

Fugue

by Chris Slusser

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1

A headache the size of a canyon was pounding through her head. She was lost in a fog. Everything was humid and thick. No light. She struggled to move, and barely managed to. A small moan escaped her lips.

Muffled voices traveled to her from outside her fog.

"Who is that?" a man's voice asked. "Is that the host personality? I thought she was eradicated?"

"Don't worry about it," another man's voice said. "Either way her memory has been wiped clean. Give her some more Thanidol. We have a lot of work to do..."

Then before she had time to ponder these words, everything was gone again. The headache, the voices, the fog. There was nothing. She had lost consciousness.

* * *

She was running at night. She came to this realization suddenly. She could hear her own hard breathing as she ran, felt her heart pounding in her chest. She was wearing shoes it was easy to run in. The woman running ahead of her was not. She wore low heels, pumps. She was chasing this other woman, apparently.

The woman in front of her kept looking back in fear. She was Indian, had her long black hair up in a neat bun. She wore a dark suit with a skirt. It also looked hard to run in. They ran along a residential sidewalk, with a row of bushes to the left and a quiet street to the right. They ran under a streetlight, then back into semi-darkness. She could hear other feet running too, ahead of the woman. It was a man with dark hair in a suit. Both of the

people she chased carried briefcases.

She wasn't in control of her own body as she chased these people. She was just aware of herself doing it.

The Indian woman, losing ground, screamed with a mortal fear to the man in front of her, "Charles!" Almost a screech.

Charles slowed slightly and grabbed the woman's hand and tried to pull her along faster.

But just then she felt her own arm rise and saw a gun in it. Silver, with a silver tube attached to the end of it. A silencer. With sickening quickness the gun was fired by her own hand and the bullet hit the woman in the back. The suited woman immediately tripped and fell and lay still, a pool of blood starting to form around her on the sidewalk. The assassin had stopped running. So had the man. He turned to gasp and stare in horror down at the fallen woman. His eyes were full of fear as he looked back up into the assassin's eyes.

She raised her gun again as they stood there. He didn't dare run. He put his hands up, perhaps hoping that by cooperating he would avoid his friend's fate.

She felt her hand point the gun at the man's chest, felt it start to pull the trigger. But anger welled up in her chest. Inside her head she screamed, 'No!' Her finger froze on the trigger. But some other force inside her struggled for control and wrestled the power away from her and managed to pull the trigger anyway. But in a sloppy way. The hand struggling with itself caused the gun to shift and the man was shot in the shoulder, perhaps only grazed.

"Ohh!" he yelled, and took off again, running. The assassin tried to run after him, but she stopped her own feet from running, and fell forward onto the ground, next to the woman. The woman's eyes were open, but there was no life in them. The assassin had the woman's blood on her hands as she rose. The force seemed to be gone and she was totally in control of her body now. She shook with fear and horror at the sight of the woman she had killed. The woman's briefcase had popped open as she fell and papers were scattered around them, shifting now and then in a light breeze. It was dead silent on the street. She started to walk quickly. She didn't know where. Just away from the body, away from the man too.

She crossed the street. She put the gun away. There was some kind of holster under the short black jacket she was wearing. She was dressed all in black. She found a gas station a block or two over, one with bathrooms you could get to from the outside, in back. She tried the door. It was unlocked. She went inside, desperate to wash the blood off her hands. Desperate to stop and

think.

She washed her hands. More thoroughly than they needed. She stared at herself in the mirror, and for the first time realized she didn't recognize herself. Average weight, average height, long brown hair in a tight ponytail at the nape of her neck. She had green or hazel eyes, a pretty face, small lips with a bow shape, big eyes, small rounded nose, sort of a roundish face. None of this looked familiar to her.

She started to panic. This is a dream, this must be a dream, she thought. She tried to remember her own name, but she had no idea. She was shocked by the murder and hadn't thought she was the kind of person who would do that, but maybe she was. Why could she not remember anything that had happened before the murder? Besides waking up briefly to the male voices, she could remember nothing.

Was she awake? She felt awake. Everything was so vivid and real. The peeling light green paint in the bathroom, the flickering buzzing fluorescent bulb that didn't light the place very well anyway. And the one dingy toilet in the corner of the room. A dripping old fashioned faucet in front of her, with two knobs, one for cold, one for hot. And the mirror. A little spotty, a little yellow. The floor had dingy scraped up black and white tiles like a checkerboard.

The air smelled like bleach and something else. An undefinable bathroom smell, like old water. The air was muggy and warm. Summer air. It had been a hot day, she could tell, and now the heat was old, mildly muted by the night. The faucet dripped, a car passed outside. In the distance a car horn honked.

It felt like reality. It *seemed* like reality. But it couldn't be. She could not imagine living life as an assassin. Was that why she couldn't remember her life? Or even her own *name*? No, this couldn't be. 'This is a nightmare,' she thought to herself. It was a nightmare and soon she would wake up. It was a lucid dream, that was all. She would fade back into unconsciousness and force herself to wake up. It was the only explanation that made any sense.

She looked in the mirror again at the unfamiliar face. She leaned down slightly and gripped the sides of the porcelain sink. She closed her eyes and tried to force herself back into dreamland so she could wake up.

"This is just a nightmare," she whispered aloud. "This is just a nightmare..." She felt herself begin to fade back, back into the blackness of before, became less aware of her body and the noises around her. Almost safe again, almost...

Suddenly the force from within her took over again and tried to shove her forward, back into consciousness. A woman's voice inside her head shouted, 'This is not a nightmare!' She was pushed forward into consciousness with such a force that she opened her eyes to see herself being literally shoved into the mirror. No other person in the mirror behind her, only her. The force was so strong her head hit the mirror and broke it. She felt a stinging tear on her forehead, blood dripped down her nose and temple. She was wide awake again now and slipped down to the floor in shock. Why was this happening to her? She put her hand to her head and pulled it away to look at the blood.

Suddenly the low firm woman's voice in her head said, 'Kayla...' Then she was allowed to slip into unconsciousness once again. Quickly and painlessly, and again there was nothing...

2

She woke up shocked by a blast of cold air on her face. A window was open, scenery was passing by very quickly outside. A rocky mountain lit by moonlight. She was startled to see she was driving. But she wasn't in control of her hands on the steering wheel, or her feet on the pedals.

A car's tires squealed and screeched in front of her. She realized she was chasing someone, and her car was better than their car. They were swerving at this high speed, out of control. It was a narrow road, a sheer drop on the right, with a rickety old railing the only barrier protecting them from it. It was an isolated road, no other cars on it.

She could feel the power and precision of her own car as she felt herself gaining on the fleeing car. Her bumper touched their bumper. They skidded more out of control. A sharp left curve was coming up in the road. Suddenly her foot slammed down on the gas and shot the car forward to the fleeing car's left, and swiftly edged it off the road as it curved.

The fleeing car smashed with almost no sound through the old railing and disappeared swiftly over the edge. She slowed quickly to a stop and drove backwards, back to the spot, and got out. The car had rolled loudly and crashed at the bottom of the steep mountainside.

She stood on the edge, still not in control of her body. She couldn't stop herself from looking down at the smashed car lying still at the bottom of the mountain, far away. She had caused this.

On purpose. She tried to control her body, to run, to even look away, but she couldn't. She started to hyperventilate as she stood there. Taking in the cold night air too quickly. She felt it chill her lungs and burn too. Her hands became tingly, she got very dizzy. Things swam out of focus around her. She saw everything fade to black as she felt her body collapse in a heap on the asphalt. She faded into welcomed oblivion.

* * *

Her head hurt. Her mouth felt like cotton. There was a heavy weight on her limbs, or maybe she was tied down. She struggled to open her eyes, but couldn't. She moaned and tried to speak, but only got out, "Haa..."

The male voices were there, beyond the blackness.

"There she is again. The one. The brain waves are different."

Another man said, "The usual protocol isn't working on her."

They hesitated, then the second voice said, "Give her a higher dose."

She felt something flood over her like a comfortable blanket, on the inside. The voices and everything else became muffled. And then she faded into nothingness.

* * *

She was having a dream. An erotic dream. There was a rise and fall and bodies writhing, pleasure building to a crescendo and then... a sharp piercing flood of ecstasy as she threw her head back.

She opened her eyes. She saw a beautiful intricately engraved wooden ceiling, dark wood. She heard her own heavy breathing and now she realized she heard the heavy breathing of a man as well. Became aware that he was still inside her, that they were damp with sweat, that she was sitting on top of him straddling his body.

Oh, God, it was happening again.

She looked down from the ceiling and saw an old man lying on the bed underneath her. He looked about 70. He was in good shape. His hair was silver. His eyes were closed as he smiled and lay back on the pillow catching his breath. His hands were tied with black silk ropes to the thick wooden bed posts at the head of the bed.

"You are a miracle worker..." he whispered at her as he smiled and opened his eyes.

She chuckled. Some force that was not her had chuckled, through her body. She felt her hands reaching behind her on the bed, grasping another silk rope. The man had closed his eyes again. She felt her hands gently wrap the red silk around his neck a few times. She wasn't in control of her actions. The man allowed her to do this, as if he trusted her. But she could feel her own body tense up and her heart start to pound as she feared she knew what was coming.

Then just as she'd feared, she felt her hands grip the rope tightly and pull to each side with all her might. The rope tightened around the man's throat and his eyes flew open. He tried to speak, but had no breath. He rasped out in a quiet whisper, "No, no ,no..." His face grew red and convulsed, and his eyes blanked out. His breathing was stopped. He was dead.

She was horrified by what she'd done. Tears started to roll down her face as she watched her hands tie the murderous scarf into a neat little bow at the front of the man's throat, so fucking callous. She was then given control over her body.

She started to sob uncontrollably. Why does this keep happening? She quickly scrambled off the man, his dead organ slipping out of her as she did. A bathroom door stood ajar to the left of the bed. She quickly ran into it and threw up in the toilet.

She washed her hands and splashed her face with water. She had been wearing heavy make-up, and tear streaks mixed with mascara ran down her face. She grabbed a tissue and cleaned her face off. There she was again in the mirror, the same face she hadn't recognized before. Her hair had been curled and pinned up in a cutesy way with little barrettes. She wore a lace black bra and nothing else.

She suddenly worried about fingerprints and DNA and things that could lead to her being arrested. Then she realized that would actually be a relief. Then these real life nightmares could stop. Still, she should leave. She felt a strong urge to leave.

She went out to the bedroom again and tried to avoid looking at the dead man. She found what must be her clothing scattered on the floor. Black underwear, and a skimpy red and gold dress. She put it on and felt just as naked as before. She found her coat lying on the ground too, a leopard print thing that hung lower than the dress, but not by much. She buttoned its two big buttons and felt a little less naked. Apparently she'd worn black stiletto heeled shoes. She slipped them on and was suddenly three or four inches taller. She hoped she could walk in these. She didn't know a damn thing about herself.

All dressed, she quickly went to the door to leave. It led to

another room with couches, then an outer door. A hotel door she realized. Before she could open it, something inside her forced her to stop. She looked to her right. A sparkly gold little purse lay on a black table. Her hand reached out and grabbed it of its own accord. Or the force within her. Then she was allowed to leave.

Instinctively she ran toward a back staircase. She ran down it, she passed no one. She exited the hotel at the back, into a lonely parking lot. She wove through the cars and started hurrying down the street, not even knowing where she was going. She was walking past a beautiful city park when she suddenly stopped and the force took over her hands and reached into the purse. They brought out a mini computer disk in a case. A plastic bag with a zipper was brought out as well, and the disk was zipped into it, then unceremoniously dumped into a certain garbage can. Not the one she had stopped next to, but one further into the park, 20 feet away.

Then she was allowed to hurry away again, down the street. She wondered where she should go. She suddenly realized she should turn herself in, go to the police, stop the madness. She needed a phone, she needed an address, she needed to tell—'clink'—her awareness of reality ended so abruptly she didn't even see it coming. Blackness and oblivion took her over.

3

It was happening again. As her eyes started to focus she saw her hands pointing a gun in front of her, toward the ground, a little smoke curling off the gun. And beyond the gun a man lying dead in a pool of his own blood on a clean bright lemon yellow kitchen floor.

The room was brightly lit, the house was silent. There was no furniture in the room, or in the dining room it opened into. No curtains on the window, black night outside. She became aware of the ragged sound of her own breathing. She was hyperventilating again. She dropped the gun on the floor. She looked at the man lying there. White, balding with brown hair, 40-something.

Suddenly the force took over her whole body and she wasn't hyperventilating anymore. It forced her to be calm. Then spoke to her using her own voice.

"Sorry I had to wake you up this way," it said, picking the gun up calmly. "But I wanted you to see the truth of things first."

The force gave the body back to her then.

She started to hyperventilate and panic again, "Who are you?" she asked the other. Her voice was not as low and firm as the force's. It took over her body to speak again.

"I'm Zane," it said. "Here, I'll show you." It walked her to a decorative mirror set in tile on one wall. She looked at herself and was shocked to find her reflection looked different than before. Now she saw a woman with sleek black hair, going back into a tight ponytail at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were blue, not green. She was very pale. She was dressed all in black. She looked amused in a wry sarcastic way. Then the force gave the body back to her and her reflection changed. Back to the familiar one. Brown hair, less sleek, pulled into a ponytail, and green eyes. Her skin was less pale. Her facial features were even different.

"How did you do that?" she asked Zane.

Zane appeared in the mirror again as she took over, "Never mind that now," she said. She walked back over to the man, and the other began to panic on the inside, trapped. "You know who this was?" Zane asked, feeling the man's neck for a pulse. There was none.

"No," the host said, regaining control of the body and breathing too fast again. She backed away now, dropping the gun again. "Why are you doing these things?" She asked this in a small voice, as if afraid the answer would be violent.

Zane took over again, "This is the kind of thing we have to do now to survive. I wanted to show you that... You haven't been reacting to it very well." She calmly picked the gun up again, and this time put it in its holster under her arm, so the host couldn't drop it again.

The host was allowed the body once more. "Haven't been reacting well?! Does anyone react well to murder? What did this man even do? And the others?" She was backing up into the wall, wondering if it was even possible to escape.

"He was a witness in a federal trial," Zane said coldly. "Someone wanted him eliminated."

"Oh, God," the host said, "You kill good people?"

"I kill whoever they order me to kill," Zane answered calmly. "I don't know why this upsets you so."

The host took over once again and slid down the wall to a crouch as tears spilled out of her eyes. "I don't know what I did to deserve this," she said to herself as if she could hide anything from Zane.

"Who are 'they'?" she finally asked Zane.

Zane stood the body back up and unceremoniously wiped the tears off her face, almost disgusted by them, so messy. "They,"

she said, "are the ones I hate almost as much as you're going to."

"Why do you hate them?" the host asked quietly, still in a panic and sad. She leaned against the wall again and couldn't take her eyes off the man.

"Because they did this to us," Zane said. "Made us split, made us do things we resisted at first, took control of our lives." She paused to stare coldly at the dead man. "They think I don't have access to you anymore, but I proved them wrong." She smiled a little bit.

The host gave a small sigh as she took over. "Who am I?"

"I don't know," Zane said. "You're the host. The original one, the one we used to be. Beyond that I do not know. Only that they tried to bury you." Zane looked wistfully, in her cold way, at her reflection in the window across the room. "I don't even remember your name," she said.

And then the host faded quickly into nothing, as if sucked back into the black. And she was aware no more.

4

She woke slowly, as if from a deep sleep on a Saturday morning, lazily. She was comfortable, lying in a cozy bed. She could hear a man's voice in the distance, talking on the phone. Casual conversation, joking. A lamp was on behind her, casting a soft light on the dark wood paneled wall four or five feet from her as she opened her eyes. Where was she?

She didn't feel panicked. She didn't feel the need to run. There was no danger here, she could tell. But she didn't know why. The man's voice was getting closer and she closed her eyes, not wanting to speak to him, whoever he was.

He walked into the bedroom and actually lowered his voice as he entered the room, thinking she was still asleep. How sweet.

"No, mom, I won't forget... Sunday, I know... I'll bring the potatoes..." Then he laughed at something she said. "Okay... bye." He pushed a button on the phone and it beeped a little and he set it down. She heard him rummage through things on a dresser or table, then grab keys, or something that jingled like keys.

Then very carefully he crawled back onto the bed and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. Then he quickly, but carefully, got up off the bed again, turned the lamp off and left the room. A moment later she heard what must be the front door open and close. Her eyes opened again. In a few minutes she heard a car

drive away from the house.

She lay there for a few more minutes just pondering what this meant. Every time she'd woken before there'd been fear. And most of the time murder, done by her. Why would Zane let her wake up during a happy moment? And, yes, it was a happy soothing moment. Was it possible she had a normal life? With this man? She slowly rolled over to look at the rest of the bed and room.

There was the lamp, the long dresser with a mirror. There was a nightstand on his side of the bed, but not on hers. Was this his house? Not theirs? She sat up and looked down. She was wearing a light blue button-down shirt, way too big for her. She lifted it up, underneath she only had panties on. She got up out of the bed. She could see herself in the mirror, as she had before. This time with her long wavy brown hair loose and messy. She walked around the bed and out into the hall, and the rest of the house. There was an office next to the bedroom, and a bathroom across the hall. There was a living room at the end of the hall, then a dining room, and a kitchen. Small house. It was neat enough, just slightly messy. A lot of old brown and dark green furniture. She sat in one chair, still comfy, even if it was old. She got up again and looked at the photos on the wall, a cluster of them. A man with a woman, a sister maybe, and two parents, on a fishing trip. The same man in a photo of a group of friends, other men, in a bar, making a toast for the camera, laughing. There was a picture of a dog, a border collie—apparently she knew what those were, she thought. There was no dog in the house now. Perhaps the dog had died. There was also a picture of the man crouched next to the dog. This man must be the owner of the house, the man who had kissed her cheek this morning. Her boyfriend?

Suddenly a force took over her body and started walking her toward the kitchen, while humming a little tune. 'Whoa!' she thought.

Her body stopped. "Who is that?" it asked.

She said nothing.

"You said, 'Whoa'," her body said.

'I don't know,' the host thought from inside.

Apparently the body heard her. "You must be the other one," it said.

'The other one?'

"The original one, that we were first," the body said.

'The host?' she thought.

"Yes, that's it," said the body.

There was a pause. The body kept walking to the kitchen then, happy and relaxed. It opened the fridge and leaned forward to see

what was in it.

This was so weird, 'Excuse me...' she thought, 'What is your name?'

The body laughed, "'Excuse me?'" she said. "You don't have to be so polite. It's your body too, I guess. I'm Kayla."

'Oh.'

Kayla grabbed a yogurt cup from the fridge, then went to a drawer to get a spoon. She seemed to know which drawer.

'So, we live here too then?' the host asked in a thought.

"Oh, no," Kayla said. "Too hard to keep all our secrets that way. We have a house of our own. What is your name?" she asked.

'I don't know,' the host said. 'I was hoping you'd know.'

"Oh," Kayla said, wandering out to the living room, "I don't." She sat in the same chair the host had chosen before. She pulled up her knees and curled up in the chair and began to stir her yogurt.

'Do you know Zane?' the host asked.

"Of course," said Kayla. "They created her first."

'Created her where?'

"In a hospital somewhere," Kayla answered. She took a bite of her yogurt.

'What did they do with my memories?' the host asked.

Kayla started answering in thoughts too, as she ate her yogurt. 'I don't know. They took them, I guess. You didn't need them anymore.'

'How could I not need my own memories?' she asked.

'I mean *they* didn't need them,' Kayla said. 'For their work.'

There was silence for a while.

'Did you know Zane was trying to wake me up?' the host asked.

'Oh, yes,' Kayla thought. 'It's been her obsession.'

'Who are the people who did this?' The host was so full of questions she didn't know how to ask them all.

'I don't know,' Kayla thought, clearly bored. 'They leave me alone,' she said. 'They mostly bother Zane. I'm just the cover personality.' She got up then, leaving her empty yogurt cup on an end table, and walked into the bathroom. She went over to the sink and started looking through a make-up sized bag there. She found a scrunchy and looked back up, into the mirror to put a ponytail in her hair. The host was shocked. She must have gasped internally. Kayla stopped to say, "What?" out loud.

Her appearance in the mirror had changed. She was no longer a brunette. She had long dark blond hair, noticeably wavier than

it had been before. Almost curly. She had cute freckles across her nose. She was slightly tan. She had dark blue eyes. Her facial features were a bit different than hers or Zane's.

'You don't look like us,' the host said inside her head.

"Well, duh," Kayla said.

Then the phone rang and Kayla turned her head.

The host couldn't see the reflection anymore.

"You have to go now," Kayla said, as she dropped the scrunchy back into the bag and half walked, half skipped out to answer the phone.

'But—' the host started to say. But before she could finish her thought she was gone. Into the oblivion again.

5

From inside the blackness a man's angry face emerged. He was about 40, clean cut, brown hair. He suddenly grabbed a heavy looking vase off the fireplace mantle behind him and screamed with uncontrollable rage, "SHUT UP!" He swung the vase at her head and it cracked something. Searing sharp pain cut into her head as she blacked out.

She woke with a start, sitting bolt upright in a bed she'd never seen before. She was breathing heavily, totally in a panic. That was not just a dream. That was a memory. She could feel her own rage and anger and fear when it happened. When she was murdered.

Why did she feel it was her murder? Clearly she was alive. She looked around her. White walls, medium blue bed covers and blue wispy curtains behind her on the window, letting in what seemed to be early morning light. Was this her own house?

She climbed out of bed on wobbly legs, still shaken from the dream. She walked down a long bright hallway, past bathroom and another bedroom, into a different kitchen than at her boyfriend's house, a different living room. In the living room a beautiful wide mirror hung on the wall. She looked at it and saw herself. No Kayla, no Zane.

She suddenly had an idea and started digging through her hair, looking at her scalp. Her heart was pounding at the idea she might find what she was looking for. And sure enough, there it was. A jagged scar from an injury. Like being hit violently on the head with a heavy vase. Her murder was real. Yet here she stood. What did this mean? She was absolutely sure she was murdered.

'Strange, isn't it?' Zane's voice said behind her. She was startled and spun around. No one was there. Zane was inside her head. Of course.

"Isn't what strange?" the host said out loud, trying to calm down her heart.

'The murder,' Zane said inside. 'That it feels so much like a murder.'

The host said nothing.

'I've been unlocking memories,' Zane said.

"How?" asked the host aloud.

'I found where they are locked up. They didn't erase them after all. They were just hidden.'

"Oh." Suddenly she felt dizzy, and sort of like she had to throw up mentally. That was what it felt like. Like a build up of uncomfortable pressure, like soon she would—

"—Are you unlocking them right now?" the host asked frantically, not wanting to see her murder again.

'Why? Did you have something better to do?' Zane asked with a sort of delighted sarcasm.

The host found herself stumbling she was so dizzy and faint. She grabbed onto the back of a chair, but found herself sinking to the ground anyway, losing consciousness again.

"No..." she said as she faded.

'Incoming,' Zane said calmly as the host faded to black.

Images and voices chattering suddenly came into focus and became louder and more distinguishable. Glasses clinked, people laughed and talked. She was standing in a small group of people at some sort of dinner party. She laughed at a joke someone told. She had a wine glass in one hand. There was a diamond bracelet on her wrist. She heard herself saying, "You are going to love what we have cooked up for you after dinner. It's quite entertaining."

"Well, we would expect nothing less from a Wurther dinner party," a smiling gray haired man in the group said.

"And speaking of eating way too much good food," a pretty, yet plump, brunette woman said, which made everyone laugh, "Where is that husband of yours so we can get this party started?"

"I don't know," she heard herself say. "He got lost getting the candles from the craft room." Everyone chuckled. "I'll go check," she said smiling. Then she set her glass down on a beautiful marble looking table and waded through the cheerful party guests to get to a very wide plushly carpeted staircase. She padded quietly up the stairs in her fancy high heeled sandals, then clip clopped down a wide tiled hall above the party. The craft room was at the end, a room she'd set aside for her scrap booking and

flower arranging, etc. She cracked the door. No one was in the room. The six taper candles she'd carefully painted with candle wax and paint for the party were still sitting on a table near the door. Where had Geoff gone?

She left the candles and took a few steps and stopped to put her hands on her hips. Why was he ruining this? She'd been planning it for so long. Where was he?

Then suddenly in the stillness, other sounds became apparent to her. Above the muffled sounds of the party below. It sounded like moaning. Her husband. Had he fallen? Was he hurt? What— She had been traveling toward the sound, but now suddenly heard a woman's voice moaning as well, all mixed up with her husband's moans.

She grew dizzy and angry and her heart raced. She was frozen in the hallway. This was not happening. Not here, not now, not at all.

With weak limbs she forced herself to walk toward the sounds, toward the guest bedroom two doors down. The sounds grew louder as she got closer, and the sick feeling in her stomach grew worse with every moan. With a shaking hand she reached out to open the door. A rush of terror and adrenaline shot through her just before she threw open the door.

The door swung open and hit the wall inside the room with a loud thump. And there he was. Her husband. Under the covers, sweating, on top of a blond woman she barely knew, but was acquainted with. She couldn't remember her name. She was speechless.

Her husband had turned to look at her. She stumbled back into the hall on her spindly high heeled shoes. Why had she worn these? It was like walking on stilts. She heard her husband climb out of the bed and whip some clothes on quickly. She felt sick. And wobbly. She began to walk quickly back down the hall, to the bathroom across from the craft room. He called from the guest room, "Rachel!" He started to run after her. She started to run, faster than she thought she could in her weak state, in those shoes. She barely made it to the bathroom before him, but she jumped inside, slammed and locked the door. Leaving him pounding on the outside of the door still screaming her name.

"Rachel!"

He faded out. So did the bathroom with gorgeous blue tiled walls with a mosaic of blue birds and dainty trees. It went black. Like a TV being turned off.

Then she snapped back into consciousness, suddenly very awake, lying on the cool wooden floor where she'd passed out

earlier, behind the chair. Her breathing was fine now, the horrible mental pressure and dizziness were gone.

And with a sudden clarity she quickly sat up and let a certain idea sink in. She had a name. Finally, she had a name.

6

Rachel sat in her pajamas in a messy office she'd discovered in her house. It said Kayla, more than Zane, to her. She had been surfing the Internet for a while trying to find information on herself. It seemed there were several people with her name, all different spellings. She didn't know which one was her.

Then finally she must have hit the right spelling because the first link she clicked had her picture in it, with some sort of article or—'Oh, my God,' she thought. It was her obituary.

She stared at the screen in horror. She was smiling in the picture, some million dollar smile she must have locked up in her still. How could she be staring at her own obituary? That certainly went along with the memory of being murdered.

And yet clearly it wasn't true.

Finally she worked up the nerve to read the words. It said she was well loved. She had died Sept. 21, 2014. The computer said it was now March 16, 2017. She guessed that during those 2 ½ years "they" had been making her into an assassin.

She read more of the obituary. She'd done a lot of charity work, apparently. Had many friends. No children. It said she'd died suddenly from an undiagnosed brain tumor.

"Brain tumor?" she said aloud to herself.

'The kind that make you black out?' Zane suddenly said in her head. 'Sorry, sweetie. Time to go to work.'

And before Rachel could have another thought, she had blacked out again.

* * *

She came to with a start. She almost fell over. She was standing at the big sink in a laundry room, possibly her own. Her hands were running something under the faucet, cold water made her hands feel icy. She looked down and jumped again. Blood.

She was washing blood out of a light blue shirt. She started to cry. Her hands kept washing the shirt, controlled by Kayla or Zane, or just momentum, she did not know.

"You killed again," Rachel said angrily out loud.

There was no answer.

"Zane!" she yelled into the air.

'We have to,' Zane said quietly in her head. 'Or they'll kill us or lock us up.'

Rachel kept scrubbing the shirt furiously. As if she could really wash away the murder.

"Who was it this time?" Rachel asked finally, quietly.

'A stranger,' Zane said. Then she took over the body, "That's all you'll ever need to know."

Rachel faded to black again.

* * *

There was a train. Some kind of rhythmic lull. Or a race or a... bed springs squeaking repeatedly. Sweat, heat... 'Oh God,' she thought. She was having sex again. She was under someone. Suddenly warm fluid spilled into her as she felt the tingled wave of an orgasm rush over her and push all her thoughts away. Her back arched almost without her control, then her muscles relaxed as she sighed and laid her head on the pillow. She was safe, she was satisfied, she was—where was she?

She opened her eyes. It was the boyfriend. Thank God it wasn't another man she was going to murder. She hoped. For all she knew Zane had been setting this guy up for months.

He started to kiss her passionately and she suddenly became aware that they were strangers. She struggled against him, trying to get out of the bed. He let her up.

In her haste she sort of slammed herself against the brown wood panel wall near the bed.

"What?" he asked, surprised. "What is it?"

"Who are you?" Rachel asked in a nervous panic.

He laughed like she must be joking. Then saw that she was not.

"Kayla," he said, "What's wrong?"

She still wasn't sure Zane wasn't about to take over and murder this guy right in front of her, like the last guy. But he wasn't tied up, and he looked bigger than the other guy. 'Everywhere,' she thought as she found herself involuntarily looking down at his body. He was perched on the edge of the bed. He saw her glance, and reached back to grab his sweats off the bed and put them on.

"This isn't like you," he said, as he walked around the bed to grab his own robe off the chair. He handed it to her. She threw it on. An old thin flannel thing, blue. She barely cared that she was

naked. She mostly feared her hands would try to strangle him or lunge for some hidden gun.

He sat on the edge of the bed again. He didn't reach out for her. He just stared at her, looking puzzled. He looked like his pictures, but his hair was lighter than she'd thought. He was bulky and muscular, but in a kind of natural way. Not chiseled. He looked like a football player. Blue eyes. Slightly crinkly around the edges. He was tan. 35 years old? 40?

"Kayla," he said again as she stared at him.

"Rachel," she said back.

He looked only mildly surprised. "Oh," he said.

"Oh'?" Rachel asked him, surprised at his response.

"Well, I've met Zane before," he said calmly. "But you're new." She was aghast. "And you're fine with this?"

"Yes," he said.

She practically did a double take. "You're not as normal as you look," she said.

He kind of laughed, then shrugged his shoulders.

She smiled a little, but still stood nervously against the wall.

"Oh, uh..." he stood up slowly, as if he didn't know if he should do this. "My name is Tom," he said, holding a hand out to her.

She took it carefully, awkwardly, and shook it, then let it go. She was still not entirely sure Zane was on the level with this guy.

"So, you know the others?" she said to him.

"Yeah," he said, "Of course."

"Will you tell me about them?" She squeezed her eyes shut, realizing how ridiculous that sounded.

"Of course," he said again.

He was smiling when she opened her eyes. Thank God.

* * *

They'd spent all afternoon talking. Rachel and Tom. Apparently, it was Saturday. In late March. Zane and Kayla didn't let her out very often. Tom was a high school coach and teacher. He taught English. Apparently he mostly knew Kayla. He met her while walking his dog, the one in the pictures, who had died from cancer he'd told her. Kayla had actually run into Tom with her bicycle. It was no accident Zane said quietly in her head with a chuckle. Zane had caused it. They'd both thought he was cute. That was four months ago.

Tom had only met Zane twice. He knew she was kind of cold and "grouchy," but he didn't seem to know she was an assassin. It was probably better that way.

Rachel pretended she had no idea who she was. She pretended she didn't know she was the host personality, that she'd never had memories of her past, and that horrible men had not trained her to kill against her will.

"You've never played backgammon?" he was asking, laughing at her now.

"I don't know!" she said, exasperated, but laughing. "Has Kayla?"

"Yes," he said, kind of wistfully, staring into the twilight. It had been afternoon when she had woken up with him in bed. They'd been talking for hours. She'd put her own—or Kayla's—clothes back on, and he'd dressed too. They were sitting at the picnic table in his backyard.

He'd offered her a beer, but she'd only sipped at hers.

He turned to her. "What made you come out now?" he asked.

"I don't know," she lied. "Maybe I feel comfortable and safe." She smiled and looked up at him. They were sitting side by side. Then he turned to face her, putting one leg on the other side of the bench.

"Why do I feel like I'm cheating on Kayla?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said quietly. "We're all the same, I guess."

"You look the same," he said, teasing.

"Do we?" she asked, honestly surprised.

"Yes," he said laughing. "That's how I know you're all you. However many of you there are."

"Oh," she said, still surprised he couldn't see them. Did he just see her then? Since she was the host?

He was staring at her intently now. "Would it be too forward..." he started to say as he slowly leaned toward her.

"Not considering the way we met," she said.

He stopped to laugh, and possibly blush. She couldn't see him that well now in the dark blue light of early night.

"Sorry," she said, turning away.

"No, it's true," he said, "That was a weird way to meet."

She turned back to look at him, wanting him to try again, but almost afraid to let him see that.

His blue eyes grew softer somehow, and as he leaned in they actually started to close in a sweet way as she let his lips reach her lips. He kissed her with less passion than he had before, aware that he was meeting someone new.

It started soft and slow and sweet. Then grew ever so slowly into something more intense. Deeper. More passionate, almost almost back to the level of that passionate kiss on the bed. Then suddenly Kayla said inside her head with a firmness to her voice,

'I'll take over from here.' And she did. Rachel was no longer in control of her own lips. She was even becoming less aware of them, as she faded back back back into blackness. Zane laughed in the blackness and said, 'I'm surprised she let you have him as long as she did.' She laughed again, and then *snap*, as fast as a light switch turning off, Rachel's awareness of anything at all was suddenly gone.

7

She slowly faded into consciousness and realized she was walking. Through a graveyard at night. It was cold. Her breath fogged the air. She was given control of her legs then and stumbled a bit with the transition. She grabbed a tall headstone to catch her balance and stopped walking. She looked around at the gnarled trees, and an actual mist on the ground in the distance. What time of year was this even? How long had she been out?

The wind rustled the leaves on the trees around and it almost sounded like whispering.

"Oh, boy," she said to herself, starting to be creeped out.

'Well, keep walking,' Zane said in her head.

Rachel was so relieved she wasn't alone! "Walking where?"

'Forward. I'll tell you when to turn,' Zane replied.

Rachel walked forward, past more old headstones. They became more modern as she walked along.

'Here,' Zane said suddenly.

"Here what?" Rachel asked.

'Turn left,' Zane said. 'One grave over.'

Rachel turned left and stepped into the next row of graves. There must have been streetlights or moonlight somewhere filtering light into the cemetery, because she could read what the headstone said.

'Rachel Wurther - Beloved Wife 1987–2014'

She'd "died" at 27. She must be 30 now. They actually had a grave for her made up. Who would do this? And why?

"You found this?" she asked Zane, as she stared at her own headstone, confused. Tears actually spilled out of her eyes, as if she was mourning her life. Which in a way she was. It had been stolen from her.

'Yes,' Zane said. 'It was in the obituary. And other places. Now that we know your name, I can find out all sorts of things about you.'

'Who do you think is buried in there?' Kayla said inside out of the blue.

"I don't think anyone," Rachel said.

'Certainly not us,' Kayla answered. 'Here we stand.' Then as if a thought had hit her, 'Dance on your own grave, Rachel!'

Rachel had to smile and chuckle at that. But then she said, "Oh, this is so not funny."

'But it's proof,' Zane said, 'It's something.'

The wind brushed past them a little wilder then, whistled through the trees.

'We should go,' Zane said.

"I almost want to lie down and sleep on it," Rachel said.

'Well, that's morbid,' Zane said after a pause.

"What? It's mine," Rachel answered. But she hadn't been serious. She pulled her jacket tighter around herself and started to walk through the graveyard again.

"I can't believe anything seems morbid to you, Zane," she said.

Kayla burst into hysterical laughter inside her head. And she swore she could almost feel Zane smiling.

She walked to the edge of the cemetery and Zane said inside, 'Yeah, we had to climb that gate.'

It wasn't too high. Wrought iron, shoulder height, no sharp points. There was a stone wall around the perimeter that was almost as tall as she was, however. So, she put her foot on the gate, pulled herself up and sort of swung her legs awkwardly over. She walked down a little stone walkway through the grass, under big trees, until she got to the road. A quiet residential road.

She felt Zane working herself up to speak.

"Yes?" Rachel said, stopping in the road.

Zane suddenly took control of the body, which startled Rachel a bit. She turned briskly to the left and started walking down the road. Usually this was the part where Zane pushed her out of consciousness, but she was still here. This was weird.

Zane walked down three blocks and turned right. She walked what seemed like an awfully long way, eight blocks? Did they not have a car? Suddenly Zane stopped in the middle of a block. She breathed in and out for moment, almost frustrated.

"It has come to my attention," she said finally, "that it benefits us all to be nice to you. So, I've taken you someplace the two of you will like and I will tolerate it."

Huh, Rachel thought. This was odd. Zane began walking again. She crossed one more quiet street, then went to the house on the corner, to the right.

She very quietly opened the gate and stood in the middle of

the neatly trimmed yard, waiting. And then there it was. The flip flap of a little doggy door, then a cute white miniature poodle was trotting happily across the yard to them. It seemed to recognize her and practically started to gallop.

Rachel was putting pieces of memories together in her head quickly as the dog virtually ran up Zane's body and into her arms.

Zane held it at arm's length, disgusted. The dog still squirmed around excitedly.

"Ew," Zane said, "Kayla, somebody."

Then it hit. Rachel rushed forward to take over the body. "Poppy!" she said with glee and pulled the dog in for a hug. This had been her dog. Her little girl. Poppy. She'd taken her everywhere.

The dog squirmed around and licked her face and she petted her and rubbed her ears and hugged her again. She was so happy.

'You named your dog Poppy?' Zane asked from inside.

'I want a turn!' Kayla declared from inside.

"Okay," Rachel said reluctantly. She let Kayla out and stepped back inside. Kayla set the dog down and petted her some more. The dog actually turned around in a small circle with excitement, then came back to be petted some more.

Okay, that was too much, Rachel had to pet her again. She tried to come out again, but there was a small struggle with Kayla and it ended up being Rachel petting Poppy with her right arm and Kayla petting her with her left.

The dog seemed to understand there were two of them there and took turns looking at each side of her face.

'Your maid took her after you... died,' Zane said from within. Then after an anxious pause, 'We've all had enough dog slobber. Right?'

Rachel laughed. Kayla gave her back the body again. Rachel picked the dog up for one last hug and then she set her down. She managed to get out of the gate without Poppy following, but as they walked away Poppy began to bark, tail still wagging.

Eventually a light in the house came on and Rachel hurried back down the road they had come from. To the car she suddenly realized Zane had left back at the cemetery.

She started to run then, just to feel alive, just to feel the cold air on her face. Just to get away from all these reminders of her "death."

She slowed down to a walk again after a block or so. She was still confused. She still felt trapped. In whatever someone else had made of her life. She would have to find a way to get it back.

'That's the idea...' Zane said from the back of her mind.

And then everything started to fade again, the world went away until there was nothing but black. And then not even that. She was gone.

8

A cool breeze on her left cheek woke her from a muddled dream of nothing. She became aware that she was in the car again, driving quickly down a country road at night. She was not in control of the body, however, as it sped the car along the road.

"What are you doing here, Rach?" The body said aloud. It was Zane.

'I don't know,' Rachel said from within.

"This isn't a good time for you to wake up," Zane said.

'Why?' Rachel asked, aware that the last time they sped along a road there was an accident.

"Because I'm about to do one of those things you don't like," Zane said. Her voice was cold as usual, but this time there was an edge of emotion under it. Anger? Fear?

'Put me back inside then,' Rachel said dejectedly. She couldn't believe she was about to witness another murder. Isn't this one of the things they should stop?

"I would if I could," Zane said. "You seem to have a mind of your own," she smiled wryly.

Then she began to slow down. She turned off the headlights and pulled onto the shoulder of the road and stopped.

'Lying in wait,' Rachel said from inside, depressed.

"Not for long," Zane said. "This one has a routine."

She was right. Within five minutes, someone had appeared about 100 yards down the road. She began to walk down it, away from them. She wore baggy jeans and a flannel shirt, had long light brown hair down her back, may have been around their age.

Zane began to creep slowly along the road. Then increased her speed, the lights still off.

The woman walked along the side of the road and clearly thought the car would pass her, as she didn't turn.

But just before Zane got to her she did turn, perhaps annoyed by the speed of the car. Terror flashed in her eyes in the millisecond before she was hit. Rachel couldn't believe it either. Zane's heart was beating fast.

The car hit the woman and she flew through the air and landed

about 20 feet from them. From where Zane had slammed on her brakes. Rachel was sure she'd heard bones cracking.

Zane turned the headlights on. The woman was starting to move. Trying to. She had slid or rolled across the pavement and was covered in blood from cuts and scrapes. Her leg seemed broken, set at a crooked angle. She whimpered and moaned.

'What did you do?' Rachel cried from inside.

But Zane was filled with a fury and didn't answer. She grabbed her gun from the seat beside her and got out of the car. She walked coldly over to the woman writhing on the ground.

The woman looked up. She was having trouble breathing, holding her hand gingerly to her ribs, which had probably broken when she'd slammed back onto the ground. Possibly injured her lung. Tears were streaming down her face as she looked up at Zane. "Why?" she rasped out.

Zane made no answer, only pointed her gun at the woman and shot once into her chest. The woman winced when the bullet hit, then went limp. The bullet must have gone straight to her heart.

Zane's fury was fading and so was her hold on the body. Rachel actually felt Zane shed a tear as she pushed forward to control the body.

"Who was this, Zane?!" Rachel demanded as she crouched down to try to feel a pulse on the woman's neck. There was none, but now there was blood on her hands.

She tossed the gun aside as she stood up again.

"WHO was it, Zane?" she asked again firmly.

Zane came to the fore again, "It was an operative," she said. Her coldness almost returned.

"What exactly is an operative?" Rachel said angrily, taking over again.

Zane took the body back. "WE are an operative," she said, almost too quietly.

They took turns using the body. Rachel asked in disbelief, "She was one of us?"

"Yes."

"You killed one of US?!" Rachel yelled at Zane. "What the hell did she do?"

Zane snapped. She yelled back angrily now too, and full of fear and pain, "She couldn't be programmed!" She calmed slightly. "She went rogue. She tried to get away, Rach! You see what they will do!"

Rachel was silent. She suddenly realized what could happen to them. If they didn't obey.

Rachel was crying. Zane may have been too, but she sounded

calmer now, more calculating as she said, "I think they know I'm trying to wake you up. I think they gave me this assignment to prove a point."

"And why DID you wake me up?!" Rachel yelled suddenly, taking over the body with a fury. "It's not like I want to witness this!" She grabbed the gun and stalked back to the car. She got in, turned it on, and started to drive. Zane couldn't even take control of the body anymore. Rachel was too filled with rage and determination.

'Where are you going?' Zane said from inside, angry she couldn't take over.

"Which way home?" Rachel said.

Nothing.

"WHICH WAY HOME?" Rachel yelled.

'Back the other way,' Zane said.

Rachel angrily did a squealing u-turn and zoomed back along the other way.

'Take the exit. Right on Glacier, left on Towne, number 4117.' Zane said crisply.

Rachel sped along that route much faster than she should.

"I know a way I can stop you," Rachel said coldly, looking at her own reflection in the rear view mirror.

Zane held her breath.

"I could run this car right into a tree," she said, tears streaming.

'You don't want to do that. You'd kill yourself.'

"There is no me!" Rachel yelled at her.

She sped up to her own house when she recognized it and slammed on the brakes, almost hitting the mailbox.

She quickly climbed out of the car, slamming the door behind her, still carrying the gun.

"I know exactly how to make you stop," Rachel muttered as she opened the unlocked door and stormed into her own living room.

The light was on, Tom was there, sitting in a recliner. She barely noticed. Kayla and he must have agreed to meet here. He jumped up when he saw how upset she was.

"Kayla?" he said, looking worried.

"Rachel," she said with almost a growl. "And DON'T try to stop me," she said, briefly pointing the gun at him. "You have no idea what I've been up to."

"Rachel, calm down," he said, but was afraid to approach her. "Tell me why there's blood on your hands," he was trying to sound calm.

"Because there's always blood on my hands," she said loudly,

hysterically. "What do you think ZANE does for a living?!" she shouted.

Zane and Kayla were both trying to wrestle Rachel for control of the body, but neither could come anywhere close to getting it back. But they kept shouting at her. Zane, 'Don't be stupid! There are other ways to fix this!' And Kayla, 'Please don't do this, Rachel! Please! Please!'

It was loud inside her head, it was loud outside her head. Tom was inching closer to her, almost whispering, "Give me the gun, Rachel. Come on, give me the gun..." It was hanging at her side, but she was gripping it fiercely.

She shoved him and then pointed it at him again.

"She murders people, Tom!" she shouted as fresh tears burned down her cheeks. "And I will stop her," she said with a desperate laugh. She raised the gun to the side of her head and tried to pull the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Not the gun wasn't loaded or the trigger was broken, but her finger wouldn't pull it.

And it wasn't Zane. And it wasn't Kayla. They still couldn't get anywhere near her. Tom stood a few feet away, looking at her with terror in his eyes.

She very distinctly tried to pull the trigger again. Her finger would not budge.

From inside Zane finally realized what was going on.

'They programmed you not to kill yourself,' she said from inside, in shock.

'Oh, thank God,' Kayla said inside, 'Thank God...'

Rachel dropped the gun to the floor and slumped down to the floor herself and cried.

Tom quickly kicked the gun away, then quietly crouched down with her and held her.

She sobbed into his shoulder and said in a muffled way, "They programmed me not to kill myself."

"What?" Tom said, completely not understanding her, "Who are 'they'?" he asked. "Kayla, what the hell is going on?"

Rachel laughed when she realized he had no idea what had been happening around him.

"Are you okay?" he asked, pulling away to look at her, and hold her shoulders. "What is going on?" He looked her in the eye.

She laughed again as new tears rolled down her cheeks. "I don't know why on Earth you would ever believe me," Rachel said.

He gently squeezed her shoulders and looked intently into her eyes, "Trust me," he said, "I'll believe you." He slid his hands down

her arms to grab her hands, which were covered in dried blood, and held them up for her to see.

"Oh God," she said, upset again, and threw her arms around him. He held her tight. "I'll tell you everything," she said. "Everything I know," she said with a broken laugh. And then she did.

9

Tom had gone home after Rachel had told him everything. He said he needed to think. Rachel understood. Kayla was devastated. She had taken over the body after he left and refused to speak to the other two. She fumed silently. She put on cute pink pajama pants with flowers and butterflies on them, and a cute pink T-shirt, because it was her favorite and she knew it bothered Zane. She'd gone to sleep fitfully.

It was morning now and Kayla was up, and Rachel was aware, but not in control. Kayla was slamming things around, getting her breakfast. She was mad at Rachel for trying to kill them, and mad at her for telling Tom everything and scaring him away. And mad at Zane for killing people and for upsetting Rachel so much. He was *her* boyfriend, after all. And they had ruined it.

She moodily took her cereal to the living room and sat in a chair and sulked as she ate.

Just then she heard a key start to turn in the lock of the front door. She set the bowl down quickly and jumped up, alarmed. Then the door opened.

There were two men standing there. Young men in suits. One with dark blond hair in a crew cut, it gave him an almost military look. The other was skinny and had dark brown hair and looked out the door behind them to see if they'd been seen. They hadn't been. He came inside and closed the door as crew cut guy stared firmly at Kayla.

"Kayla," he said.

"Yes?" she asked, frightened.

"Why don't you run and get Zane. We'd like to speak with her."

"Okay," she said and quickly sunk back into the body as Zane stepped forward to take it over. Rachel hadn't even known she was there.

"What do you want?" Zane asked coldly, crossing her arms.

"What do you think we want?" Crew Cut asked, as he sat on the arm of an easy chair.

"You've missed two doctor's appointments, Zane," Dark Hair said. "We were worried about you." He said this in a flat way, like there's no way in hell they would actually worry over her well-being.

'What's going on?' Rachel asked from inside. 'Who are these guys?'

'They're handlers,' Zane said inside. Then aloud, "I forgot."

"An appointment is not something you forget," Crew Cut said menacingly as he got up from the chair arm and walked over to her with a confident swagger. He glanced around to see if she was alone here. "Especially you, Zane."

"With all the heightened mental capabilities that were instilled in you," Dark Hair said in his monotone. He looked away, bored, to the pictures on the wall.

"You also failed to eliminate one of your targets. We had to send another assassin to finish the job," Crew Cut said.

Rachel realized he must be talking about the man she'd stopped Zane from killing.

"So, here's the way it's going to be," Crew Cut continued, looking down at her now, and in a lower voice. "You're going to come with us now and make up your two appointments, and then everything will be fine."

"Alright," Zane said coldly, glaring up at him. "Let me change first." She started to walk away.

"Oh, no ,no, no, no," Crew Cut said grabbing her firmly by the elbow. "I don't think you'll be leaving our sight."

'What are "appointments"?' Rachel asked hurriedly from inside. 'Where are they taking us?!'

'They're debrief sessions,' Zane said inside. 'I skipped them 'cause I didn't know how to hide the fact that you were out. They have tricks to find stuff out.'

"So, why don't you put on your fuzzy slippers and come with us," Crew Cut said with authority in his voice.

'Let me handle this,' Zane said to Rachel inside. 'You have to go away now.' Zane shook the man's hand off her arm and went to the door and slipped on some sandals there. The dark haired man calmly put her hands in plastic disposable hand cuffs.

"Is that really necessary?" Zane asked.

"I think you know it is," Dark Hair said.

"Let's go, Zane," Crew Cut said, grabbing her arm roughly.

They each held an arm as they led her out to a big black SUV and put her in the back. They sat on either side of her, as their driver started the car.

'Rachel, I said get back!' Zane said inside. Her heart was

pounding. 'Kayla...'

'Come on, Rach,' Kayla said quietly. And Rachel felt herself being pulled backwards, farther and farther away from reality, until there was nothing.

* * *

She woke up what seemed like days later, and maybe it was. She was in her own bed, in different clothes. She sat up. She felt groggy, drugged.

'They know, Rach,' Zane said from inside. 'They know you're out. But they still think they can fix it, so we're okay for now.'

"Okay," Rachel said aloud. She got up out of the bed and groggily went to the kitchen for food. She ate, she began to feel her head clear. She went out to the front porch to feel the breeze of a cool summer morning. It must be quite early, she thought.

Then she started to feel dizzy and felt the mental pressure in her head again. The mental throw up feeling. 'No, not again,' she thought. 'Just give me space to breathe.'

She got so dizzy she had to lie down on the porch.

Wind chimes tinkled gently in the morning breeze as she was sucked into another memory.

She was a teenager, working in a juice bar or something on a boardwalk or outdoor walking mall. The ocean was in the distance. It was a slow day. She wiped a table clean, there were four tables out front. Out in the sun. No inside to the bar, except where the workers were. She dumped an empty cup in the trash and went in the back to take a break with her friend.

The friend had long dark hair and naturally brown skin. She handed her a cigarette. Rachel took it and took a long drag off of it.

"So, he was here again," the friend said.

Rachel looked at her with raised eyebrows.

"The rich guy," said the friend. Rachel said nothing. "Come on, don't tell me you don't see how he looks at you. Go for it!"

"Go for it?" Rachel asked. "Allie."

"What?" Allie blew smoke out of her mouth quickly. "You never knew your parents—"

"I knew my mom 'til I was four," Rachel snapped.

"Okay, but she was a druggie and gave you up for adoption," Allie said, unfazed by Rachel's snappiness. "You lived your life in foster homes, you don't have money for school, or time to get good grades for scholarships. So, screw all that. You marry one rich guy and all your problems go away," she said, enthused by her own

idea. "Hell, I'd do it if he gave a half a glance at me."

Rachel wondered why he didn't. Allie was pretty. Exotic looking. And she knew how to use make-up just so. Boys certainly noticed. But not this guy.

"He must be into the goodie two shoes type," Allie said snarkily.

"Shut up," Rachel tried to sound annoyed, but she laughed. They all had to wear the same white T-shirts and blue shorts for their uniforms, but she did for some reason look more innocent and sweet in hers. Was it the no make-up? The hair pulled back in a neat barrette and a ponytail, no frills?

"Talk to him," Allie said with confidence. "Believe me he will do the rest."

"Are you talking to me like I'm a virgin?" Rachel asked, exasperated.

"Aren't you?" Allie smirked.

"Aren't you the one who walked in on me and your brother?" Rachel said in a lower tone.

"Yeah, back at the Ritz."

"The group home is not the Ritz."

"Exactly," Allie said, staring intently at her. Then she took another drag on her cigarette. "So, cut a little cleavage out of that shirt and let's get this thing going," she muttered.

Rachel smacked her on the arm. "Shut up!" she laughed.

The next day he was back, sitting at a table. There wasn't really waitress service there, but Rachel went nervously up to his table anyway. It had cups and wrappers from the customers before him.

"Let me get these out of the way for you," she said.

He was in his late 20's, maybe 30. He looked bookish and quiet. Dark hair. Suit with the tie loosened, like he'd just come from work.

"Oh, thank you," he said, a little surprised.

"No problem," she smiled and started to take the garbage away.

"Uh," he said, "have you always lived here?"

"All my life," she said, stopping to turn to speak to him again. "Uh... you?"

"No, I'm new here..." he said, at a loss for words. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Rachel."

"I'm Geoffrey Wurther." He held out a hand. She shifted the trash to one hand so she could shake his.

"Hi," she said shyly.

"Would you..." he almost stuttered, "mind showing me around a little?"

She tried not to blush. "Not at all," she said.

"I could pick you up after work..." he trailed off.

"Eight o'clock," she said nodding.

"Okay then," he said getting up quickly. "Eight o'clock."

* * *

Later that night they walked along the walking mall in the twilight, window shopping at the closed shops and talking about things. Not their lives, just what they thought of everything.

He was sweet. More educated than she was, though he didn't make her feel bad about that. He kissed her gently on the lips as he dropped her off back at the juice bar. He offered to drive her home, but she didn't want that.

Over the next few weeks he took her to old movies in little theaters, plays, art house films, art galleries, and fancy restaurants. She was running out of pretty outfits to scrounge together or borrow. He'd been dropping her off outside the group home, a big two story brown brick house.

"This some sort of sorority house?" he asked her the first time he dropped her off at home.

"Something like that," she said and smiled. She kissed him goodbye.

He was such a gentleman with her, even when they made out. She wasn't used to that. Hadn't known it was possible, to be respectful and sexy at the same time.

She enjoyed his company. She was learning all about art and other things. He was opening the world to her and she was falling in love with him.

"Wurther family fortune!" Allie said to her one night as she was getting into bed. They shared a room.

"It's not like that," Rachel said.

"I'm sure it helps," Allie said sarcastically.

Geoff's father had started the enormous Wurther Corporation, which owned all kinds of businesses, many brand names.

"Pregnant yet?" Allie asked wistfully from her bed.

"Shut up, Allie Cat," Rachel said wearily as she climbed into her own bed.

"Night, Rach," Allie said quietly from her bed.

"Night." Rachel flipped off the light from her bed.

* * *

Geoff had invited her to the opera. She said she couldn't possibly, she had nothing to wear. He offered to buy her a dress, and he did. His assistant had helped him pick one out. She'd met Rachel once. He bought the dress in two sizes, to return the one that didn't fit. But the first one she tried fit.

It was a beautiful black and dark blue silk gown. Strapless. Loose ruffles to the skirt, random layers of blue—which shimmered black in places—and black. The bodice was layered too, but more snug. It looked like fabric wrapped carefreely around her. It was beautiful.

"Oh my God," she said, looking in the mirror.

"I agree," he said from behind her, and bent down to put his chin on her shoulder and wrap his arms around her.

"I can't keep it," she said, smiling at his boyish grin.

"But you will," he said. He straightened up then and took her hand. He was in a nice tuxedo.

"Your chariot awaits," he said.

She laughed.

They went to the opera. It was beautiful and breathtaking, though she couldn't understand a single word. The voices were so beautiful and filled with emotion. She followed the story in a rudimentary way, mostly because he'd lean over now and then to whisper the plot into her ear.

At one point he stole a kiss on her neck. It warmed her soul.

On the way home in the limo they began passionately making out. He kissed her neck, her ear, her mouth. He started to unzip her dress.

She playfully slapped his face and said, "Not here," breathlessly.

Once back inside his luxury apartment building, they behaved themselves past the doorman and began kissing passionately in the elevator, all the way up to the penthouse.

Once inside his apartment he quickly pulled her out of her dress. He picked her up and carried her to the king sized bed in his lush bedroom with gorgeous views of the city's night sky. He lowered her gently on the bed and made love to her. Their first time together. She fell asleep in his arms, their naked bodies tangled together.

Morning light woke her as it traveled in a beam and finally got to her eyes. She woke slowly and rubbed her eyes sleepily. Then she realized it was morning.

"Geoff! Geoff!" she said, trying to wake him up quickly. His head was resting on her arm, which had gone numb. "Geoff!"

"What?" he asked, lifting his head to squint at her.

"I have to get home," she said, glancing quickly around the room for her clothes.

"Okay," he said, yawning and stretching.

She must have left her clothes in his walk-in closet when she'd put on the dress. Too nervous to be self-conscious, she just jumped out of the bed and streaked over to the closet to get dressed.

"You want breakfast first?" he asked, sitting up in the bed, watching her zip up her pants and shuffle quickly into her shoes.

"No, no breakfast," she said quickly and wondered where she'd left her purse.

"Why are you so freaked out?" he asked. He stood up and grabbed a pair of pajama pants out of a drawer and threw them on. "It's not like you have summer classes, and you don't have to be to work until one." He looked at the bedside clock. "It's 9 a.m."

He looked at her, confused. He had spiky bed hair. It was cute. But she couldn't think about cute now. She'd be in huge trouble at the group home. Unless Allie somehow managed to cover for her.

"Geoff," she said, "Just trust me. Let's go."

"No," he said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. She was standing near enough that he could reach out and grab her hands and pull her to him. He put his hands on her waist and looked up at her. "Tell me what's going on."

She could think of no other way to speed this along quickly and get her back to the home to do damage control. She sighed, and looked down at him. "I'm 17," she said.

"What?!" he asked in disbelief. He almost laughed.

"You're WHAT?" He jumped up and started to pace, then stopped to look at her. "Tell me you're joking." She didn't. She just watched him fume and thought how this wasn't as bad as she thought it would be.

He looked so confused. "I thought you lived in a sorority house. I thought you were in college."

"I let you believe that," she said. "I wanted..." she couldn't think of what to say.

"Oh, my God," he said, putting his hands to his cheeks, "I've broken the law." He opened another drawer and threw on a T-shirt. He slipped on some loafers in the corner and grabbed his car keys off a table. "I am taking you home," he said coldly.

She started to cry. Now he was acting like some stern father instead of her boyfriend.

"Geoff," she said.

"No, no, NO," he said turning to her angrily. "No tears, and no

apologies and no explanations." He pulled her by the hand and dragged her out of the room a little too roughly. He looked around and grabbed her purse and slapped it into her hand.

"I am taking you home," he said as he led her to the elevator. "And we can never see each other again," he said.

Her tears became a silent steady stream then. He wouldn't look at her.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"It isn't even about that," he said without looking at her. "It just has to be over. That's all."

They went the rest of the way in silence, down to the underground parking garage. He put her into a shiny black sedan, one of many cars he had. Apparently it seemed appropriate for the occasion. Almost funereal.

He drove her home in silence. She could tell he was fuming. She looked at him, but he wouldn't look at her. She stopped crying and dried her tears. He stopped in front of her brick house and let her out. As soon as she had closed the car door he drove away. He usually waited 'til she was inside. She walked sullenly up the walk and Allie rushed out to meet her.

"My God, where have you been? Never mind. We've been telling Sheridan you're in the bathroom being sick. Now, get your ass in there!" she hissed quietly as she dragged her up the walk.

She went to work and home again in a fog for the next few days. She would only tell Allie that Geoff had broken up with her. That was all. Allie kept giving her spontaneous hugs.

Three days had gone by. She told Allie she would close up the juice bar alone, then walk the five blocks home. Allie said okay and left without her. Then it started to rain.

"Perfect," she thought. She waited under the side awning for it to let up. Surely, it would. The sky grew dark. Cars drove by on the side street on the other side of the building. Then a car drove up and stopped. Well, that was creepy, she thought. She peeked her head around the back of the building to look at the street.

It was Geoff's car. The black sedan. She was getting pounded with rain as she stepped out from around the building to stare at him. He left the car on, and got out. He shut the door. He was dripping wet with rain now too.

He stared at her for a moment and then slowly walked around the car and towards her. He stopped in front of her. He stood there, looking down at her. Then he took her face in his hands and kissed her. Then pulled her back around to the side of the building under the awning and kissed her passionately, hungrily. The sky was dark and the rain was pounding. So was her heart. Everything

around her was cold, but he was warm. And this was not a goodbye kiss. She cried tears of joy that mixed with the rain on her cheeks as she kissed him. He was hers again.

Rachel came to with a crescendo of energy that ended with a snap and her eyes popped open. There she was on her front porch, lying on the floor. She was stunned at how vivid that flash was. The sun was brighter. It was later in the day. She didn't care. She saw an ant crawl across her arm, she didn't care. She couldn't move. She was too stunned. She was getting her life back slowly. One chunk at a time. It was so obvious and vivid, her memories... She couldn't believe she had ever forgotten them.

10

Rachel became aware that she was in a public restroom. Zane was in control and she was changing her clothes.

'What are we doing?' Rachel asked from inside.

"Rachel, I swear to God, why do you show up at these moments?" Zane said quietly out loud.

'You're going to kill again!' Rachel said.

"Did you or did you not see what happens when we don't obey?!" Zane snapped and looked up at herself in the mirror.

Rachel was startled. Zane was wearing a wig, long straight blond hair.

'Well, this is different,' Rachel said.

"Only for you," Zane muttered.

'How long have I been out?' Rachel asked.

"I don't know, I don't keep track of you," Zane said as she zipped up a conservative gray skirt. She buttoned up a white long sleeved shirt and tucked it in, then put on the gray suit jacket that matched the skirt.

She looked in the mirror then and carefully slid a black headband over her hair. Behind the wig's bangs. Then she put on dark rimmed glasses.

'When did you speak to me last?' Rachel asked.

"Two weeks ago, after the debriefing," Zane said as she put on a muted lip gloss.

'Have you killed in that time?' Rachel asked.

"Maybe."

'Dammit, Zane.'

"You wanna drive?" Zane asked her in the mirror. "'Cause I

think you'd get us all killed really quick." She picked up a briefcase from the floor. She had managed to stuff her old outfit, pants and shirt, into a big chunky purse. She picked that up too and said, "Now shut up and let me do my job."

'Why did you even wake me up at all?' Rachel asked.

'I'm beginning to wonder that myself,' Zane said inside.

Rachel watched as they walked through a busy mall to a door. It led to an office building. It too was fairly busy. Apparently, there was a parade going on. A few workers were crowded around the front glass of the large building.

Zane made her way to the elevator. She rode it up to the fourth floor and got off with a group. She dawdled as they dispersed and then Zane discreetly took the stairs back to the third floor.

She opened the door and there were tarps hanging from the ceiling. Construction was going on. But not right now. It was dark and quiet. Zane made her way over to a window, above the parade. She cracked the window open. She set down her purse and briefcase, and opened the case. It had a rifle inside it, nestled in foam.

Rachel was actually surprised.

"Not a word," Zane said after she'd put the pieces of the gun together and aimed it carefully out the window. City officials were riding in convertibles and waving. Baton twirlers were dancing. Bands were marching. She couldn't remember what parade this might be.

A blue convertible came into view. Zane let it pass. A man in a suit was sitting on the back seat and waving. Then she aimed at the back of the gray haired man's head. Once she had him in her sights, she fired.

The bullet hit him at the top of his neck, base of his skull, killing him instantly. He fell forward and landed on the seat.

"Not what I was aiming for, but it worked anyway," Zane said as she quickly moved away from the window. She packed up her gun and moved back and watched from the shadows. The car had screeched to a stop. A horrified crowd had gathered. Two police officers were trying to hold off the throng. Back up had probably been called.

The bands had stopped, the parade had stopped. Zane stepped back quickly and went into the stairwell.

She quickly descended the three flights of stairs and went out into the lobby. She followed stray people as they went over to the window to join the crowd there.

"Oh my God, what happened?" Zane said, sounding like a sweet worried office worker.

"Someone's been shot," a voice said near her.

There was a constant chatter as people speculated aloud and tried to get a better view.

Zane jostled forward and managed to get up to the glass at one point. She put her hand to it and peered out, faking worry.

'All I have to do is open this briefcase and let the gun fall out,' Rachel said inside. 'And they'll all know you did it.'

'That's it,' Zane said as she hurried away from the window. 'You're going back inside.'

Rachel heard the clip clop of Zane's comfortable pumps as she hurried across the lobby, and Zane pushed her back inside her mind, 'til there was nothing but black. And then she was gone.

11

Rachel was drifting through a memory again. Her wedding day. She was 19. Most of the people at the wedding were Geoff's family and friends and colleagues. Allie was her maid of honor, but Geoff's sister and cousin were her other bridesmaids.

Still it was the happiest day of her life. They kissed at the altar and everyone clapped and cheered as they walked out of the church.

Then it dissolved. Another memory took its place. She was arguing with her husband the night of the party where she had found him cheating. She had actually eventually gone back down to her guests and put on a false cheery face and finished the party. She'd told them Geoff was sick and couldn't join them. She had told him *not* to come down. The blond woman had discreetly left while Rachel was locked in the bathroom.

But now the party was over, the guests and servants had gone. It was just the two of them. And she was furious. She went to find him in his study upstairs. She burst into the room. He was sitting in silence in a chair with his feet up. In the dark.

She flipped on a light.

"What the HELL were you thinking?" she fumed at him.

He jumped up out of his chair. "Let me explain..." he started.

She laughed. "There IS no explanation. You cheated!" She started to cry. "And in my house!"

"Our house," he said quietly.

"Well, that makes it all better," Rachel said with a laugh. "I guess that gives you every right to start a little harem."

"That wasn't what I meant," he said, getting frustrated. "You

are never around. You're always busy with your projects and friends—"

"THAT'S your excuse for having an affair?! Like you weren't always busy at the office." She realized something, "God, if you were even at the office."

"We had grown apart, Rach," he said, trying to explain. "We barely knew each other anymore."

"So, instead of talking to me about it, you have SEX with someone else? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Quit blaming me for everything!" he shouted.

"You're the one who cheated!" she shouted back. Tears were streaming down her face. "I want a divorce."

"What?!" He was shocked. "Over THIS?!"

"Are you kidding me? Yes, over this!" She couldn't believe he was surprised by this. "I will take half of your money and everyone will know why we split. I'll give interviews about it. Everyone will know what kind of a person you are."

That had hit home. He was dazed. Then a fury of anger rose up in him. "You will NOT take half of what I have. You didn't even earn it. I did."

"You were born into it! Most of it was given to you at birth," she argued.

"You would never tell the world about our personal life. You hate that," he said, his face getting redder.

"I hate you more," she said through her tears. "What if I do more than that, huh, Geoff? What if I call the police and tell them you committed statutory rape? That you seduced a 17-year-old girl when you were 29? How does jail sound to you?" She glared at him.

"Shut up," he said. He was red with anger, almost shaking.

"I'll take your money, I'll tell everyone what you did, hell I'll write a book—"

"Shut up!" he shouted.

"And I'll have you put in jail for being a pervert when I was 17!" she shouted.

"SHUT UP!" He yelled with rage and grabbed the heavy vase on a nearby table and swung it at her.

It cracked into her skull. The vase shattered. She fell to the floor, everything went black.

Her head was throbbing, she was waking up, but so groggy and dizzy and weak she couldn't open her eyes. Male voices were speaking over her.

"Thank you, Rob," her husband was saying in a broken voice.

"I didn't know who else to call."

"Whew!" Rob said, probably as he caught sight of her. "You've really made a mess," he said.

Rachel recognized his voice. He was one of Geoff's friends from a men's club he belonged to.

"I don't know what to do." Geoff had a sob in his voice.

"Don't worry," Rob said calmly. "I've dealt with problems like this before. I know people who can help you clean up this mess. It'll cost you, though."

"Anything," Geoff said, still upset. "Just make it go away."

Rachel was disturbed by this conversation, afraid of what they would do to her. Kill her? Bury her alive? She tried to move or speak, but all she could do was let out a little moan and roll her head slightly. She still couldn't open her eyes.

"Oh my God!" Geoff said. But he didn't rush to her side. He didn't try to help her.

"Wow," Rob said. He paused for moment. "This is even better," he said.

"What?" Geoff asked, confused.

"You won't be paying anyone to take care of this problem. They'll be paying you," Rob said.

Geoff said nothing.

"I know of a group who will buy... unwanted people, so they can train them with special skills and do research, etc.," Rob said.

"I..." Geoff said, sounding shocked.

"They'll erase her memory, Geoff," Rob told him. "All I have to do is make a phone call."

"I can't believe this is happening," Geoff said with tears in his voice again. "What will they do to her?" he asked.

"Frankly," Rob said, then paused, thinking it over, "they'll most likely make her into an assassin or a spy. To be rented out. It's a lucrative business," he said.

"I don't know," Geoff sobbed.

"Look, if she comes to, you'll go to prison for assault or attempted murder."

Geoff said nothing. Rachel heard him sniffle.

"So unless you want to finish the job, or have someone else finish the job, I suggest you take this deal." Rob spoke as calmly and firmly as if he were selling real estate to someone.

"Hey, she'll be alive," Rob said, softening his voice into sympathy. "It's the best way to go."

There was a big silence and then Geoff said with tears in his voice, "Make the call... sell her."

"Good man," Rob said, almost cheerfully, and started to dial

his cell phone.

Rachel struggled to move again, or speak. The world faded in and out. The light came back. She moaned. She tried to move, but her arms seemed to be tied down. She was lying on something hard, like a metal table or gurney.

"We can't contain her anymore," a male voice said. "Look at the brain waves. The host personality is completely out and retrieving forbidden memories. We have to terminate her."

Another man sighed. "Alright. I'll go get the order signed. You get the kit ready."

She heard one man leave the room. She was waking up more now, becoming less groggy. She opened her eyes and saw a man with short dark hair, average looks, 30-something. He wore white pants and a white shirt neatly tucked in. He had a grim expression on his face. He was opening a case near her, setting things on the table near hers. The room was small and white and bright.

Suddenly someone took over her body, and spoke. "Billy!" she said. It was Zane.

He looked over at her with pity, and what looked a bit like puppy love.

"Billy," Zane pleaded, in a feminine sweet way Rachel didn't know she was capable of, "Please don't let them do this to me. We'll run away together," she said. "It's time. Please, let me up," she begged. "We'll take care of him and get out of here. Please..."

Billy was softening with her pleas and desperation and the way she looked at him. It occurred to Rachel that Zane had been cultivating this relationship for a long time, just for this purpose.

Billy had paused. He'd stopped setting up the termination kit.

"Please, Billy," Zane started to cry. "Please don't let them kill me..."

He made his decision and got the key to unlock her cuffs from across the room. He unlocked the chains around her ankles too. Zane leaped off the table and grabbed Billy's face and kissed him full on the mouth.

"Thank you!" she whispered. Then she moved her hands back a little and pressed firmly into pressure points at the top of his neck on both sides. He immediately fell to the floor, unconscious. She was wearing her own clothes. Rachel had expected a hospital gown.

She grabbed her shoes from a table nearby and put them on, and her jacket. Zane was still in control. Rachel realized this must be one of those 'doctor's appointments' where they debriefed her after a kill.

Zane rummaged through Billy's pockets and found his keys

and took them. Just then the other man came back in with a piece of paper, probably the order to kill her.

He was older, had wavy gray and brown hair. He also wore the all white clothing, possibly some kind of uniform. He stopped and immediately reached for the pepper spray on his belt. Before he could pull it off and spray it Zane had turned and kicked him in the chest, knocking the wind out of him and knocking him to the floor.

He lay in the doorway trying to catch his breath. Zane looked down at him and said in a snide greeting, "Walter," then kicked him in the head and knocked him out.

She immediately ran down a hall to her right. She just followed the "Exit" signs. Twice she had to unlock doors with the keys, but she saw no other people in the hall. She ran out of the back of the building. The sun was just setting. The building was huge, made of brick. It could have passed for a hospital or clinic. Maybe it had been one.

Zane continued to run as fast as she could away. She was more scared than Rachel had ever seen her. It grew dark. They began to walk. "I'm out," Zane said, exhausted, and dropped back into the body and gave Rachel control of it. She stumbled a little as she took over. Then she ran over to the nearest dark corner she could find, between an old brick building and some bushes and a wooden fence, and crouched down to hide.

She was in a panic. Where could she possibly go where they could not find her? Or where one of her fellow assassins could not find her. She crouched in the dark, hugging her knees to herself, and rocking, partly for comfort and partly for warmth as it grew cold.

12

It was cold crouching in her corner. She had to think up a plan. She checked her pockets to see if she had a cell phone. She found one in her jacket pocket. She flipped it open with shivering fingers and looked through the menu for Tom's phone number.

Thank God Kayla had put it in there. It had little heart icons next to it. She pressed the call button and waited for him to pick up. He did on the fourth ring.

"Kayla?" he said.

"Rachel," she said as she shivered. It wasn't too cold that night, but sitting still in cool air had gotten to her.

"Where are you?" he asked, concerned.

"Are you on my side, Tom?" Rachel asked in a small voice.

"Yes. I'm on your side," he said reassuringly. "What's going on?"

"Because I know I made a big mess of everything, and I don't know if you and Kayla worked things out or not." She babbled, shaking, partly from panic.

"We did, Rachel. We're still together."

"I have some bad news," she said as she shivered.

"What is it?"

"I think... I think they will have put out a hit on me by now. They got a signed order to kill me at their clinic. I escaped—Zane escaped—and I don't know what to do..." She started to cry. "And they may have tapped your phone, or my phone and it could be too late—"

"Shh, Rachel. It's okay," he said. "I'm coming to get you."

"We can't go home," she said, still crying, "Yours or mine. They'll find us..."

"We'll find a place," he said. "The GPS map on my phone shows me where you are." He paused to think. "You shouldn't stay there. Is Kayla around?"

Kayla didn't come forward. She was too scared. Rachel could feel her in the background, though.

"I think she's here," Rachel said.

"I want you to meet me at the place we had our second date. She'll know where it is." He paused. "Don't say it out loud. And you should probably start moving soon... and, Rachel?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

"Me too," she said in a small voice into the phone. "Goodbye."

"Bye."

She clicked her phone off and left it there in the dirt, just in case they could track it anyway. She got up with stiff cold limbs and sort of limped to the edge of the bushes. No sign of anyone yet. She followed the wooden fence to its edge and climbed behind it. She ran across a vacant lot.

'Two blocks,' Kayla said in her head.

Rachel obeyed and ran two blocks in the direction she was going. When she reached that corner Kayla said, 'Three blocks left. On Cresher Street. The Midnight Cafe.'

Rachel ran down the quaint little downtown street of cafes and shops and stopped under a sign that said 'Midnight Cafe' with a picture of a big cup of coffee with steam. She hesitated, but then went inside. Like the street outside it was quiet, only two customers in it. They each sat alone.

"Take a seat," A young plump waitress said.

Rachel sat in the nearest booth.

"Coffee, hun?" the waitress said.

Rachel nodded and the waitress brought over a cup and poured coffee into it.

"Thank you," Rachel said barely audibly.

"You bet," said the waitress and wandered off.

Where was Tom?

She waited there for five, maybe ten minutes, but it seemed like forever. A shiny black truck sped up and quickly parked outside. She almost started to run, but then Tom got out, and she was relieved. He rushed inside and sat across from her and grabbed her hands.

"Are you alright?" he asked in an urgent hushed way.

She nodded.

"We should probably get a move on," he said, reaching for his wallet. He put a couple of bills on the table and grabbed her hand and led her out of the cafe.

They ran to his truck and he opened her door for her and ran around to get in. And then he just started to drive.

They said nothing as he drove aimlessly.

Finally Rachel spoke, "Would they have a tracker on your truck?" she said.

"Dammit," he said and quickly stopped the truck. They got out and he grabbed a backpack he had brought with him. "Food and clothing," he said when she glanced at it. He locked the door and they started to walk. It was a warehouse district. Easily they could have hidden in a warehouse, but not with the truck right there.

This area started to seem familiar to her. From long ago. Like a memory.

"Down this road," she said, jogging ahead of him. He followed.

It was all coming back to her. They got closer and closer to an overpass. She used to play there as a child. She and a few friends. They'd put on old dresses and play dress up. Under the overpass. The road it passed over was broken down and rarely used now.

They went and stood under the freeway above.

She remembered more. She looked to her right and there was a brown metal door. With a hole where a doorknob used to be. They used to play in there.

He saw where she was looking. She looked back at him and he nodded.

They ran over and pushed open the metal door. She flipped a heavy switch inside the door, which turned on two light bulbs

hanging from the ceiling. The third bulb was missing at the far end of the room, where it was still dark. Where a man in a brown suit sat at a gray metal table as if he'd been waiting for them.

He had.

They froze. He got up from the table in a dignified way. He was in his 50's, sleeked back dark brown hair, his eyes looked black, but must have been brown.

"Rachel," he said. "So good to see you."

'Oh God, oh God, oh God...' Rachel thought.

"Or is it Zane?" he asked, stepping around the table toward them.

Tom slowly unzipped the backpack, opened it and showed its contents to Rachel. On top of her folded clothing was a gun. Oh how she wished Zane were here.

She pulled the gun out of the backpack and Tom set the backpack behind him. Rachel pointed the gun at the strange man. This didn't even faze him. He seemed to be unarmed.

"Who are you?" she said in a low firm voice. Trying to do what Zane would do.

"I made you," the man said, almost proud. "I was the main programmer who trained you. I broke you into pieces, then built you up again." He almost said this sweetly.

"You did this to me?" Rachel asked.

"With help, but yes," he said calmly. He stood about six feet from her and looked like he would take another step.

"Don't move!" Rachel said.

"But Rachel," he said, condescendingly, like she was a child, "we are old friends." He stayed where he was anyway. "How do you think I knew you would come here to this room? It's one of your happiest childhood memories." He smiled at her, as if to coax her out of her gun.

Where was Zane? Where was Zane? But it was fine now. Rachel had enough rage building up inside her of her own to take this man on.

She said to him through gritted teeth, "I'm going to kill you."

His smile faded, but fear had yet to make an appearance on his face. "I'd honestly like to see you try," he said coldly.

"Wish spoken, wish received," she said with a steely voice. She cocked the gun and tried to fire it at him. Her finger would not budge. The man smirked. She had been programmed not to kill him.

She tried to pull the trigger again, but could not make her hand do it. The man had taken a syringe with a needle out of his pocket, filled with a sedative no doubt.

As Rachel struggled with the gun, the programmer lunged at her, but Tom quickly took the gun out of her hand and fired it at the other man. He shot him in the right shoulder. The man dropped the needle and fell to his knees on the floor in shock, gripping his wounded shoulder.

"I'M not programmed not to kill you," Tom said angrily to the man. He raised the gun and pointed it again, this time at the man's head.

The programmer laughed. "You love her, don't you?" he asked Tom.

Tom paused, not seeing the relevance of this. "Yes."

"Alumhagamora," the man said and Rachel immediately began having a seizure. She fell to the ground as her body convulsed and Tom went to her to help. But there was nothing he could do. She seemed to be in pain.

The programmer had weakly gotten up and tried to run for the door.

"Stop!" Tom yelled as he got up, pointing the gun at the programmer again. "Stop the seizure!"

"Only I know the codes to control her," the programmer said with a wicked smile. "I *made* her," he said, leaning in the doorway. "I control everything about her. You never will."

"I don't want to control her," Tom said angrily.

"Right now you do." The programmer smirked at him.

"Give me the code!" Tom yelled. He could hear Rachel gasping behind him.

"I give you the code and you shoot me? Is that the deal?" the programmer asked calmly.

Tom was furious now, and frustrated, and lost. "I will shoot you... in your arms, legs, hands, feet... groin," he said, with seething anger, raising his eyebrows, "until I convince you to give me the code."

The man's expression grew grim. "Ikata dakrita," the programmer said clearly and Rachel immediately stopped twitching.

Tom could hear him run away across the gravel outside as he bent down to attend to Rachel.

"Oh, that hurt," she said.

"I know, baby, I know," he said as he helped her up. "We can't stay here now. He'll send others back."

Her muscles were sore as he helped her out of the room.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"I think so," she said.

But where on Earth to?

"You choose this time," she said as she limped across the road. "They can't predict what you would do."

"Okay," he smiled at her. "Okay."

13

She lay awake next to Tom. They had walked 15 blocks or so to a cheap motel and gotten a room under fake names. Tom had used an ATM about a mile away so they could pay with cash.

She could see the red light of the neon "Vacancy" sign shining through the curtains. She could not sleep. Her muscles felt better, after walking. But she knew she was doomed. Her time was limited. They couldn't run forever. How had her life gotten to this place?

Mostly, she realized, it was the men's club. Her husband's friend, the man who had brokered the deal to sell her. What was his name? Rob. Rob Davis. She remembered meeting him.

Without him her husband would have called an ambulance. Everything else would have been as it should be. Divorce, separate lives.

Suddenly a memory flooded into her head. Her husband going out after dinner. She asked where. He said he had joined a men's club.

She raised her eyebrows at him.

"Don't worry, honey," he smiled. "There are no strippers there. It's just a place for men to go and unwind and smoke stogies."

She was mollified by this.

He kissed her on the cheek and said, "I'll be back late."

"Okay," she said. She curled up in an easy chair with her poodle and a book she'd been reading. She could spend an occasional evening without him, she thought.

She came back to reality now, lying in the bed with Tom. He was breathing evenly. He was asleep.

What was the name of the club? She knew she knew this. She must.

Her mind flashed back to her picking an object up off of her husband's nightstand. He wasn't there. It was a dark brown matchbook with a slightly lighter brown logo and the word "Staggert" under it. The logo was a stag's head, she realized. At the time she'd thought it was cheesy. She set it down again. She didn't smoke anymore and Geoff never had. But apparently he'd taken up cigar smoking now.

She sat up carefully in bed, so she wouldn't wake Tom. Staggert. That was the name of the club. She felt energy surge through her now. She could do something about this. Maybe not stop them from doing it to someone else, but at least make them pay. Or at least make Rob Davis pay.

She couldn't harm her programmer, and maybe she'd been programmed not to harm her handlers or her debriefers either, but it was doubtful they'd bothered to protect this guy. Maybe she *could* stop him from ever doing this to anyone again. Or at least for God's sake ask him *why*.

She got up out of the bed and went to the backpack. She grabbed the gun. She also pulled on her long sleeved black shirt, over her T-shirt. She wore black pants and shoes and jacket. These were Zane's clothes. She wanted to feel like Zane right now. Cold and methodical. She needed to do this right.

She took money from Tom's wallet. She would need to take a cab. She put the gun in her jacket pocket and quietly left the hotel room. She didn't take the key with her. If she died with that on her they could find Tom with it. And if she needed back into the room she could just knock. She gave him one last look as she closed the door.

She ran over to the payphone at the end of the building and leafed through the phone book. It wasn't in the yellow pages. It was in the white pages, however. Only under "Staggert." But there was an address. Fools.

Then she called for a cab to pick her up.

* * *

She had no plan, just to find him and demand answers. She paid the cab fare and got out, nervous. Where was Zane during all of this? Or Kayla?

She walked up to the entry to the club. It was 1 a.m. Everything seemed quiet and discreet. How could she politely walk into a men's club? As a woman. She had no idea. But she walked into the entrance and was greeted by an older portly gentleman in a suit behind a desk, a booth. There was a windowless window between them.

Without looking up, he said smoothly, "Could I see your key card please?" Then he looked up. "Oh," he said.

'Uh oh,' Rachel thought. What now? She put her hand in her pocket to get the gun, but the man spoke first.

He said, "Are you the one who was sent to wash the filth off the windows?" He sounded almost frightened.

Suddenly Zane said urgently from within, 'Say "Only if the price is right and the birds are merry"!''

It startled the hell out of Rachel, but with a halting voice she managed to get it out, "Only if the price is right and the birds are merry," she said.

He nodded and smiled as if relieved. "Indeed," he said. "Room 214." He handed her a key card.

She nodded and took it. She walked past a coat check girl's booth and through a big heavy dark wooden door. It swung closed behind her and she found herself in a wide long hallway with dark red velvety carpet and painted portraits all along the wall. There was another big door at the end. It was closed. She was alone.

"What was that all about?" she whispered aloud to Zane.

'That's the code they use to greet an assassin discreetly, when one has been called to a location to take care of an immediate problem,' Zane said. 'So, another assassin is on the way.'

'And headed for room 214,' Rachel said inside.

'Yes.'

'Have you been here before, Zane?' Rachel asked.

'No,' Zane answered. 'How exactly do you think you're going to find this guy?' she asked.

'I know what he looks like,' Rachel said hopefully. "Oh my God," she said aloud.

She had been slowly walking down the hall, but now she stopped in the middle before the biggest portrait in the hall. It was a painting of the man she had murdered with the silk rope.

The name plate said his name was Stuart Locke. He was the founder and head of the club.

'He was hoarding research and information,' Zane said inside her head.

"Is that any reason?" Rachel said.

She stared at the painting some more. "They kill their own?" she asked in disbelief.

'In this world they do,' Zane said.

Rachel was stunned. She was starting to get more nervous. But she could not let this man get away with doing this to people. Rob Davis. She had to at least stop *him* before they took her down. She took a deep breath and turned and marched the rest of the way down the hall. She pulled open the heavy wooden door.

The lights were dim. Smoke hazed the air. Glasses tinked, men's voices laughed and talked. There were tables, and along the wall couches. There was a bar. No one noticed her at first. She scoured the room with her eyes, looking for Rob Davis's face. There were about 17 people in the phone book with that name. But

he was nowhere to be found, as far as she could see.

She took a deep breath and walked over to the bartender.

"I'm looking for Rob Davis," she said to him firmly.

"What are you doing here, sweetheart?" the man said as he poured a drink. "Ladies aren't allowed."

He nodded to someone behind her, probably some sort of bouncer or security. Suddenly two strong hands gripped her upper arms.

Then Zane suddenly took over her limbs. Her heel kicked the man in the shin and she turned and slammed her hip into his groin.

The man let out an "oomf," and let go of her. She spun around and kicked him for real in the groin, sending him to the floor.

Wow. It was like she was doing it. With Zane's help. It was like Zane was letting her have all the training and knowledge she'd learned from the programmers.

Another man, large like the other, no doubt another bouncer, came at her too. His arms were open as if he meant to grab her.

With one foot she kicked him in both shins, then turned and kicked him back with one leg smacking into his stomach. He fell to the ground and she kicked him in the head just enough to knock him out. The first man tried to get up and grab her, but she kicked him in the head too.

The bartender was calling someone. The men of the club were hushed, and then the braver of them tried to rush at her too. She panicked, but suddenly her body knew what to do. Kickboxing, martial arts, street fighting, you name it, she seemed to know it. And how to use her skills against bigger stronger opponents.

She kicked and elbowed and back handed and *flipped* men as they came at her from every direction. She took a few hard punches, but was so full of adrenaline the pain hadn't registered yet. She knew her lip was bleeding. She couldn't do this forever. She kicked and kneed and shoved men away from her and managed to get enough space to grab her gun. She pointed up and shot into the ceiling. The rush almost stopped.

One man tried to run and tackle her, but she quickly pointed the gun at him, and he staggered to a quick stop. She looked around at the men. All angry, some injured. Not likely she'd get Rob's whereabouts from them now. Just then the big door behind her started to creep open.

'More security,' Zane said.

Rachel went to stand against the wall near the door. Another big man entered. She put a gun to his head. He stopped walking.

"Drop your gun," she said.

He did.

"Step into the room with the others," she said coldly.

He did as he was told. She picked up his gun. 'They only have one more security person?' she thought.

'I guess they don't expect this kind of tussle every day,' Zane said. 'We'd better go.'

Rachel looked at the men in the room. "You see what happens when you mess with me," she said. "If any of you try to follow me, you'll get one of my 24 bullets," she said, holding both guns up.

She put one gun in her pocket and opened the big heavy door and let it slam behind her as she ran down the carpeted hall.

"One of my 24 bullets",' Zane repeated in her head. 'God, that was dorky.'

"Well it *sounded* good," Rachel said aloud.

Just then the door to the club started to open and Rachel fired one shot back down the hallway and shouted, "What did I say?!"

Zane laughed inside her head.

"Shut up," Rachel said under her breath.

The door closed again and Rachel had reached the other door. She shoved it open and ran through it. The coat check girl looked stunned. Rachel had blood coming from a cut on her head and her lip, and her knuckles she now noticed, and she felt a black eye coming on.

Rachel walked quickly by the coat check booth and pointed her gun at the girl. "Don't interfere with me, sweetie," she said.

She went right over to the man who had greeted her before and pointed the gun at him.

He looked alarmed and raised his hands up.

She said, "I don't have a lot of time and I know you have a computer back there and I need you to look something up for me," she said.

He hesitated.

"Look," she said louder, "I'm pretty sure I'm not gonna make it through the night, and if you piss me off I have no problem taking you with me." She was starting to feel the pain of her injuries now, though she was still fuming. "Understand?!" she shouted at him.

"Yes," he nodded.

"Rob... Davis..." she enunciated. "A member of this club. I want his address. NOW."

The man stared at her as he moved over to the keyboard to type. He looked at the screen and waited for it to display the results.

He looked up at her and muttered nervously, "3102 Hathaway Place."

"THANK you," Rachel said, and continued to point the gun at

him as she made her way quickly out of the building.

14

It was raining heavily as Rachel ran from the building. She put her guns in her pockets and ran down the street.

She got tired and out of breath and stopped running. The rain was hurting her swelling eye and the cut on her head.

"Zane, do you know how to hot wire a car?" Rachel asked aloud.

'Yes,' Zane said soberly.

"You sure you don't want to take over?" Rachel asked, out of breath.

'No,' Zane answered. 'This is really your thing.'

"Is Kayla around?" Rachel asked as she walked along the street discreetly checking for a car that was unlocked.

'Please, she's hiding in a corner,' Zane said.

Bingo. A shimmery rust orange colored car opened when she tried the door. "It would have to be orange," she said under her breath. "Bad for a getaway."

'Get in,' Zane said from inside.

Rachel opened the car nervously and got in.

'Let me do it,' Zane said. She took over and bent down and messed with the wires above the pedals until she got them to spark the engine into firing up. She sat up, and let Rachel take over again.

'You know where Hathaway Place is?' Zane asked.

"I think so," Rachel said as she sped away from the curb.

The key, she realized, was to drive fast, but not over the speed limit. No sense getting pulled over and not making it there at all. She drove through a busy nightlife area, and then got onto residential streets.

She found Hathaway. "Yes!" she whispered to herself. She drove a few blocks until she got to 3102. She got out of the car and left the motor running. It was still raining hard.

The house was big and beautiful and set back from the road. Tall bushes and trees gave it privacy from every angle.

Rachel went to a smallish window and started to get a gun out to break it.

'No!' Zane said. 'He'll have an alarm system. Best way in is to ring the doorbell.'

Oh, God, Rachel thought. What was she doing? She walked

right up to the front door and rang the bell.

It took about five minutes, but finally someone came to the door. She had stepped out of view, and broken the lens of his security cam, just in case he recognized her and wouldn't open the door.

His curiosity got the best of him and he cracked open the door. He saw nothing and opened it wide and stepped out. He hadn't gone to bed yet. He still wore suit pants and a white button-down shirt, unbuttoned at the collar. He had a drink in one hand. Looked like scotch, no ice.

Rachel put the gun to the side of his head before he had a chance to look in her direction.

"Hello, Rob," she said. "Are you alone?"

"Yes," he said, holding his hands up a little bit, scotch and all.

"Good," she said, then turned to elbow him in the stomach and shove him inside the house. He fell to the floor of the foyer wincing in pain.

"Remember me?" she asked, pointing a gun down at him. He looked different than before. Different hair, a bit longer. Still a good looking man in his mid-thirties, but now with a weird streak of gray going through his brown hair on top on one side.

"No," he said, trying to catch his breath.

"Well, let me refresh your memory," she said. Then in a fake cheery hostess tone, "Hi. I don't think we've met. I'm Rachel Wurther. Hope you enjoy the party." She punctuated the word "party" by kicking him in the thigh.

He yelled in pain. "Alright!" he said. "I remember you now."

"Good," Rachel said. "I hate it when old friends forget me." She walked into the sitting room, and saw no one. Same with the den on the other side of the foyer, which is where he must have been. The lights were on.

"Why don't you drag your sorry butt back in here, and we can have a grown-up sit-down chat?" Rachel asked snidely and pointed the gun at him.

His glass had shattered when she threw him inside and he cut his hand on the glass trying to get up. But he limped into the den as she pointed her gun. He collapsed on a big brown leather couch.

She perched on a brown chair across from him and said, "So, do you sell people for a living or is that just a side project of yours?"

"I'm a lawyer," he said, wary but angry. He held his non-injured hand to his stomach.

"One who doesn't obey the law," she said. "Well, that's enough

fun and games." She stood up and pointed the gun at him again. "Why did you sell me?" she asked, gritting her teeth.

"Cause my mother never loved me," he said sarcastically.

"Who did you sell me to?" she asked angrily.

"They'll kill me worse than you will if I tell you that. No way."

"Is it the club?" Rachel demanded. "Do they do it all the time?" She started pacing a little bit. "I know there are more of us. How many more? How big is it?"

He sat silently staring up at her, as she paused in her pacing.

She suddenly put the gun right up to his neck and he grimaced.

"Do you REALIZE what you did to my life?" she said angrily, right into his face. He leaned back as she shoved the gun into his neck harder. It just made her angrier, how uncooperative he was being, not answering any of her questions, not caring.

She got up off the couch and stood a few feet from him with the gun. She backed up and pointed it toward his chest. Angry tears spilled out of her eyes.

"I AM going to kill you," she said. Then in a small voice, "I just want you to talk to me."

His face changed then. "It wasn't even my choice," he argued. "It was your husband's choice. Why aren't you at his house, kicking him around?"

"Oh, he's next," Rachel said, still crying. "I just want to know where your soul is. How you could do this to another human being. Do I have to shoot it out of you?"

"Look, take my car, take some money, get away from here. Just let me be," he said hurriedly.

"How will they ever find me in your car?" she said with mock innocence.

"What do you want?" he asked, desperate.

"Oh, my life back," she said. "Do you have a time machine stashed anywhere in here?" She glanced around. "No? Hmm. If I can't get my life back... maybe I should take YOURS."

"I will do ANYTHING," Rob said, pleading with her.

"You will do it again is what you will do," Rachel said angrily. "You'll keep buying and selling people. Ruining lives. Maybe even going above the law."

"No, I won't," he said, begging.

She laughed. "Don't lie to me just because I have a gun." She was almost hysterical. "There really is only one thing I can do with you." She had tears in her eyes again. "You won't talk about them, you won't stop buying people for them. You're becoming more and more worthless to me..." She pointed the gun at his chest again.

"It's not the club," he said quickly. "It's a group that is associated with it."

She cocked the gun.

"The Zorizen Group," he rushed out. "It's a corporation. Please, that's all I know."

"Where is my husband living now?" Rachel asked with a cold seething voice.

He hesitated, seeing the grim look on her face. He took a deep breath. "922 Tower," he said.

She shot him in the chest. He looked anguished and moaned as he fell to the side and blood rushed out of his wound. The right side of his chest. Blood started to leak out of his mouth.

If she were Zane she thought, she'd shoot him again. Finish it. But Zane stayed out of it and let things be.

Still, he really would ruin more lives if she didn't make sure he'd die. He was gurgling and moaning and gasping for breath. 'With all the people I've killed really, what's one more?' Rachel thought.

'It's a bad habit to get into,' Zane said quietly. 'Want me to do it?'

'No, I got it,' Rachel answered. She pointed the gun at him again, closed her eyes and fired.

He had whimpered in pain again. She'd shot him in the stomach. More blood was coming out of him now, and she just felt sorry for him. But she couldn't shoot him again. She couldn't, not even to make it quick. He'd just have to bleed out, wait for his body to shut down.

She ran out of the room and out the door, which was wide open, and out into the pouring rain. The orange car was still running and she got inside. She knew where Tower was. It was a group of condos. At least he wasn't still living at the house, the scene of the crime.

She sped off quickly, through the rain, down many side streets and quiet residential areas. Then she got to the condo complex. She drove into it. The roads were all brick. She wound her way around until she got to 922.

She ran up the front steps, rang the bell and stepped aside. In a few minutes the door opened. She grabbed onto the neat tidy white railing of the steps and kicked both her feet up into the air and kicked him back inside.

With a yelp and an "oomf" he fell into the entry way. She came in and bent over him, taking a gun out of her pocket.

"Hey, hubby," she said, "Replaced me yet?"

He looked up at her, shocked and still out of breath, "Rachel?"

He was in a T-shirt and boxer shorts. He must have been in bed.

"Is your bimbo here?" she asked soberly, pointing the gun at him and glancing into the few rooms nearby. "You know, the whore you cheated with."

"No one's here," he said.

"What? You didn't marry her and reproduce?" Then she grabbed him angrily by the T-shirt, "Get up!"

He scrambled to his feet, still looking shocked. "In here," she said, dragging him to the living room. She motioned for him to sit. "I guess you never thought you'd see me again."

"They said they'd take your memory," he said, stunned.

"Oh, they did," Rachel said. "And they gave me a handy new skill set. Thanks to you."

"Rachel, I didn't know what else to do," he said.

"Except save your own ass," she said.

"You were alive. It was the only way to keep you alive," he said, pleading.

"Oh, except calling an ambulance and going to jail!" she said, smacking his face with the back of her hand.

He looked back at her angrily, but unable to reciprocate. A red spot appeared on his cheek.

She backed up, still pointing the gun. "I loved you," she said with tears in her eyes. "When did you become a fucking psycho?"

He said nothing.

"Well, I guess you know we're getting a divorce now," Rachel laughed through her tears. "Hey, let's reenact our last fight when you almost killed me. Except this time I'll have a gun. Huh? How 'bout it?"

"Rachel, I never meant to hurt you," he said deliberately and slowly.

"Well, then your heart and your hands don't communicate very well, do they?" Rachel said. "I wonder if my trigger finger would work if I tried to kill you." She sort of laughed. "I've been having a problem with that lately."

"If I could take it back, I would," he said earnestly.

"Yeah, it's funny how full of remorse people get when they have a gun pointed at them. Pretty amazing, don't you think?" She pulled the hammer back on the gun.

"Rachel," he said warningly, "you don't want to do this."

"Yeah, well, I didn't want to kill the dozens of other people I've murdered either, but you didn't give me a choice about that." She started circling around him on the couch. She got back around to the front of the couch and said, "Down on your knees, please. Like the day you proposed to me. Come on."

"Rachel, don't—"

"DOWN!"

He got down on his knees.

"Say you're sorry," she said. "Even though you don't mean it."

"I'm sorry," he practically whispered.

She tried to make herself pull the trigger. She tried to work up enough anger, but it just wouldn't come. Why had she ever loved this man?

"You are such a lying snake," she said, almost under her breath. Then she kicked him hard in the groin.

He crumpled over in pain, quietly moaning.

She started to leave the room, but turned around. He had gotten up again, onto his knees. He waited, in pain, to see what she would do. She raised the gun, pointed, and fired. A bullet whipped by his head, within a foot or so, and buried itself in the wall of the living room.

"You're dead to me," she said and walked out of the room.

She could feel Zane smirking in her head.

'You want me to take over?' Zane asked inside. 'I could shoot him right.'

"Shut up," Rachel muttered.

Zane laughed.

15

When she got back to the orange car, it had stalled. It was out of gas. It was still pounding down rain. She was pretty sure Geoff had called the police by now. She started to run down the street, turned and ran down another street, trying to zig zag through the residential streets and not be found.

Now she could hear sirens starting to wail, getting closer to her. She ran down a different street. They seemed to be getting louder in that direction too. Dammit. Should she break into a house? She had no idea how to tell which ones were unoccupied. There were not a lot of trees or bushes in this neighborhood. Nothing to hide behind.

She heard the wail of a siren get louder behind her.

She heard cars slam on their brakes. Then more police cars sped up and blocked the road in front of her.

"Drop your weapon and put your hands above your head," came a loud voice over a megaphone from behind her. She turned around slowly and dropped the gun she was holding and

begrudgingly lifted her hands into the air. Rain poured down on her face.

Three cop cars were stopped in the road. Police officers were crouched behind their open doors with guns drawn. Suddenly from behind them two men in suits appeared from out of a dark SUV. They were her handlers.

The two men in suits breezed past the police cars. Crew Cut flashed a badge at them as he stared at Rachel and said, "We'll handle this, guys."

Dark Hair stopped to politely let a police officer view his badge, then he followed Crew Cut as he marched confidently toward her.

She still had the other gun in her pocket. She could use it now, on the handlers. But if she did the cops would open fire, and she'd be dead. And she wasn't as in the mood for that now as she once was.

Crew Cut got to her and punched her in the face, on her cheek. She almost fell over and was in shock. Dark Hair came up and punched her in the stomach, causing her to double over in pain. Then Crew Cut kicked her leg so hard he knocked her over. She yelped as she slammed into the pavement.

She instinctively reached for the gun in her pocket, but Crew Cut grabbed her hand.

"Uh, uh, uh," he said. He pulled the gun out of her pocket. Then he leaned over 'til his mouth was practically touching her ear. "I would advise you to stay down," he said clearly.

Then he leaned back up and Dark Hair handed him a syringe. Rachel glared back up at him.

"You may be an assassin, baby," Crew Cut said, "but looks can't kill." He shoved the needle into her neck and injected her with something. It made her feel like she was scrambling for reality as she was sucked into a black hole. She tried to hold onto the rain and the cold and the hard street, the stinging of her cheek, the pounding pain in her leg, the tense soreness in her abdomen. Even that snide look on Crew Cut's face as she faded. She tried to hold onto it all, but she blacked out anyway, not knowing if her handlers were fulfilling the kill order or just knocking her out. But soon, there was nothing.

* * *

Rachel woke with a start and tried to sit up, but her arms and legs were tied down. She looked up. There was a white ceiling a few feet above her head. Was she in an ambulance?

"You're up," a man's voice said over an intercom.

She said nothing.

"Take a look around, Rachel," the voice said.

She looked to her left. "Oh, my God," she said, startled. There was a window a few feet from her. And outside the window was nothing but starry sky. No ground, no Earth, no trees. Nothing. She looked to her right. More stars, but in the distance, the round shape of the Earth.

She was in space.

She looked behind her head, another window. She looked at the foot of the bed she was tied to. There was a window, but a screen had quietly dropped down in front of it. And on this screen she could see the man who was talking to her.

"You see," he said. "We've had a lot of trouble with you escaping."

She noticed there was an IV going into the crook of her left elbow. And one into the side of the wrist on her right hand.

"We figured this was one cell you wouldn't want to escape from."

She was panicking, starting to sweat. She felt herself start to hyperventilate.

"Rachel," the man said firmly. "Focus."

She leaned up, propped on her elbows as much as she could with her arms tied. She looked at the man on the screen.

"You see, in the beginning of your training, we put you in a cell under water, and you escaped it. You're our little Houdini," he said. "But we can't have you disobeying us."

She tried to calm her breathing down.

She had no memory of escaping an underwater cell.

"You were hard to break, Rachel," the man said, "Like a wild horse. We thought we had succeeded. Apparently, we were wrong." He turned to the side and pushed a button on the wall in the room he was in. Suddenly a pump or something came on in her cell and muddy looking fluid started traveling down the tube connected to her left arm. She started to panic and kick out of her restraints.

"Nutrition and hydration," the man said calmly.

The fluid went into her arm and she felt fine. She didn't feel drugged or poisoned. She relaxed a little.

"We spent a lot of money on you, Rachel," the man continued. "So, you'd better behave yourself. I know you understand me. Do you understand me, Rachel?" he asked calmly.

She hesitated to answer, then said, "Yes" in a raspy voice. She must not have drunk fluids for a while. How long had they kept her here?

"We're going to give you another chance," he said. "We're going to test new techniques on you. Pain aversion techniques," he said. "Among other things."

She quietly started to cry.

"We're going to separate you from your other selves, Rachel," he said. "We're going to erase your memory. We're going to make you compliant." He looked sternly at her. "And if we can't rehabilitate you, we *will* put you down like a dog."

She lay back and let the tears stream out of her eyes.

"Now be a good girl and take your medicine," the man said.

She looked up to see him push another button on the wall. Blue fluid started to flow down the tube to her right wrist.

She squirmed and tried to thrash around, but to no avail. The fluid entered her vein. She almost felt it burn as it did. Within seconds it had faded her out of the world and into a place of pure black and nothing. She was gone again.

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Rachel groggily opened her eyes. She was still in a white cell. She tried to move her arms and legs. She was still tied down. Her eyes began to focus and she realized she was in a completely different cell. Big enough to stand in. White padded walls and floor. She was tied to a gurney or bed that seemed to be attached to the wall.

She propped herself up on her elbows. She was in a hospital gown. She had a few small round burn marks on her arms. They looked recent. She saw a camera on the ceiling in the far corner of the room. She lay back down and waited. She wondered when this reprogramming would begin and what it would involve, and how on Earth she could escape these people.

Just then the heavy white metal door was unlocked with a loud clink that made her jump. She looked toward the door, past the foot of her bed and saw a pleasant looking nurse coming in. Fifty-something, plump, short brown hair. She was smiling.

"Quite a night you've had," the nurse said as she came to undo the ties on her arms and legs.

"Where am I?" Rachel asked.

"In the hospital, dear," she said. "I'm going to have you come with me, so we can get you back into your clothes and released."

Rachel was amazed. The nurse helped her off the bed. Her legs were a bit wobbly, possibly from a sedative. Who knew? She

let the nurse lead her down a tiled green hallway to a cheery looking exam room. It had upbeat posters on the walls that said things like "shoot for your dreams" and had pictures of flowers and butterflies and things.

"Here you go," the nurse said, pointing to a neatly folded pile of clothes on a chair. "Put these on and the doctor will be in to talk to you shortly." She left and closed the door behind herself. She didn't even lock it.

This was bizarre. Rachel took the gown off and put her clothes on, which were not her clothes but fit her perfectly, jeans and a T-shirt. Then she slipped into shoes next to the chair that were just her size. Some sort of slip-on loafers.

For some reason she felt no need to run. She felt lulled into peaceful submission somehow. She casually walked around the room looking at jars with tongue depressors and ear flashlights and a stethoscope. Why was she not running? Had they already done something to her to make her not run?

The door clicked open behind her as she was staring at a butterfly poster on the wall, and she jumped. She turned around and an older gray haired man in a lab coat came in, holding a clipboard.

"Rachel," he said cheerily. "Why don't you have a seat." She sat in the chair her clothes had been on and he wheeled over a chair from a corner and sat in it facing her. He pulled reading glasses out of his coat pocket and put them on and read papers on the clipboard.

"Do you know why you're here?" he asked casually.

"No," Rachel said.

"Good," he said cheerfully.

What? she thought.

"I'm just here to tell you the rules," he said. "You've been separated from your other selves and are never to talk to them again. We left your memory intact. Because how can you ever learn if you can't remember? We know you know what we can do to you if you misbehave." He was speaking to her kindly like she was a child.

She had started to cry silently. This was so creepy.

"Do you understand, Rachel?" he asked.

"Yes," she said through her tears.

"Now we've put even more safeguards in place, more programming, so if you disobey us, there will be grave consequences. Okay?"

She just cried quietly.

He raised his eyebrows at her.

"Okay," she said tearily.

"Okay." He stood up and held his hand out to her to shake.

She warily took his hand. He smiled at her and shook her hand. "Nice seeing you, Rachel. A driver will be in in a minute to take you home. Take care."

He left the room.

She put her head down and let tears fall onto her arms.

Where had those burn marks come from? Why didn't she remember getting them? How much time had gone by?

The door clicked open again and she dried her eyes, and looked up. A young man in a suit was standing there.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked politely.

"Yes," she said, getting up. Were they really letting her go home?

He motioned for her to follow him and she did. Down the tiled hallway, through a door which he unlocked, down another hallway. Through two sets of bars he had to buzz for a guard to open. No wonder they had left her alone in an unlocked room. They were obviously in a fortress.

Finally they walked through a lobby with beautiful glass walls on one side, and out into what seemed to be a summer afternoon.

She followed him to a big black SUV. Typical, she thought. He actually opened the door for her. She got in and buckled her seat belt.

He got in, started it up and drove for what seemed like forever. Through heavy traffic, then residential streets, then downtown, then more houses. It started to look familiar to her. They really were taking her home.

Finally he drove up in front of her house and stopped. The house looked the same. He turned off the car.

"Do you have any questions?" he asked her.

She hesitated to ask, not sure she wanted to know. "What year is it?" she said finally.

"2019," he said. He got out of the car to go around to get her door.

2019, she thought. Two years have gone by. The quiet tears started to roll down her face again. How had two years gone by in the blink of an eye?

He opened her door. She let him help her out and lead her to her front door. He unlocked it and opened it for her, then handed her the key.

He held the screen door open and said, "Just be happy, Rachel. Just enjoy your life. Don't worry about what the other parts of you are up to."

She just stared at him. He had said that as casually as a bellboy saying, "Enjoy your stay."

"Take care," he said and let the screen door close. She was starting to hate that phrase. She watched him walk to the SUV, get in and drive away. She looked down at the key in her hand. It wasn't really hers, was it?

She looked around. Everything was pretty much how she had left it. Except it was all a little neater, cleaned up. Staged.

She quickly walked through the house, making sure no other creepy cheerful people were there. She was alone. She went to the fridge and opened it up. They had stocked it with her favorite foods. Creepy.

She suddenly wondered what had happened to Tom. She panicked when she realized she didn't know his last name. Or his phone number. She had left her phone in an abandoned lot. Otherwise she could call him with that. And she couldn't talk to Kayla anymore, or even find her in her head. She felt alone.

She went into the living room and sat down and stared into space. She was trying to process what had happened to her. None of it made sense or felt right, or even felt real. What "safeguards" were in place in her own mind?

The sky grew dark and she leaped out of her chair when she realized she could just walk to Tom's house. It was five blocks away. She wouldn't drive. She wanted to check out the situation first. Approach quietly.

What if he didn't live there anymore? What if he wasn't alive? 'God, don't think like that,' she thought. She grabbed her house key and locked the front door and started to walk. The air had grown slightly cooler, but not bad. She walked quickly, past quiet houses with people watching TV and having late dinners.

She was a block away from his house and could see his lights were on. She got closer and could see his truck in the driveway. 'Thank God,' she thought. She ran the rest of the way there. She stood across the street and could see him in the kitchen, standing at the counter, probably making dinner.

She was so happy to see him alive. She almost started walking across the street when he laughed and seemed to say something to someone behind him.

Suddenly a woman appeared next to him in the window. She set a bowl down on the counter and playfully slapped his hand, and laughed. She was pretty, had short brown hair.

Rachel froze in her tracks. He was with someone new. How could she not think of that? Two years had gone by. They probably told him she was dead. God, she had nothing left.

"They took my life away," she said to herself in the quiet street. She was shocked. How had they so thoroughly ruined her life? It was like they had gutted it and left her with the shell of it to do what she wanted with.

In a daze she slowly walked back home, opened her door, and sat down on the couch in the dark. She flipped on the TV to drown out her thoughts. She watched an annoying infomercial. And old movies. And the news. She didn't even care.

She picked up the pad of paper near the phone and began to doodle on it with a black pen. She drew tiny stars, filling the little page and starting another. She drew eyes. She drew flowers with sharp edges. Eventually she just scribbled one whole page black, then started another. Where else could rage go in this stifled shell of a life they'd left her?

Eventually she grew so tired she wandered back to bed. She was a little afraid to go to sleep. Afraid she'd wake up tied to some table three years in the future. But she did eventually drift off to sleep.

She woke with a start hours later with morning light seeping through her window. It was early. She hadn't dreamed. Was that one of the things they had changed?

She groggily got up and wandered to the kitchen. She had put on Kayla's favorite pajamas because she missed her. She was hungry, so she grabbed a yogurt from the fridge and took it to the living room.

She sat down and looked at the pages of scribble she'd left lying around. Flowers, stars, eyes, black nothing. Then she glanced at a piece of paper on the table next to her. She slammed the yogurt onto the table, the spoon fell to the floor. She picked the paper up. She couldn't believe it.

At the bottom of a page of stars and eyes were written the words, "They'll never separate us for good, Rach. Zane."

"Oh, my God," Rachel said aloud and started to cry. She stared at the paper, then she held it to her chest. She looked down at the paper again as she lowered it to her lap. She stared at it to make sure it was real. It was.

"Thank you..." she whispered, to who she didn't know. "Thank you..."

Other novels by Chris Slusser:

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