awake; they used sound, from a safe distance.

He took another good look at her. Her cheeks were rosy, and water droplets clung to her hair. "Did you go outside?" he asked, instantly suspicious. She offered a guilty little smile and self-consciously ran a hand through her hair.

"Yes." She gestured at the cabin. "It smells moldy in here. I wanted to get some fresh air. I didn't go far, just to the edge of the lake." She glanced at the window. "You know, I bet it's really beautiful here in summer."

"Hm." He wouldn't know about beautiful. "Don't do that again," he said. "Not alone. There could be wolves out there."

She laughed. "Si—Cade, do you think I'm totally helpless? When I was a kid, we often went camping. Wolves are more afraid of me than the other way 'round."

He shrugged. Wasn't necessarily the kind of wolf he was talking about. "Just don't do it again, okay?"

"Or what?" Her tone held a hint of belligerence. "You gonna tie me up again?"

He held her gaze. "If that's what it takes."

She winched, rubbing her wrists unconsciously, and he sighed. "Look, Rachel, I didn't like doing that, all right? But I couldn't trust you. I do what I do to keep you alive. Even if you don't like how I do it."

She looked away. "I know."

That startled him. "You do?"

She nodded and turned back to him, biting her lip. "I told you I saw the news last night. I don't understand what's going on, but I think I believe you. And you can trust me now; I won't try to run away from you."

"Huh." He watched her for a long moment, surprised by her admission, until she shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. He got up from the couch. "I think I saw a pile of firewood 'round back. What do you say we get a fire started?"

She wrapped her arms around herself. "This place could do with a little warming up. I don't get how you could sleep right here."

"I got a high body temperature," he said. "Cold doesn't bother me, usually."

The look she gave him was odd, and he snapped his mouth shut. She was just starting to relax around him, and the less he told her about himself, the better. "You hungry?"

"Yeah." She grinned. "Hot dogs and tomato soup sounds good."

He grinned back. It sounded damned good.

o0o

That evening, after another uninspired microwaved dinner, Clemente sat in his customary easy chair, the few lights that were on in the living room not enough to banish every shadow, and nursed his regular glass of whiskey. He took an occasional sip, hardly tasting the liquid, his thoughts occupied with a sense of failure.

They'd taken him off the case.

It wasn't the first time he'd lost a case to a federal agency, and usually, they'd promise to keep him in the loop, if only out of professional courtesy. The NSA, however, had cut him off completely. They'd taken his files, every last damned scrap of 'em. They'd stood to watch over his shoulder as he erased his case notes from the hard drive of his computer, and had walked out of the door without so much as a by-your-leave. And that chafed far more than being taken off the case itself did.

Spread out on the coffee table were Shaver's notes that he'd picked up that morning. Over the rim of his glass, he pondered the pages. At least he still had those, but what good they'd do, Clemente didn't know. He couldn't very well follow up on the Lehane killing. Not after the Chief of Police himself had told him—twice!—to leave it be; not after the



Berrisford case, with its mysterious link to Lehane, was taken from him.

He glanced up at the photo of Debbie on the dresser, from the days before she got sick. Her portrait smiled at him, cheeks dimpling, eyes sparkling. He remembered when it was taken, several years ago, when he'd first made Detective and they'd gone out to celebrate.

He raised his glass to his wife's photo. "To protect and serve," he said, the words turning sour in his mouth. Today was one of those days he wished he'd followed in his father's footsteps and become a gardener. At least that was honest work. Whereas being a cop in post-Pulse Seattle—

A shrill buzz interrupted his bitter introspection, and Clemente gave a start. It took him a second or two to identify the noise as his doorbell; he didn't get many visitors since Deb died.

He put down his glass, padded to the door and opened it cautiously.

"Frank Davies," the wide-shouldered man on his doorstep said. "I'm—was—"

"Yeah, I remember," Clemente said. Though it looked as if the cut on the bodyguard's temple was healing nicely, there were bags under his eyes that indicated he hadn't slept much lately. "What can I do for you?"

Davies snuck a glance over his shoulder. "I... think there're things you should know," he said in a low voice. "Can I come in?"

"Oh. Sure." Clemente opened the door wider. "I should tell you, though, that I'm no longer on the case."

Davies barked a humorless laugh. "Can't say I'm surprised."

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

His curiosity piqued, Clemente preceded Davies to his living room, switched on a couple more lights and offered to pour the man a drink, which he declined.

"If you have decent coffee, on the other hand, I wouldn't object," he said.

A few minutes later, Davies was sipping from a steaming mug of instant. "Not exactly stellar quality," he commented idly after swallowing.

Clemente's brow drew down. "Did you just come here to insult my coffee?" he asked.

Davies grinned. "No. Sorry. In fact, I'm glad."

That caused Clemente's eyebrows to lift right back up.

"Means you're honest," Davies explained with an amused little grin. "I know a little of what a detective makes."

"Huh." Clemente settled back in his chair. "You wanted to know if I'm on the take? What if this is just the coffee for nosy guests, and I keep the really good stuff for myself?"

Davies smirked. "Then I'll have to take my chances."

"Chances with what?" Clemente asked.

Davies remained silent for a long minute. "It wasn't a random coincidence," he said at last, putting his unfinished coffee on the low side table. "What happened, I mean."

Clemente nodded. "I figured that."

"Mr. Berrisford, he was a wealthy man. Made his fortune in the genome business or some such. Made enemies, too. He was worried about his daughter, that's why he hired us, me and Sean: to make sure nothing happened to her."

Clemente could understand Berrisford's concerns; he'd seen the mansion. After the Pulse, when society broke down, there'd been a string of kidnappings, ransom demands, murders. Someone like Berrisford would be high on the list of any criminal looking to make a quick fortune. He certainly wasn't the only one who'd hired private security; Clemente could think of several former colleagues who'd left the police force and started to freelance.

Davies pressed his lips together. "Good job we did, too," he muttered, so softly that Clemente didn't think he was suppose to have heard it. He decided not to comment.

"So, what do you think? Competitor? Disgruntled employee?"

Davies shook his head. "No. Lately, Mr. Berrisford was more worried than usual. He didn't really tell us why, but Sean and I talked about it between ourselves. Did you know Berrisford was gonna testify for some senate committee?"

"No." Clemente straightened up. "What committee? Why?"

Davies shrugged. "Something to do with genetics and the military. I don't really know."

"Military?" Clemente repeated, astonished.

"Yeah. Mercidyne, that's Mr. Berrisford's company, worked for the DoD. He annulled their contract about a year ago."

"Huh." Clemente pinched the bridge of his nose. "That'd explain why the NSA has taken over the case."

Davies sighed. "You mentioned being taken off the case. You do realize it'll not gonna get solved, now, right? It's gonna quietly disappear, and Rachel'll never be found."

"I..." Clemente fell silent, unsure how to respond. There was something smelly about the entire thing, he'd known that for a while now. But to believe that the NSA, a government agency, deliberately would bury a case and let an innocent teenage girl vanish, that was a bit much to swallow.

"I don't see what you think I can do," he said at last.

Davies made a noise. "Neither do I." He rolled his shoulders. "I guess I was hopin' you could do, I don't know, *something*. Call in some favors, or whatever."

Clemente shook his head. "This goes all the way to the top," he said. "Chief of Police himself told me I was off the case. I don't think I could find anyone willing to risk their neck."

"Yeah. Figured as much." Davies scrunched his eyes shut and rubbed a hand across his face before he started to get up. "Well, Detective, thanks for the coffee."

"Wait," Clemente said, making up his mind on the spot. "There's something else." He point at the spread out pages that formed Lehane's murder file. "Lehane."

"Rachel's teacher?"

"An impostor." Clemente's mouth curled in distaste for a moment. "Lehane's dead." He showed Davies the photocopy of Simon Lehane's license, the one found discarded in his apartment, on top of the teacher's corpse. "This is the real Lehane."

Davies took the page and perused the photo closely. "That's not the guy."

"I know." Clemente paused. "But that—" he tapped the photo with a finger, "*is* Simon

Lehane, licensed music teacher. He was murdered about three months ago. His killer's never been apprehended. And they didn't want me looking into the case...."

"Three months..." Davies muttered. "That's when he first came to teach Rachel. Goddammit, you mean that weasel snuck in under our noses to spy on Berrisford all along? He set the bomb?" Davies's face flushed with frustrated anger.

Clemente shrugged. "I think so."

"Fuck." Davies chewed on a thumb, thinking. "I did wonder if he'd gotten military training at one point. Something about the way he moved. But I never asked. I mean, c'mon, a piano teacher in the army? But, *shit*." His head shot up and he pinned Clemente with a look. "He took Rachel? They got her? The people that killed Mr. Berrisford? We'll never find her!"

Clemente offered Davies a supportive smile. "Maybe they don't have her," he said cautiously, letting Davies in on his theories. "Lehane, for lack of a better name, was reportedly seen leaving the city, heading south, in a stolen car. That car was later abandoned in a large factory lot. Where, we believe, he stole another car. It doesn't look like a special ops heading for base after he's done his job, does it? Assuming the guy took Rachel...." He left the rest unsaid.

Davies finished the thought, speaking slowly. "He could be on the run, trying to keep her out of harm's way." A hopeful smile spread across his face. It was obvious he cared for Rachel beyond her being the object of his job. "Sean said she was head over heels with the guy. Maybe he liked her too. How do we find them?"

Before Clemente could answer, Davies's pocket beeped. He fished out a cell phone and shrugged at Clemente.

"Sorry." Davies flipped open the phone. "Yeah?" He listened for a moment and sat up straighter. "Yes ma'am, this is Frank Davies."

Clemente got up, gathered Davies's coffee cup and held it up, asking silently if the man wanted a hot refill. Davies gave him a distracted nod, listening intently to whomever was on the other end. Clemente walked to the kitchen.

When he returned, Davies was wearing a big grin that stretched from ear to ear. "Guess what?" he said. "Rachel called Senator Hamm."

Clemente gave him a quizzical look. "What?"

"The senator's was a childhood friend of Mr. Berrisford's wife," Davies explained. "Her daughter and Rachel Berrisford practically grew up together. Mr. Berrisford was about to testify for the senator's committee. You were right; Lehane's running. They're up north somewhere."

oOo

Darkness crept into Sandoval's office, the single lamp on the desk not nearly bright enough to banish it. Sandoval paced in front of his desk, five steps to the left, another five to the right, back and forth. He was feeling too itchy to sit still. His eyes burned with fatigue; he couldn't remember how many hours he'd been up, but it was at least thirty-six. And there still was no trace of the transgenic.

The base was quiet; training had been finished for the day and the cries and shouts from the quad no longer drifted into his office. Manticore's troops were at chow, before they'd be locked up in their dorms and cells. As soon as Sandoval had been informed of X5-494's defection, he'd called off all privileges and downtime activities. Training, food, more training, and sleep. That was the base's primary activity, and that was all that was needed, truly. The transgenics should never have had the liberties of free time at all.

*We've trained them too well*, he thought. How else could it be explained that a single transgenic could elude the combined forces of the NSA, Homeland Security and Manticore's own security personnel for two days? Other than the stolen car, they hadn't even found a trace.

On the advice of Lydecker, he'd reluctantly split his forces, sending a team north as well as south. Neither had produced any results so far, and Sandoval worried he'd might have made a mistake. Perhaps, if he had concentrated all their efforts on the areas south of Seattle, maybe they'd have found the X5 by now. Deep down, however, he knew Lydecker had a point. Still, he couldn't very well concentrate his troops up north, either; it might just be what the transgenic counted on: that they'd believe he laid a false trail, and that the trail was real after all. Lot of desert in California and Nevada, easy to hide in.

Sandoval uttered a heavy sigh and scrubbed a hand over his skull. His thoughts had been going round and round in those same circles for hours, and he was friggin' tired of it. He wouldn't know if he'd made the right decision until they found the transgenic. And there wasn't anybody he could talk to, nobody he trusted enough to let them in on his insecurities. He hadn't forgotten the threats murmured into his ear in that deep, anonymous voice from Washington. He couldn't appear weak or uncertain; he simply had to play the part of on-site leader in full control of the situation till the bitter end. It was the only chance he had to survive the disaster of a transgenic gone rogue.

He wrung his hands together, wishing they were wrapped around the son of a bitch's neck. He'd happily squeeze the life out of the creature that caused him so much grief. But for that, they'd first have to find him.

The sound of his phone ringing dragged him from his daydreaming of strangling the X5. He gave a start at the sudden noise so loud in the silence and nearly tripped over his feet as he swooped down on the device.

"Yes?" he spat into the mouthpiece, sending up a silent prayer to whatever god might exist that this was the breakthrough he'd been waiting for.

"Agent Sandoval."

Sandoval's hopes took a plunge; it was the voice from Washington.

And he had nothing to report.

"Sir...um...." He cleared his throat. He wanted to lie, to say they were close to capturing the transgenic, but the last time he'd tried that, the voice had seen right through him. Sandoval didn't think they'd let him get away with it twice. And since he couldn't admit defeat either, he was at a loss for words.

A soft chuckle drifted over the line, causing Sandoval's brow to crease.

"Agent, we know you haven't found him yet. I have some news that we think might help you."

"Oh?" The word slipped out before Sandoval could swallow it.

"Yes." Then all amusement melted from the voice as it continued. "The girl tried to call Hamm on the senator's personal line. It went to voice-mail, or we would've learned about it sooner."

Sandoval's heart skipped a beat before lodging in his throat. He dared hardly breathe.

"Did... did she say if she was with X5-494? Where are they?"

"She didn't leave an exact location. Somewhere up north, is what she said. She also said she'd try to call again when she gets the chance. We're monitoring all the senator's incoming calls. If Rachel Berrisford calls again, we'll know the second she does. Have a team standing by for extraction. We'll have to move fast."

"Yes sir."

As soon as he hung up, Sandoval rushed out of his office and started barking orders. Up north, she'd said. Lydecker had been right; the son of a bitch was trying to get to Canada. If he succeeded, catching him would be that much more difficult. Relations between Canada and the States weren't as friendly as they once had been. No, they had to capture the rogue transgenic before he crossed the border. Whatever the cost. Nothing less than a team of X5s would do. And Sandoval planned to handle the team himself. He didn't have time for another screw-up.

## 8 Chapter

For the first few seconds after she opened her eyes, Rachel couldn't remember where she was. The room was tiny, the gloomy gray light that filtered through a small, dirty window barely enough to make out its features, and the air smelled dank and moldy. But once consciousness fully reasserted itself she remembered: she was in the bedroom of the cabin on the shores of Lake Wanacut.

She threw back the covers that she'd been burrowed under despite the funky smell wafting up from them, and swung her legs down. She didn't need to dress; the chill air had made her think twice about taking off her jeans or socks, so all she had to do was slip her feet back into her shoes and wrap the new, soft fleece jacket that Cade bought her around her shoulders.

She padded around the narrow bed and into the living room of the cabin. It was deserted; Cade nowhere in sight. A low fire burned in the hearth, doing its best to chase away the cold, and failing rather miserably. A few logs had been placed next to the fire, and Rachel threw them on the flames. Once the fire burned high and her hands had warmed up some, she navigated around the couch to the other side of the room and the small kitchen area. She poured herself a bowl of cereal and added milk from a container sitting on the counter. The milk was still cool so it wasn't long since Cade brought it in from the car where they'd left it to keep it chilled. The cabin lacked a refrigerator; in fact, it lacked electricity, and last night they had made do with a few stubs of candles they'd found in one of the kitchen drawers. At least the wood stove had allowed them to warm up the canned soup.

By the time she finished her breakfast, Cade still hadn't returned and, curious, Rachel went in search of him. She didn't have to go far. He was outside, in the grassy clearing in front of the cabin. He was barefoot and naked from the waist up despite the cool temperature in the forest and the misty drizzle that leaked from the sky, and performing some kind of stylized forms that looked more like a dance than the martial arts Rachel knew it had to be. *He's beautiful*, she found herself thinking while she watched. Muscles shifted beneath smooth skin, every move filled with slow grace and perfection. Yes, it was almost like a ballet.

He didn't give any indication he'd seen her. Even so, Rachel was certain he knew she was there. He'd probably noticed her as soon as she first stepped out of the door. There wasn't much that escaped Cade. She wandered over to the porch swing and sat down, waiting for him to finish.

He was tugging his T-shirt down over rain-slicked skin while he walked over to her. He



cast an anxious look up to the cabin's roof.

"Did you add more wood to the fire?" he asked, hopping onto the porch and out of the drizzling rain.

She nodded. "It was cold inside."

"Don't stoke it too high," he warned. "The wood isn't entirely dry. I don't want anyone seeing the smoke and coming to investigate."

"Sorry," she muttered. It wasn't something she'd considered.

He gave her dimpled smile. "Not a problem. Did you eat?"

"Yeah." She nodded at the clearing. "What were you doing out there?"

"*Tai chi chuan*." He sat down next to her and the old swing groaned beneath their combined weight. "It's a form of martial arts that also works as meditation. Clears the mind."

"Meditation?" She laughed. "Did they teach you that too?"

He didn't smile back. "They taught me everything I know."

"Even the piano?" she asked softly.

This time, he did smile. "Especially the piano."

"How long did it take you to learn that?" she said. "I mean, I guess you're not like a real piano teacher, who has had years to learn."

"A day," he replied. His green eyes were earnest.

Her jaw dropped. "Day? You're joking, right? Nobody can learn to play like you do in a day."

He shrugged. "I can. Does that make you uncomfortable?"

She wrapped her arms around herself. "A little," she admitted. "There's so much I don't understand. Like, why aren't you cold? It's freezing out here."

He got back up and held out his hand. "Then let's go back inside." She hesitated a second

before she accepted the hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. He followed her back into the cabin. "I do feel the cold," he said as he closed the door behind them, "but not as much as you do. I've learned to ignore it. Besides, I got a higher body temperature than a human."

He disappeared into the bathroom, leaving her gaping after him, and reappeared a few minutes later, rubbing his hair dry with a towel.

Rachel drew a chair as close to the fire as she dared and snuggled into it. She stuck her legs out, her feet at the edge of the crackling flames, enjoying the heat that slowly seeped into her. Cade dropped down on the couch, folding the throw into a heap on the edge. Rachel cocked her head and watched him.

"What did you mean?" she asked after a few silent minutes passed. "A higher body temperature *than a human?*" She stressed the last few words.

"I'm part cat," he said blandly. "Or so they tell me."

For the second time that morning, she goggled at him. "What?"

He shrugged. "It's just a few strands of DNA. Enough to make a difference, though. Higher body temperature, faster reflexes, enhanced senses, speed."

She wasn't sure whether to believe him. He seemed totally serious, though his story was too crazy. "So, you're part cat, you don't have a name, and they trained you to kill?" A shiver ran along her spine, and it wasn't from the lingering chill in the room.

He shot her a wry grin. "That's me, in a nutshell, yeah."

Rachel leaned forward, found the poker and stirred the fire. A log fell and a whirlwind of sparks flew up into the chimney. She glanced guiltily at Cade. He frowned, though he didn't say anything. She dropped the poker and shifted back into her chair. "How...?" she began, not sure how to finish. He understood anyway.

"Test tubes," he said. "And surrogate birth mothers."

The way he said it, so emotionless and calm, like it was the most normal thing to say, brought tears to her eyes. She couldn't imagine having to grow up without her dad, or her mom before she passed. "I'm sorry," Rachel whispered. Then something else clicked. "You said mothers. Plural...."

"Yeah." Cade folded his arms, sitting up straight, military-style, and Rachel could tell he

was uncomfortable talking about himself, even though he spoke in a businesslike tone. "There are thirteen of us in my unit. Or were, before most were shipped out somewhere. There are dozens more at the Manticore base."

Her eyes widened. "They all look like you?"

He snorted a laugh. "No. We all look different. I heard rumors we have twins somewhere, though." He gave another shrug. "For all I know, there are dozens of other base camps like mine all over the States."

"With cat people killers." She couldn't keep the sarcasm out of her voice, though remorse washed over her as she noticed the slight tremor that ran through Cade at her words. Although she couldn't quite forgive him for murdering her father, she blamed those other people more, the ones who trained him, who sent him, and who told him to kill Daddy.

"Did my father know?" she asked. "Is that why you killed him?"

He looked at her, not speaking. He didn't need to.

"No," Rachel whispered—it wasn't true! Her father couldn't possibly be involved in something so... so heinous as growing cat people in test tubes and turning them into cold-blooded killers.

"I saw his files," Cade said. "He knew what was going on. "

She was shaking her head, refusing to give in. "My dad worked for the government. He was a good man! He didn't... he wasn't...." A sob lodged in her throat.

"Rachel..." Cade said. She looked at him through a film of tears. He held her gaze, expression gentle. "Who do you think gave the orders? Who paid for the research? The government did that." He waited a moment, giving her time to let it sink in before he continued, "Your father, he was going to testify. He was gonna reveal everything. Make it stop. That's why they wanted him dead."

She stared at him, absently brushing at her eyes with the back of her hand. "Should... should you even tell me all this?" she asked, hiccuping. "Isn't this supposed to be... I don't know... classified or something?"

He offered her a grim smile. "I don't want to lie to you, Rachel. Not any more. I *want* you to know. So maybe you can understand why I did what I did." There was a naked plea on his face. She reached out and touched his cheek.

"I think I do," she said softly. "At least a little."

For the first time since her dad died and he took her away, he smiled that bright smile that reached his eyes, the smile that she'd fallen in love with the first time he offered it.

"I don't think we should go to Canada," she added.

The smile disappeared and he pulled away from her touch, raising an eyebrow.

"Daddy was going to Washington," she said. "To meet with my aunt Colleen. I mean, she's not my real aunt, but.... Anyway, she's a senator. We should call her."

"No."

"Why not?" Rachel wanted to know. "I think she'd help us."

Cade was shaking his head. "No," he said again. "It's too dangerous. Colleen Hamm is the chairwoman of the committee your father was going to talk to."

"But Cade," Rachel pleaded. "She's not involved in this. Believe me, she's a decent person. And I think she and my dad... you know. She'd never do anything to harm him."

Cade pushed to his feet. "I can't risk it," he said. "There could be others like me out there."

"Others?" Rachel echoed. "You mean, someone might be send to kill Aunt Colleen?" She shot to her feet as well. "Cade, we must warn her!"

"No," he repeated a third time. He grabbed her shoulders and ducked his head so he could hold her gaze with his. She found it impossible to look away. "Rachel, listen. I *have* to get you to Canada; you've got to start a new life with a new name. Your identity papers'll be ready tomorrow. Once you're safe.... Maybe then I can go and talk to your aunt. All right? But you have to trust me."

Rachel hesitated. She feared what he might do if she refused. He might tie her up again, and she didn't want that. She let out a breath and nodded shakily. He let her go and grabbed his jacket.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Outside," he said. "I'm gonna make sure nobody's in the area. You stay here, where it's warm."

He walked out on a blast of cold air and Rachel wrapped her arms around herself, inching closer to the fire. Cade was wrong about Aunt Colleen; her aunt would help them. But there was no arguing the subject with him, that much was clear. She sighed, curling her fingers closer to the flames. She would have to take matters into her own hands. Tomorrow, after he had left to pick up those fake papers.

Pleased with her decision, she got up and wandered over to the kitchen to make herself some tea. She'd call Aunt Colleen, and Cade would tell her everything. They'd be safe then.

oOo

Oroville, Washington, was an armpit, Davies decided. And the police department was run by idiots. First, they'd had the arrogance to refuse to talk to him so he had to call Clemente and put him on the phone with the sheriff to get any answers at all. Then, it turned out, nobody'd ever paid any attention to the incoming APB from Seattle— "*Big city criminals don' ever come here.*"

Nearly two days had gone by since Senator Hamm had called him to say Rachel Berrisford left her a voice mail message. So much precious time lost. Who knew what might've happened to her in the interim. But, *somewhere up north* wasn't exactly specific, and between just the two of them, Davies and Clemente could hardly scour the entire state for the girl. It wasn't until the Seattle cop decided to check the on-line police reports of every town on the Canadian border that they discovered the entry from Oroville: an unknown young man had sent four men to the hospital with broken bones and concussions after he'd jumped them in the parking lot—or so the victims had said.

More importantly, the report mentioned there'd been a dark-haired girl with him.

It had been a very long shot, but it was the best possible lead they had, and to check things out in person, Davies had driven up to Oroville.

Where he'd run into the dumbest police force ever.

Even after Clemente had told the sheriff to give Davies any help he could, it took a while to convince the fool to show Lehane's photo to the beat-up farmhands. Much to the sheriff's shock, they confirmed he might have a *big city* fugitive in his jurisdiction after all. At which point the asshat got all flustered and stern, and had the nerve to tell Davies that Oroville's finest would "handle it".

Davies wasn't about to sit around and wait for them to get their fat asses in gear.

Knowing Rachel might have been in Oroville was a far cry from actually finding her, however. For all Davies knew, Lehane had crossed the border right after his scrap with the local rednecks, and had taken her to Vancouver or Edmonton or God knows where else. He sure had had plenty of time to disappear again. Not to mention, Davies couldn't even be sure the dark-haired girl was Rachel until someone confirmed it for him. Still, he had to keep going; not only because he'd failed the girl's father, but also for his own peace of mind. He needed to know that he'd done all he could to find her.

There was one way he could think of to make certain Lehane had had Rachel with him. Davies left the red-stone building that housed both city hall and the police station and drove down the street until he found the diner mentioned in the police report. He walked in, got himself a table and ordered lunch—meatloaf, as the waitress recommended. He waited until she'd served him his food, then pulled the two photos he'd brought from his inner pocket.

"Excuse me," he said as the waitress, a tired-looking woman with strawberry blond hair in an untidy pony tail was about to turn away. "You ever seen these two?" He showed her the photos. He knew what he needed to know even before she answered, from the way her eyes widened.

"Him," she said, pointing to the grainy print from the security camera. "That's the guy who beat up Burt and Jimbo and the others." Her mouth curved. "Bout time someone taught those dumbos a lesson. But the way he went on...." She shook her head. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. Like a whirlwind, and one minute later, they were all down."

"And the girl?"

She peered at the photo of Rachel. "Yeah, she was with him. Pretty little thing too."

"Did she seem... hurt?" Davies asked.

"What?" The waitress frowned. "No. Though she did have this sorta...sad look in her eyes, now that you mention it. But the boy? He doted on her, even a blind man could see it."

"Hm." Davies tapped a rhythm on the table top, thinking. He knew what she meant; the affection Lehane had shown Rachel had always seemed genuine. That was why he'd been able to pull the wool over all their eyes, including Mr. Berrisford, who'd treated him like a family friend. Until Lehane turned on them like a rabid dog and snatched Rachel....

"Did you see either of them again, after that day?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No. After he finished with Burt and his buddies, they got in their car and hurried off. Haven't seen 'em since."

"Did you see where they went?" Davies asked.

"South," she said firmly.

He started, pinning her with a look. Canada was to the north. Why would Lehane go back south? Unless they were staying in the area somewhere...? But that made no sense.... "Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent," she said, nodding sagely. "I'm thinkin' maybe they stayed at one of the cabins, even though the season's pretty much done and gone, and we don't get many tourists 'round here anymore. Not the way it used to be."

"Cabins?"

"Yeah. Plenty of summer cottages at the lakes. Used to be, people came from all over in summer. Fishing, hiking, boating. Not no more, though." She shrugged.

Davies pondered the photos for a moment before he collected them and stuffed them back in his pocket. "Thank you."

"Are they in trouble?" she asked, suddenly aware she'd been answering some stranger's questions freely. "Are you with the police?"

Davies shook his head. "No, no trouble. Some people are worried about them, is all." He didn't really want to elaborate, so he dug into his meatloaf, already cooling rapidly, and stuffed his mouth full of food, effectively forestalling any further conversation. After a few seconds, the waitress took the hint and moved off.

He finished his meal in record time; the meatloaf was as good as advertised and his stomach remembered he hadn't eaten properly since the bombing. He paid, left a sizable tip for the waitress, and thanked her for her help. Her skeptical mood lessened somewhat at the sight of the tip, and she smiled and told him, "You're welcome. I hope you find them."

He walked outside, ducking his head against a chill wind, and headed for his car. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket; he'd best call Clemente and bring the detective up to speed. Perhaps the cop had found more reports, or maybe he could give him pointers where to start looking. If there were so many summer homes about, finding Rachel would seem like trying to find the proverbial needle in a haystack. Without knowing which

haystack to dig through.

Before he could dial the Seattle number Clemente had given him, the phone started buzzing in his hands, startling him so much he almost dropped it. He hit the button. "Hello?"

A military helicopter flew by overhead and the thud-thud of its rotors made it hard to hear the voice on the other end of the line. Davies turned away and hunched over his phone, pressing his other ear closed with a finger. "What?"

The helicopter disappeared in the distance, the noise fading. "Can you repeat that?"

"Davies? It's Colleen Hamm. Rachel called again. She says she's at a cabin somewhere."

oOo

Davies found her at the seventh cabin he tried. As the waitress had told him, the forests surrounding Oroville were littered with summer houses. Mostly abandoned cottages, dilapidated to the point of collapse, a few still livable. Even those breathed an air of neglect, with overgrown dirt tracks leading to sagging porches.

As one cabin after another turned up empty and deserted, Davies's frustration rose—so close, so close—and it was hard not to throw caution in the wind. But he didn't know who or what he was dealing with, or what he'd find when he did locate her. He didn't know if Lehane was still with Rachel. He had to assume he was; and the guy was dangerous, *that* much Davies did know. Though he didn't believe for a single second that Lehane had attacked the four hicks without provocation, like they said, the fact remained that he'd taken out four strong, muscular men all by himself in record time.

No, best to proceed with care; Rachel's life might depend on it.

The seventh cabin was indicated by a faded wooden sign that said *Lake Wanacut, 1 mile*. Davies turned into the narrow dirt track. His heart sped up as soon as he was bouncing over the trail: fresh tire tracks had overturned the mud, leaving clods of grass scattered about.

Someone had been here. Recently. *Very* recently.

Eager to find Rachel, Davies pressed the pedal a bit deeper, and the car started bumping in earnest across the track. Suddenly, he remembered the broken bones and cracked skulls of the hillbillies, and he let up, pulling over to the side of the track as far as he could and letting the car coast to halt. He turned off the engine and sat for a moment, trying to



think of his next move. He couldn't risk alerting Lehane to his presence. Lord knew what the guy would do when provoked.

He got out of the car and continued on foot along the muddy road, trying to be as stealthy on his feet as he could. The wet ground helped, the carpet of soggy autumn leaves muffling his footsteps.

At last, he could see the cabin shimmering through the trees. Overhead, the clouds had finally broken open, and weak sunlight dappled the ground, illuminating a small open space. Tire tracks marked the grass, and a blue Aveo was parked in the middle. Otherwise, the clearing was deserted, the forest surrounding him dead quiet.

Davies checked his hip, chagrined to remember he'd had to leave his gun behind in Seattle. His permit only allowed him to carry the weapon in the city, and there was no way he'd have gotten it through the various checkpoints.

Well, he'd just have to be very, very careful, then.

Determined to see it through, Davies squared his shoulders and cautiously moved out of the trees and across the open ground. Every muscle was tense, his ears focused on the smallest sound. It remained quiet; all he heard was a soft breeze swishing through brittle needles and the drip-drip of wash-off trickling from the pines.

He crept up the porch steps, dimly surprised when the wood didn't creak beneath his weight, and nudged the door. It wasn't locked, and slowly swung inwards. The interior of the cabin was cloaked in shadows, a strange smell hung cloyingly in the air, and it took him a minute before his eyes were grown used enough to the gloom....

Bile rose in his throat, and he stumbled away, down the steps on shaking knees. Taking deep breaths, he tried to get the nausea under control.

Finally, once he could hold himself together to the point that he didn't fear he'd upchuck his meatloaf any second, he forced himself back into the cabin. He had to make sure.

A minute later he had the confirmation he needed, and he took out his phone, planning to call Clemente. His mind still reeling from his discovery, it took him a minute to realize there was no coverage at the cabin, and the phone was useless.

Swearing to himself, he trotted away along the trail to his car and drove back in the direction of Oroville as fast as he dared. It was the closest town, and he could be certain he'd have coverage there. The journey seemed endless, and it wasn't until he passed the faded *Welcome to Oroville*-sign that the phone signaled it was within range of a cell

tower.

Davies pulled over to the side at once and again tried Clemente's number. This time, the phone started ringing almost instantly. Impatiently, fingers drumming against the steering wheel, he waited for the detective to pick up.

"I found her," Davies said, his voice cracking, as soon as there was an answer. "She's dead."

oOo

494 fought not to lose consciousness as they dragged him into the helicopter and dumped his limp body on a bench. Two X5s settled themselves on either side, propping him up between them, their faces impassive, while Sandoval crawled into the shotgun seat beside the pilot.

A moment later, the helicopter lifted and banked sharply. 494 caught a glimpse of the cottage, a ray of unexpected sunlight glinting off the blue car he'd stolen. It seemed like that was ages ago, instead of a few days.

They'd left Rachel inside the cabin; he couldn't see her body, and for that he was strangely grateful. The memory of the look in her eyes would haunt him forever.

Sandoval noticed where he was looking and shot him a self-satisfied scowl. If not for the sedative they'd pumped into his veins, 494 would've lunged for the agent, crushed his windpipe with both hands, anything to wipe that smirk off. As it was, he could only glare, promising agony and death with a single look. He took small comfort in seeing the smug grin falter, and Sandoval growled something into his mic. The pilot nodded and turned south.

Back to Manticore.

He wasn't sure what they'd do to him once they got him back to base. He hoped they'd kill him, that would be a mercy. But honestly? He didn't think he'd be that lucky. If Sandoval had wanted him dead, he wouldn't have sedated him; he'd have had him shot on the spot.

No, they'd do whatever it took to turn him back into an automaton designed to behave as he was told to, without a thought of his own.

He'd been there before.

He still had vague memories of the horrors Manticore had put him through—him and the

rest of the X5s—after a bunch of them ran off, way back when they were kids. An unbidden shudder of fear ran through him.

Reindoctrination.... The word alone was enough to make him want to curl into himself. They'd break him apart, wipe his mind clean, make him forget anything and everything until he was a drooling idiot who couldn't remember his own designation. It was a fate worse than any punishment. Worse than dying.

And he'd come so close to seeing Rachel safe....

He'd gone back to Oroville to pick up their papers. Rodrick, the forger, had been true to his word and done a good job; the papers had been ready and waiting for him, as promised. He'd paid the man with the money he took from the poker game, snatched the passports, and rushed back to get Rachel.

He remembered thinking, *If we hurry, we can make it to Canada tonight.*

When he'd reached the cabin and got out of the car, his instincts instantly had started screaming in alarm. The clearing was empty and quiet—too quiet, and the door to the cabin stood ajar, the interior a black hole.

He'd made a mistake, then; he could see it so clearly now. Fear for Rachel had washed over him, like a wave of icy water, and he'd forgotten everything he'd ever learned, simply dashed up the steps while shouting her name.

The fraction of a second it took for his eyes to adjust to the gloom was all the time his enemies needed. He recalled a brief sting against his neck and though his hand lashed out lightning fast, and the crunch of breaking bones and the strangled scream that died in his opponent's shattered larynx were quite satisfying, he wasn't fast enough.

Next thing he knew, his muscles turned to rubber and he collapsed on the doorstep, unable to do more than spasm helplessly against the heavy sedative that his heart pumped through his veins. A shadow had fallen over him, and when he looked up, he thought his heart would stop.

"Well, well, X5-494." Agent Sandoval scowled down on him, lips twitching in a triumphant grin. "You turn out more trouble than I think you're worth. If Miss Berrisford hadn't called Senator Hamm, we might still be looking for you in southern Washington, might even have widened the search to Oregon and California."

"Rachel?" he'd gasped, heart thudding in his throat. She moved into his view, shifting in the shadows behind Sandoval. "What have you done?"

Her face was pale, her expression unreadable. Her eyes pleaded for his understanding, like it was important to her somehow. "I called my aunt. I... I know you didn't want me to, but she promised to send help."

"How...?" he wanted to know. There was no cell phone reception anywhere other than in town.

"Because you fucked up, 494. Girl's got a satellite phone," Sandoval said in Rachel's stead. "Seems Daddy was worried for his little girl."

"I believe you've told me the truth," Rachel continued softly, kneeling beside him, "but I couldn't just trust you blindly. Cade, you *killed* my *father*."

"It was *he* who gave the order," he'd managed to grind out, indicating Sandoval with a twitch of his hand.

Rachel's brow had furrowed with confusion, her gaze flicking to Sandoval. The agent scowled and nodded, and Rachel had stumbled back, a hand to her mouth and her eyes widening in horror.

"Oh God...."

Sandoval had brushed her aside and barked a command. Two X5s had appeared from the forest and had started dragging him off.

494 tried to push away the memory of what happened next while the helicopter began its descent towards the pad in the Manticore compound. Pain awaited him there, torture and agony and lasers, and finally, oblivion. He'd lose his memory of Rachel, of what she taught him....

The memory of what it meant to be human....

Tears were streaming down 494's face, but he didn't feel them, and he didn't try to struggle as the soldiers hauled him from the helicopter and started lugging him to Psy Ops.

Perhaps forgetting wouldn't be such a bad thing after all.

In his mind's eye, over and over, he kept seeing the expression on Rachel's face as Sandoval had snapped, "Wait," stopping the X5s before they'd carried him out into the trees and to the helicopter waiting half a mile away. "One more thing, 494."

Sandoval had raised his gun, aimed, and pulled the trigger before he could even shout a warning. Rachel had been dead before she hit the floorboards. He'd screamed then, his voice echoing among the trees, sending flocks of birds to lift from the lake in a flutter of wings.

Sandoval had dusted off his hands.

"Congratulations, 494. Mission accomplished. *Finally.*"

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