

## CHAPTER 1

"Man, I keep on telling you, it's my knee that's hurt! Not my neck or my back!"

Culley hated being strapped to that damn back-board, especially since it was only his knee that was injured, but they didn't know that. Either that or they didn't want to listen.

What they did know was that he'd been in a tag-team match at the Psychobrawl bout, and that he'd been injured. The Professional Wrestling League wouldn't let them think of anything else, particularly not with the convoy of wrestlers and officials that were trailing behind them.

Culley would have sworn he was like gold, he had so many people fussing over him, and not just those in the ambulance.

"Just relax Mr Taffinder, we'll have you at The Rand Hospital in no time."

The female paramedic patted his chest reassuringly, and Culley thought, sourly, about reminding her that he was an adult, but he didn't as the ambulance raced through the red lights.

"What the hell is going on out there?" the head of emergency medicine grouched, as he watched the local TV stations set up shop outside his ER.

Yasmine gave the situation a quick glance, and said nothing. She had nothing to add, and she felt it better not to whine about something she had no control over.

"What's next?" she asked at the nurses' station.

"Kid fell out of his bunk bed," Antonia Lynn, her favourite nurse informed her.

"One of those new Greenfield Lullaby beds?" she asked, mentally tracking the statistics she and several of her colleagues had been collecting. She and the other fifteen were going to present papers on childhood injuries at the next orthopaedics convention. Their focus was the household and the playground, and it certainly had been eye opening.

She impassively strode toward where she could hear the sound of muffled screaming, steeling herself to deal with a difficult trauma. Most adults could be reasoned with, most children couldn't, and she could tell that this child was well past reasoning with.

She pushed open the generic, antiseptic, blue door, with its pretty teddy bears stencil, and the screaming became appreciably louder.

A tiny mother was trying to pin down a writhing little body, whilst another child was crying in his father's arms, as they stood to one side, in a corner.

Yasmine mentally crossed her fingers that she had correctly remembered these parents' surnames. She was notorious for calling people by the wrong name, although she never forgot the injury that brought them to the hospital.

"The Da Silvas," Tonia murmured, giving her the required information.

"Mr and Mrs Da Silva, good evening. My name is Dr Yasmine Knittel, I am an orthopaedic surgeon, and I understand your son fell out of his bunk bed."

"Yes," Mrs Da Silva bit back a sob, trying to control herself for her son's sake.

"A frequent household accident," Yasmine sought to comfort her. "Happens every night."

She was aware that not many parents knew of the dangers of bunk beds. Many children fell out bed every night, and most sustained a concussion along with a broken limb.

The Da Silva's son had a particularly bad break, and Yasmine didn't need to see the X-rays to know what was going to happen next.

His forearm bone had pushed through the flesh and tendons, and was now protruding from the gore at an ugly angle. The little boy was going to need pins to put his arm back into place.

The emergency technicians had already taken CAT scans of his head and neck, and apart from his arm, he also had some bruised ribs.

"Okay little one," she soothed, as she rubbed his little back. She gave Tonia some instructions on medication, keeping an eye on his distraught parents.

"Your son has a compound fracture of his lower left arm, and some bruising about his thorax," she directed her diagnosis to the boy's mother when she had finished her exam. She had to talk loudly over the boy's tired screams.

"We'll have to admit him to the hospital, and prepare him for surgery. He's going to need pins in his arm to align the bone properly, and he'll have a cast for the next six to eight weeks, maybe a little longer."

Yasmine was heartened by the fact that she had been able to do some good tonight.

"So we'll get started on the paperwork, and Dr Lonner will begin preparing for surgery at the same time-

The door popped open behind her, and Pickering, the ER chief said: "Yasmine."

She waved a hand to show that she had heard him, but she spent another two minutes with the Da Silvas.

She held the door as the orderlies tramped out with their new patient, and she took the gratitude, that the little boy's parents showed her, gracefully. She was just doing her job, and not even the main part either.

She was just the surgeon on call, which meant that unless it was a dire emergency, the only thing she'd be doing was diagnosing, and sending her patients up to surgery if they required it. She wouldn't be wielding her scalpel this evening.

"Bob," she called out, when she had spotted Pickering. She darted down the blue hall toward him.

"What's up?" she queried. She knew that he wouldn't have disturbed her without a good reason. He pulled her to one side, out of the way, to tell her what she needed to know.

"Thirty four year old male, 6ft 5" tall, 135 kgs, with a sports injury."

As she worked out that she was dealing with a rather large male, she could sense that there was more.

She decided to focus on the patient first. "They take X-rays?"

"And CAT scans," Bob confirmed, with a nod. "He's only complaining of some pain in the knee, and I told them to get some stress X-rays, of the knee, and of his entire leg just in case."

"Good thinking," she complimented him. "Those films back yet?"

"No, but I think that you ought to look at the knee. It's a nice India ink colour, and there is some swelling." He made to move to where the patient was.

"Fine," Yasmine agreed, and turned to follow him.

He shepherded her toward a spectacularly crowded exam room.

"Big family," she mumbled, beginning to feel awfully small. Everybody around her was bigger than she was, including some of the most stunningly beautiful women she had ever seen.

"Mr Heard," Bob greeted a tall, urbane man, in a tweed jacket that flattered his salt-'n- pepper hair. She was glad to have someone to focus on.

"This is the surgeon I was telling you about. Dr Yasmine Knittel, Mr Paul Heard."

"Evening Doc," Heard shook her small, warm hand. "Sorry to bring down the house, but Culley here is worth it."

He pointed to her patient, who was sitting propped up in a regulation hospital bed, his right leg stretched out in front of him. Forgetting about the person, she first looked at the discoloured knee, drawing her breath at its ghastly colour. It really did look like someone had dumped a pot of ink over it.

She looked up at him to get a feel for the person himself, and was struck by the kindest blue

eyes she had ever seen. They were a dark, almost navy blue, the colour of the ocean on a calm day, and just as deep.

He had a square jaw, and a long face, an average nose, but she couldn't tell if his ears were big like the rest of him, or what colour his hair was, because both were hidden by a bandanna tied about his head pirate style. All he needed was two thick gold earrings in each of the big lobes that she could now see peeking from under the red cloth, and the pirate image would have been complete.

He had on a torn T-shirt, and the Spandex wrestler's pants that they all wore, only the right leg had been cut away to reveal a massive thigh, and the swollen knee.

She moved to his side, and gently probed the discoloured area.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, as she felt him flinch.

Bob was standing next to her, watching her work, and she felt like a student all over again.

"The patella isn't broken, which is good, and we still have lateral movement, which means that the Collateral ligament is still intact."

"You thinking the Cruciate Ligament?" Bob asked, sagely, aware that they had an audience, and using his medical knowledge to make himself look good.

"Won't be able to tell without the film," Yasmine replied, not ready to jump to any conclusions.

The room had gone awfully quiet as she had examined the big man before her.

"It's here," Edward, a male nurse, said, as he burst in noisily, waving the black coloured object to them.

Yasmine took the plate from him, and then stepped out of the room, to use the right equipment.

She was followed by Bob, and she noticed, by an entire rugby team of curious men.

"Oh yeah," she said, once she had the exposure over the sharp fluorescent light. "There it is."

She pointed to the elastic band-like ligament that was hiding under the hard bone, that was colloquially known as the kneecap.

"Looks to be pretty standard," she said with relief.

Knees could be very complicated. Apart from the ligaments, there were a number of small cartilaginous bones that could have been damaged; or there could have been more than just a ligament torn, it could have been a muscle or a tendon. They were slow to heal, and required vast amounts of physiotherapy. Any slip up, and the person concerned wouldn't be able to bend his or her knee properly for the rest of his or her life.

"Standard?" Paul Heard asked behind her, his words penetrating.

"I'm sorry," Yasmine apologised, when she remembered that they still had an audience.

"I didn't mean to give everyone the impression that this injury isn't serious. It is, but it *is* something we've seen before, have treated before, and we are getting good at it. The patient will be up and about in about six months."

Mr Heard and his entourage looked ... well, interested. Yasmine had never come across an employer who was so concerned for his employees.

"No sooner?" Heard pushed.

"Well..." Bob vacillated.

"No," Yasmine said with finality. "Not if you want it done right."

"So what's going to happen now doc?" a man with a huge telephoto lens, and a battered notebook, jumped in.

Yasmine refused to turn this into an impromptu news conference, especially since her patient was still in the dark.

"Now I discuss the options with the patient, and allow him to decide what's best for him. I assume that you have access to the best specialists?" she directed the question to Mr Heard.

He nodded, and so she continued: "Then maybe you'd like a second opinion."  
"Tell me Doc, you've seen worse?" Mr Heard asked, quickly summing her up.  
It was Yasmine's turn to nod.

"And you think he'd benefit if he took the whole six months?"

"Definitely," she replied, firmly.

"Then we'll stick with you."

With that decided, he turned to hammer out instructions to his subordinates, organising a formal press conference in minutes. He didn't believe in wasting time when he had answers in front of him.

"You'll be there, won't you Doc?" he stopped for a moment, to ask Yasmine.

"Not this evening Mr Heard," she said with a smile. "I'm on duty, so I'll read your compliments in the papers."

"I'll go," Bob volunteered, defying Mr Heard's frown.

Yasmine gave him the thumbs up, and turned and walked away to go and talk to the big man, whose knee was hurt.

"I'm back," she called out as she walked in, and grabbed the man's chart.

Culley Taffinder was in the best of health, except for his knee that was. He was also still in the company of two equally large men. If Yasmine hadn't been accustomed to some situations turning weird at the drop of a hat, she would have been intimidated.

"What's the verdict Doc?" one of the huge men asked. "Is he gonna keep his leg?"

Culley rolled his eyes at Yasmine, and she laughed softly.

"We're working on it," she kept things equally light.

There was a 3D chart of the leg, with all its muscles and ligaments in relief, on one wall, and Yasmine walked over, reached up and pulled it off. It was light so she didn't need any help carrying it over to the bed.

"Mr Taffinder," she began, "you've torn the Cruciate ligament in your right knee," she gave him the bald truth quickly, knowing that he would hate to be in the dark, like most patients were.

"It's this criss-cross looking part, here," she crossed her own fingers over the relevant part on the chart, as if that would make it clearer.

"Man, Culley I'm sorry," said the other man, his big bass voice, seemingly making everything hollow vibrate.

She didn't say anything to interrupt him, instead taking the time to study him. Slightly taller than her patient, his red hair was braided into two strands, that hung alongside his broad ugly face. He wore a kilt, but his accent wasn't Celtic, so she assumed it was part of his act.

"It probably happened during that 3-D drop that we pulled."

Yasmine looked at the three of them as they launched into a detailed dissection of their wrestling bout. It all sounded like gibberish to her.

"Gentlemen," she cut in, after she had endured about a minute of their terminology. She did have other patients to see.

"I have no doubt that what you do is very dangerous, but I need to explain to Mr Taffinder about what to expect."

She turned and faced him, submerging herself once more in his soft eyes.

"First we are going admit you, then reduce the swelling, and the bruising, so that we can schedule you for surgery to repair that ligament."

Three pairs of eyes watched her earnestly.

"They will make an incision in the side of your leg, down under your knee cap, so that they can

catch the ligament, because it's sitting about here." She showed them on her chart.

"They'll drill two small holes in the bone so that they can attach the ligament with two small staples, so that it stays in place. You'll spend about six to eight weeks in a full length cast, and then you'll have extensive physiotherapy. If-

"If," she repeated loudly, over their audible groans, "you follow this regimen exactly, your knee will be like new in six months."

For a moment Yasmine felt like she was dealing with three naughty boys instead of grown rational men, as their frowns eclipsed their good natures, and she just knew that they were expecting more.

"Mr Taffinder, I think I haven't been clear in what I've been trying to tell you. Your knee is a complex hinge-like joint with a lot of ligaments and muscles around it. These ligaments really are like a system of elastic bands, that help you bend your knee. If one of them snaps you can't bend your knee, and if we leave it for too long, you won't be able to use your knee properly at all."

Culley looked at her intently. He knew the drill, but he still wanted to be sure about some information. "So how are you going to bring the swelling down?"

"We'll apply a cold compress, and start you on Cortisone-"

"Uh-uh! No way!" Culley stopped her, rudely. "Cortisone is a steroid, that kind of thing will ruin my sports career."

"Mr Taffinder, your career will be over *if* you don't have the surgery." Yasmine wondered if she had been talking to herself earlier.

"I'm not saying no to the surgery, Doc. I'm just saying no to the Cortisone, to any steroids of any kind."

"Okay," Yasmine compromised. "We'll see how the compresses work, and we'll talk again."

"No. No discussion. I won't take any steroids," Culley reiterated, stubbornly.

There was an awkward silence as Yasmine sought to fathom Culley's hard head.

"Well that's cleared up," said the other wrestler, his bald head sliding from sided to side, as he watched their argument proceed.

"Say Doc," he came up with a bright idea to break the tension. "Do you think that you could look at my ear lobe for me? One of those big lugs got their fingers caught in my earring, and they tore my damn lobe."

"Told you not to wear those things, Buzz," the man with the braids said, trying not to appear too unsympathetic.

"Actually now that I think about it, it was you did the dirty deed Rory," Buzz accused him, good-naturedly.

"Let me look," Yasmine said, as she moved around the bed.

She indicated that he had to bend down, so that she could get a better look. She didn't need her glasses to see the blood, and the bloody gash in the big man's ear. Culley's pirate image earring hung painfully in the lobe.

"Yeah," Yasmine said stiltedly, because she was on her toes, trying to keep her balance. "Yeah, I think that you ought to get that looked at."

"Is it going to hurt?" Buzz asked, suddenly looking scared.

"No, they'll give you a shot to numb it, if it needs stitches."

"Hey, hey, don't poach my doctor!" Culley said scowling, before he shifted to be more comfortable.

Yasmine noticed he looked a little pained.

"Do you want some pain killers?" she asked him, concern coming to the fore.

"No, that's okay," Culley said, spiritually uncomfortable, as he was physically. He hated being helpless.

"Yasmine!" Tonia poked her head through the door, her big blue eyes very large in her pale face, and her wrinkles more pronounced than they usually were.

"We need you," she mouthed.

"Okay," Yasmine answered realizing that this was serious. "Get some cold compresses on Mr Taffinder's knee, and get one of those orthopaedic pillows to put under it."

She left hurriedly, Tonia competently seeing to Culley's injury.

A young intern, who was on one of his required rotations was standing waiting for her.

"It's bad," he told her, as he escorted her to another set of X-rays.

"Motor vehicle accident, five cars. We got the victims from the one in the middle. Teenagers on their way to the movies. There were six in the car, three are dead, and this girl was one of the lucky ones, if you could call it that."

Yasmine took all the information in, before focusing on the transparent film in front of her. The girl's spinal cord seemed to be like a huge rock lobster that clambered over the reefs of her ribcage, and internal organs in the ocean of her thorax.

Everything looked normal, until she came to the hangman's break in her neck, which looked like tiny pebbles in the bottom of the lobster's tank.

"She still alive?" Yasmine asked, calmly, although inside she was horrified.

"Barely," lamented her younger colleague.

"Let's take a look," she said, and took a deep breath to face this girl.

Sometimes she wished all she did was fix torn ligaments like Culley Taffinder's, instead of dealing with broken lives like this.

## CHAPTER 2

"That's brilliant!" Denny crowed with joy, at his big brother's plan.

They had been wanting to do something bold for ages, to prove that they *were* the chosen ones, the men in a world of weaklings, although Denny couldn't quite get the significance of Judd's needs.

As Denny bounced around, Wilson became glad that they had told Denny in the privacy of the secret room in the compound. Anywhere else, and he would have given their hard planned secret away with his over-enthusiasm.

Denny was like a huge, slobbering St Bernard puppy - although he didn't look like one. He was always getting into trouble because he had this boundless energy, coupled with a simple mind, and those translated into clumsiness, and mindless conversation.

For all that, he was a loveable big git, and not even Wilson could stay mad at him for very long. It was just unfortunate that he was an integral part of this plan, and Wilson wondered about the wiseness of including him.

Wilson felt his gut clench once more, as he watched Judd treat Denny badly for about the fourth time today. He never could watch the other man abuse his younger brother, but he couldn't put a stop to it either.

Judd would carve his heart out in an instant if he thought that Wilson was about to plunder his power.

"Man, that's brilliant!" Denny exclaimed again, and Wilson cringed as Judd slapped his brother through the face, leaving a red mark on his pale cheek.

"Pay attention here! You have to keep this a secret. You can't tell anybody-"

"I won't! I promise!" Denny said, his voice reflecting hurt. "I promise I won't! I won't!"

"Oh yeah?" said Judd, with another slap. "What about the time with Lucas? You remember what we had to do to him? You promised then too, and look what happened!"

"I remember, I remember," Denny repeated breathlessly, backing away from his brother's blows. He started bumping into furniture, adding to his bruises.

His scrawny, lanky frame contorted as he backed away again, recognising the signs of Judd's impending eruption, and tears started filling his eyes.

Judd was invoking a list of Denny's past mistakes, and Wilson realised why he never forgot that Judd had a long memory, and that the other man never remembered the good stuff. Every single mistake would always be catalogued, processed and stored in Judd's mind, and every transgression would be recalled, dredged up and used to effect next time Judd took offence. And each one would add an extra punishment when the reckoning came.

Denny naturally had more sins than the average pack member, and would receive more punishment. Judd didn't believe in the virtue of forgive and forget.

"You remember? You remember?" He was really working himself into a froth. "No, I don't think you remember. But you will this time."

With that, he promptly reached over, and broke his baby brother's fingers.

He didn't do it gently, or even very quickly. Instead, he meticulously bent back the four digits on Denny's left hand until he heard the crack of knuckles giving.

He didn't even notice his brother's thrashing attempts to brush away his relentless deformation of perfectly working fingers. His ice blue eyes, had taken on a far away sheen, an evil calmness, and Wilson knew that he wasn't even seeing his brother then, but rather the accomplishment of his plan, the end of his unhappiness.

He let go of Denny, and the boy's sobbing figure dropped to the ground, his fingers uselessly trying to flex.

Judd stepped over him, and walked out, to start a trail of kidnapping, hijacking, destruction and death.

"Why? Why?" Denny kept asking, his voice like a thick soup of pain and tears and betrayal.

Wilson could have told him that he was sure that Judd felt dispossessed. Or was that possessed? Denny wouldn't understand that, but for different reasons to normal people.

Judd always felt that the world owed him - just what was owed was something that changed by the minute - but he never let go of the idea that he was owed.

A social worker that had once joined the group, had said that Judd felt alienated from the rest of the human race. He had been right and he had been shot for it. Wilson would have added that Judd was full of hate, but he didn't want to suffer the same fate.

After that no one speculated about the state of Judd's mind. They all knew he was psychologically challenged, but they believed in him anyway. The fact that he was possibly psychopathic, just made him brilliant in several sycophants' eyes.

"It's okay," he reassured Denny, as he steered the battered, old, Datsun pick-up toward the big hospital in the city, trying to ignore Denny's moans of pain. The city was one of his least favourite areas, but for this they needed to be there.

This was all part of Judd's plan. He was finally going to take what he believed the world owed them, and in a strange way Wilson was glad for him. Judd had always had the most amazing potential, and now he was going to fulfil it.

Wilson was just sorry that Denny had been hurt in the process. But that was over now. He had sacrificed something for their cause, and Wilson hoped that when his own turn came, he would

also only have to give such a little.

"Now you've got to remember Denny, you hurt your hand by slamming it in the door. Okay?"

"Yeah," Denny whimpered, flinching at Wilson's words.

Wilson didn't mean to be cruel, but there was a lot riding on this.

"Good boy," he said, and ran a big palm over the younger man's short, scraggly, red hair.

He turned when the light indicated that he had to, and drove toward the big white building that was the hospital. In Wilson's eyes it was more than just a place of healing. It had also become a repository for all their hopes.

"What happened?" the physician asked, assessing that Denny was a simpleton on sight, and adjusting his tone of voice accordingly.

"I slammed it in the door," Denny replied, hiccupping.

"Okay Buddy," the doctor said pulling up a sliding chair, in front of Denny. "Let me take a look."

He held out his own hand so that Denny could place his sore one in it.

Wilson tensed. He knew that the doctor was no fool, and plenty rested on this one act.

"Yep," the doctor said as he looked over the swollen appendage. "It's broken all right. You sure he slammed it in the door, though?" The question was directed at Wilson.

"Yes," he nodded, but his eyes darted about nervously. "He caught them in the door, on the hinge side--"

"Geez Buddy, you've got to be more careful," the doctor cut him off. There was something suspicious about this situation, these two strange men keeping something close and secret to themselves.

*'Well,' the doctor thought to himself, 'it won't be the first time that we've had to pry secrets out of a patient.'*

"Lydia, would you take Dennis here, to X-rays, whilst I talk to Mr Wilson?" the doctor spoke to the attending nurse.

"Can't I go with him?" Wilson asked, leery of leaving the boy alone. He was also supposed to go everywhere Denny went, and not just to keep an eye on Denny.

"Yeah can't he go with me?" Denny reinforced the question, his big blue eyes filled with the fear of the unknown.

Lydia had watched this interaction, and she now agreed with Dr Hansard's decision to separate these two. They needed to get to the truth and that would happen a lot quicker if they were separated.

"Dennis," she said quietly, using the same tone she used on her own fractious children, "if you come with me now, we'll go past the children's ward, and see if we can't snag an ice-cream. Wouldn't that be good?"

Wilson knew he had lost when Denny's body had contorted at the word "ice-cream." It was his favourite food, and if pushed, he would cave faster than he could prevent it. It was better to let him go, and hope that he remembered Judd's painful lesson.

"Go with Nurse Lydia," he instructed. "I've got to stay and talk to the doctor." There would be other chances.

"Really?" Denny asked, and gave everyone one of his angelic smiles.

"Yes," Wilson agreed, smiling back. He couldn't help his actions when Denny smiled like that.

"Sit here," Lydia instructed, and then placed his big feet on the pedals of the wheelchair, once he had been seated.

"Off we go," she said, and began pushing his wriggling body down toward X-ray.

Hansard waited until they were out of earshot. "What's going on?" he asked Wilson bluntly.

"I don't know-"

"Spare me!" Hansard snapped. "I've heard a million different versions of the same story. What's going on? Is Dennis being abused? Are you doing it?"

The doctor had seen too much to be bull-shitted, and to Wilson it was obvious that they hadn't thought this part through.

He didn't know what to say; and worse, he was now torn between two brothers, whom he loved. It was such a sudden shift, and he didn't have any time to formulate, or adjust so that he could rescue Judd's plan.

On the very threshold of Judd's success, this had become an opportunity to rescue Denny, to get him help, away from his brother's abuse, and for a few precious seconds he stood on the median between good and evil, and then he fell off.

*'No,'* he decided, *'I won't break faith with Judd. If he pulls this off, then Denny will be better off.'*

He could see all the nights that Judd had wildly promised to end Denny's pain, if only he had the ability, the money, the power to see their dreams come through.

"Denny, told me he slammed it in the door," Wilson said with finality.

Hansard had sensed that if there was a weak link in this chain of abuse, then Wilson would have been it, but he couldn't make the other man crack. Wilson was clearly divided, but still not capable of doing the right thing. From here it was up to Hansard.

"They make good ice-cream here, don't they?" Lydia questioned, as she pushed Denny down the hall.

"Yup, they do," Denny answered, around a mouthful of hardened chocolate pieces, soggy biscuits, and mushy ice-cream.

"So what were you doing, that you got your hand stuck in the door?"

Lydia knew the drill. When doctors separated people like Denny, or children, from the people that brought them in, it usually meant that there were questions that needed to be asked in a neutral setting.

And there were plenty of questions about Denny's injury. If he'd slammed his knuckles in the door, hard enough to break them, then he should have had broken skin, and blood everywhere. Even if the skin hadn't broken, there should have been a significant bruise where the door had cut into his flesh.

Something had broken those fingers, but it was more likely another human being, and it was their duty to stop it from happening again.

Denny had taken the time to think about her words, and he had come to the right conclusion.

"Nurse Lydia, I'm not very slow you know. Just a little bit-"

"Oh I bet you are very smart, and you've got us all figured out. But I want to figure you out as well, so I want to find out all about you and how you hurt your hand, if you've got any brothers and sisters, if you like anything more than ice-cream - you know that kind of question."

Denny said nothing, just licked his ice-cream. He wanted so desperately to talk to Nurse Lydia, to get her to make Judd stop being so angry, to even get her to ask Judd what he had to do to make him love him. But that would just make Judd angry again, and he would punish him for it.

"So do you have any brothers and sisters?" Lydia looked at the back of his head, noticing the tension in his bony shoulders. Something scared him, and she wanted to find out what it was.

"My brother's name is Judd," Denny said excitedly, forgetting that he was supposed to watch his words. He could talk about Judd all day, because he was smart and clever, and he could see the

future - but he wouldn't tell Nurse Lydia that.

He would just tell her that Judd was the best, and that *he was his big brother*. And that would make up for everything that he had ever done wrong. He was sure of it.

"You there!"

He was being summoned, and he knew it. He wanted to ignore the rich bitch, in her snooty, clingy-material dress suit, as she gaily waved her hand at him, bidding him to approach, and help her load her brand name packages into her Mercedes 4x4.

He wondered, for an instant, if she was slumming by driving such a muscled car, but the thought was instantly obliterated by the loathing he felt for her.

He could tell that she thought that she was better than he was, and he sneeringly wondered what gave her that right.

He resented having to help her in any way. He detested having to deal with her, to have to come within her repulsive (what he thought was) Jewish presence. He didn't know any different, and he wouldn't have cared if she was a WASP. She was rich, and his eyes, that made her as much an accomplice in the repressive Global regime.

But he had no choice. He needed to hang on to this job. It was part of his plan, an integer in an equation that would make *him* the master in this race.

So he helped her, reluctance infusing every action, bitterness pouring out of his skin, his breath, his existence.

"Carver!"

He knew that voice, and he didn't even jump when his false name was barked out, just kept loading each package into the back of the plush car.

"Just what the hell do you think you are doing? Is this man bothering you ma'am?" Elliot, his immediate supervisor spat out the questions, as he stalked over, pouncing on the chance to cause Judd some trouble.

Judd felt an inordinate calm settle over him. He would not give this little spit of a man the satisfaction of ruining his plan.

He carefully schooled his emotions, allowing none of what he was feeling to show on his brutal features, as he slowly turned and faced Elliot.

"No, he's not bothering me, and if you expect me to pay you for your concern, then you are mistaken," the rich woman dismissed Elliot, and gave Judd a paltry gratuity.

He wanted to mock her generosity, but he wanted to wave it in Elliot's face at the same time, and the resulting conflict just added fuel to the nuclear reactor that was his angry core.

Instead he took her tip, gave her a courteous salute, shot Elliot a gloating grin, and walked away to detail his plan to get the hell out of his crap life. He would not be happy until he could make it happen.

### CHAPTER 3

"I'm really lucky," Culley sighed, as he leaned back against the elevated mattress of his hospital bed.

The white sheet that he was lying against, had a blue stripe with the hospital's name running through it, and as it creased with his movements, it made naughty and exotic words.

"Lucky how?" Orrin Taffinder asked his son, distractedly. He wasn't really paying attention, more intent on seeing how many words he could get out of the blue letters, and wondering whether Culley would ever stop wriggling, so that he could get off his obsessive quest.

He was bored and he was surprised that his son wasn't equally so. Hospitals were excessively boring places, and he was only visiting.

"I've got this peach of a doctor-

"Ah," commented his father, and gave him a broad grin.

Culley showed the usual interest in girls, but he very rarely talked about them, least of all to his father.

But now Culley couldn't keep it in. Every time he thought about Dr Knittel, his heart pounded a little faster, and he could feel his limbs twitching, as if they wanted to chase across the hospital just to find her.

He had never felt this way before, and he wasn't so sure he ought to be feeling that way either. She had never been anything but professional, and she had only seen him twice on top of that, so where these weird emotions were coming from, he couldn't say.

And yet there they were. Infecting his every thought.

He could recall with perfect clarity the fine curve of her face, the exact shade of blue of her eyes, how touchable her soft skin looked, and the way her short blonde hair curled around her delicate ears. Yet he wouldn't have been able to tell his father or any one else for that matter, what the groupie, who had thrown herself at him last week, looked like. And she had been a lot more willing.

"Oh my son, you have it bad," Orrin said, noticing the faraway look in Culley's eyes.

He knew that look. He had been seeing that same look in his own eyes for the past thirty-six years. He got it every time he thought about, or looked at his wife. And he was very likely going to get it again, the minute she walked through the door, carrying terrible hospital coffee.

"Dad!" Culley fussed, and pretended to frown before a big sappy grin broke out all over his face. "I know, I can't help it."

Orrin reached over and patted his son's large hand. Whilst his son's thinking processes were sometimes alien to him and the boy's mother, it could never be said that they didn't trust their son. His decisions might have been off the wall, but they were his, and he took responsibility for them. Good or bad, Culley could be counted on for everything, and whoever this girl was he hoped she realised what kind of man she was getting. He was very proud of both his sons.

"Don't worry Culley, this girl will understand that you are one hell of a catch, and then you'll really be trapped."

"You think so Dad?"

"Your mother and I will help you any way that we can, son. Won't we Vi?" Orrin asked his petite wife as she walked through the door.

"Help with what?" she quizzed with a smile, and handed her husband a styrofoam cup filled with coffee.

"That big lug has been bitten by the love bug-

"Oh dear, he's rhyming," Violet sighed comically. "Don't tell me you've passed the love bug on," she teased Culley, and then fussed over his pillow placement.

Like most mothers she couldn't bear to see any of her children in hospital, even if they were a foot taller than she was.

"So, who's the lucky girl?"

"His doctor," Orrin jumped in, before his son could explain.

"That little thing we met this morning?"

Culley nodded, then shrugged, helpless to explain the attraction. "But it's not love," he rushed to justify his feelings.

"Keep telling yourself that son. It helps when she has you wrapped around her little finger."

"Orrin!" his wife scolded. "Don't listen to him sweetheart, love can only make you stronger-"  
 "Love only makes women stronger," Orrin continued in the same vein. "It turns us to mush."  
 "Rubbish!" his wife dismissed his claim. "I have never seen you turn to mush Orrin Taffinder!"  
 "Only after sex," her husband tossed in.

He loved to tease his wife, to see her get colour in her cheeks, to let her know that he loved her with all his soul.

"Dad!" Culley moaned, and clapped his big hands over his ears, like he used to when he was little, and he didn't want to hear something.

Violet laughed as she surveyed her two men. She was looking forward to seeing Culley settle down, and extend her family. It was too small for her tastes. She had wanted more children, but they had only been blessed with Culley and his younger brother, and he was gay, so she wasn't very like to get any grandchildren from him. Instead she would rely on Culley to fulfil her fondest wish.

"What's the matter son? You never hear of sex? I thought we had that little talk a while ago," his father joked with him.

"I know about sex," Culley answered, looking uncomfortable, "but you're my parents. That's just more information than I needed to know."

Violet laughed at Culley's squeamishness. She knew that he hadn't been a monk, but she had the feeling that he didn't sleep around callously either.

She and Orrin had tried to instill a sense that sex was something special, almost sacred, and that a person didn't sleep with someone unless they cared for one another. She hoped that Culley carried that with him always, even when he was on tour, and away from them.

If they had asked Culley would have eased their minds, but he knew of their trust, and in return didn't abuse it.

"My turn to take a walk Vi," Orrin told his wife, as he lifted himself from the uncomfortable, beige, plastic chair.

"Mom, Dad, you guys don't have to stay. Buzz is going to be here in fifteen minutes-"

"No, we stay here," his mother told him firmly.

"But-"

"But nothing," his mother stopped any further arguments.

Culley looked at his father, and sighed when he saw no ally there. Sometimes it was a pain having parents around.

Lydia had expected Dennis to be a trial in X-ray, and he had surprised her by being a good spirit. He had told her that his brother was very clever, and that he was going to try and be like him, and even now she was commending him for doing just that. He had been so good, she was tempted to take him home with her, but she pushed him back towards Dr Hansard, and only listened to his jabbering with half an ear.

"Yippee!" Denny roared, suddenly, and he shot out of the wheelchair before she could stop him. Every eye was now on him, but he was focused on only one person.

"Buzz the Demon Buzzard!" he crowed as he skidded to a stop before a very large bald man, who was standing in front of the elevators.

"Yippee!" he said again, his whole body going into overdrive as excitement frizzled out his brain waves.

Lydia rushed to his side. "I'm really sorry," she said to the big man, as others gathered around them, demanding autographs.

Denny began to dance around the outside of the sort of circle that Buzz had acquired.

"That's okay," he gave her a big smile. "I'm used to it."

He finished signing things in no time, and pushed the button to summon the car again.

"Dennis," Lydia called, and then captured one of his arms, as he made twirl on by.

"You are going to make yourself dizzy, and you are going to hurt your hand even more. Sit here."

"No," Denny wheedled reluctantly, This was Buzz the Demon Buzzard, and he didn't want to go away from him.

"Dennis, we have to show Dr Hansard your X-rays, and then they have to set the bones so we can put a cast on-

Buzz could tell that he was going to have to help, because the boy had become uncooperative, and he knew that he would just get more hurt.

"Hey Dennis, if you go get your cast then both me and Culley 'the Culler' will sign it for you. How about it? You want to sit down for the pretty nurse? That's it buddy," Buzz laid a gentle hand on a skinny shoulder, and he smiled when Denny stroked it.

Lydia sagged with relief, and she gave Buzz a huge smile.

"Thank you," she mouthed, and then released the brake on the chair.

"We're on the third floor, orthopaedics wing," he said, as she began to move off.

"I'll remember," Lydia said, making a mental note to make the effort. Denny was not going to be happy when they set those bones, or even if he had to be admitted, and she now had something to bribe him with, even if she had to go out of her way to come through.

"Buzz!" Orrin greeted his son's big friend as he walked through the door, and he hopped off the bed to shake his hand.

"Hello Thomas," Violet welcomed him with his given name, and she reached up and gave him a kiss on his broad cheek.

"Hey Mama Vi, when are you going to leave this old rogue, and find someone who deserves you?"

"Oh I got who I deserved, you bad boy," she said with a laugh.

"Hey Culley, nice digs," he observed, as he moved over to where Culley lay.

"You haven't been laying here looking at this pukey colour all morning," Culley grumbled, as he accepted his friend's hand. "Did you have any trouble getting in?"

"No, actually I only had to sign about ten things-

"Ten only? Just goes to show who the champion is in this place," Culley teased.

"You wish," Buzz grunted, and then took up a place next to Orrin on the other empty bed in the ward.

"How's the food in this place?"

"Crap!" Orrin and Culley answered at the same time.

"Boys!" Violet cringed at their crude language.

"Did you need stitches last night?" Culley indicated to where the band aid hid Buzz' earlobe.

"Nah. Just some ointment, and a tetanus shot. I tried to tell them that you guys were rabid, but they weren't buying it."

"Big baby," Culley said, and they all started laughing.

And that was what Yasmine walked in on.

"Hey Doc!" they all seemed to greet her at once, and Yasmine didn't know whether to be grateful, or whether to run, as she was instantly enveloped into Culley's milieu.

"Mr Taffinder," she greeted Culley back, and she was surprised that she had actually remembered his name without looking at his chart. "I've come to see if the swelling has gone

down..."

She moved to his side, dodging between Culley's father whom she'd met this morning, and the big wrestler whom she'd met yesterday evening. She was glad that Culley's mother was as small as she was, because that gave her a sense of equilibrium - at least she wasn't the smallest person that the big men knew.

Culley had one of the uncomfortable, but practical hospital gowns on, but he'd kicked most of the bed covers off, so that his injury was visible. It was bound by an orthopaedic support, and she loosened it to get a better look.

She wasn't happy, and it showed. The swelling hadn't gone down appreciably, and she knew that she was going to have a tough fight, on her hands, to get Culley to accept medication.

"What's the verdict Doc?" Buzz asked, breaking the quiet.

"The swelling has gone down some," Yasmine said with a frown, "but he would be a lot better if he took the medication that has been recommended."

Orrin started to laugh at her piqued expression, and Culley joined in, whilst he thought that he would love to kiss that testy look out of her eyes.

"Don't worry about them dear," Violet said soothingly, when she noticed that they had turned their teasing on to her. "They are men after all..." and she left the sentence hanging as if that would explain their behaviour.

"What's that supposed to mean, Mom?" Culley asked, adding his own bit.

"That's a woman kind of response," Orrin chipped in.

"It means," Violet said, over her husband, "that on occasion men take a serious situation far too lightly."

Yasmine sensed that she had an ally in Violet Taffinder, but she wasn't out of resources yet. Culley might have been stubborn, but that didn't mean she was willing to call in his mother to make him see reason.

"I'm afraid that I want to send you for an MRI-"

"Why?" Culley asked, alarmed.

"I know we discussed the use of steroids-"

"I said no," Culley interrupted, firmly. "My answer is still the same."

"Hear me out," Yasmine replied, reasonably. "If I send you for the MRI, then I can see where the bruising is most prominent. That way, I can apply specific doses of anti-inflammation in the most effective areas."

"No steroids, no Cortisone-"

"Agreed."

*'For the time being,'* she amended silently.

The other three looked at the two of them with interest. For Violet and Orrin, there was an added fillip of emotion to Culley and the doctor's argument. They were both aware of Culley's interest, and they were both hoping that this wouldn't stop Yasmine from returning their son's notice.

"Okay, when do we go?" Culley came to a decision quickly, because he saw two blessings in doing this. First, he would spend more time with Yasmine, and second he would be able to get out of this boring room.

"As soon as I can secure a gurney," Yasmine said, relieved that he wasn't fighting her any more. On that she turned and left the others, as they discussed where they would go for lunch.

## CHAPTER 4

*'Cutting disks, extension cord, extra ammunition - clear access to the fire escape, with waiting transport...'*

Wilson couldn't help feeling that he had forgotten something as he ran through his mental checklist of the things he needed to see Judd's plan come to fruition. It was either that or the fact that there were too many variables that could go wrong as they made preparations to strike back at the oppressors in their lives.

What scared Wilson even more was that they might have to leave Denny behind out of sheer necessity, and that Judd might just have that very idea in mind even if it wasn't necessary. For Judd, as long as he had what he wanted, then nothing else mattered, and Denny had already expended his value for his brother. He was just the key to the hospital, and after that, like another disposable soda can for Judd's insatiable gluttony, and just as easily tossed aside as Judd tore down the highway of destiny.

Wilson couldn't have that. Denny was too important to him, he was like a drug that he couldn't do without, and he was willing to risk a power showdown with Judd in the middle of one of the biggest exercises in the Brotherhood's history. Denny was *his*, and he would stab, maim, torture just to keep him. And he had the power to back it up.

It was a heady thing this power, Wilson reflected as he strode through the hospital corridors with purpose. It gave him the confidence to look people in the eye, to let them think that he was there for a reason, not to sell them out, and so what if he did? It wasn't like they hadn't asked for it. They had brought this on themselves with their serious need for power, money and things that bore the right names, or people with the same stain.

Just so long as they didn't get Denny, then he didn't think of them as serious threats.

But he was a serious threat to them, and they were that ignorant of his purpose that they didn't even know it. It was as if he was made for this one act, as if his whole life had been held in abeyance until this one important moment, and he was going to take Denny as his reward after he had accomplished his mission. He smiled internally as he realised that he was thinking like a soldier, and using terms like 'mission' and 'exercise,' and he had a misguided notion that Judd would have approved had he heard, although he was not that deluded as he took the thought further and perceived that Judd would resent the crap out of him for usurping his power like that. Wilson didn't care. Just so long as he got what he wanted. And he was going to meet with his prize right now, as he got closer to the X-ray department, where Denny was supposed to be.

Culley wondered if people ever really stopped to observe other people in elevators, or if they were more like he had been, and saw the others that shared such a small space like the carton displays in a hypermarket, as just there.

But now he had Yasmine to look at, and he was aware that he was staring but he couldn't help it. If anything the details that he had remembered earlier were now sharpened, he got more minutia to add to the store that he had collected in the few moments that he had spent with her yesterday and this morning, and here was a chance to get to know more about here. Not in the strict doctor/patient sense, but more along the lines of a man who would love to flirt with an fascinating woman. That was if he could find anything to say.

"So, uh," he cleared his throat. "You been a doctor long?"

*'Brilliant Taffinder,'* he thought to himself. That was hardly an interesting question, one designed to distinguish him from any other patient that she'd had.

"A few years," Yasmine reassured him, nodding her blonde head.

Culley kept noticing the enchanting hint of sky blue that kept peeking out from under her standard issue doctor's jacket. She had a neat pair of functional Khaki pants on, because he could see them from under the length of white material that kept her clothes covered from the professional hazards of blood, vomit and piss that were probably a staple of every doctor's vocation, at least in some part of their career. Her feet were covered by strong leather Doc Martins, and he noticed how tiny they were. She was tiny all over compared to him. If he was standing up, she would barely reach his chest, and for a moment he was amazed that so much iron will was housed in such a small, almost fragile body. And it was a very nice body too, from what he could see. He had always been a bit of a bum man, but he couldn't see that delectable bit of her now, and he was slightly miffed. But then, when he looked into her clear, lively, blue eyes, he was soothed. She looked like she had a secret to share, and he wanted to be the one she shared it with.

"Are you worried about my qualifications, Mr Taffinder?"

"Culley please," he rushed to squash the wrong impression that his question had raised, "and no I'm not worried about your qualifications."

The elevator dinged, and then he was wheeled out to the X-ray department, the slightly greyish-blue institutional colour of the walls making him nauseous. It was the same colour as a stormy ocean, and he was prone to sea-sickness, a condition exacerbated by his not being able to walk on his own legs.

"You'll have to wait a few minutes Dr Knittel," one of the technicians delayed them, and Culley was glad that they were still.

"You were saying about my being a doctor?" Yasmine probed. She sensed that the big man lying next to her was uncomfortable, and it was part of her job description to comfort him.

"I was saying that I won't question your professionalism. Is this going to take long?" He sounded impatient, but inside he was glad that he had a little more time to listen to her voice, watch her lips move and wonder what it would be like to taste those tempting pillows that were perfectly placed over the abditory of her mouth.

"Once we get in, about half an hour," she answered, and looked at her watch. She didn't want to keep him waiting too long. The quicker they started him on anti-inflammatories, the quicker his leg would begin to heal.

"What's going to happen when we get in there?" Culley had had X-ray's before, but this was going to be his first MRI.

"MRI stands for Magnetic Resonance Imaging. They'll take you and lay you on a bed that slides back and forth into a big square machine. They'll insert you probably up to your hips, and then they'll scan your leg so that we can see what tissue has been damaged. Don't worry, MRI's aren't like X-rays. You'll be exposed to an electromagnetic ray, so there's no danger."

Culley hadn't thought that he was in any danger anyway, but now that she mentioned it, he was sure he was supposed to be worried.

They called them in before he could verify her qualifier, and then it was academic, because they did what they wanted, and he just had to follow direction.

"Hey Andrea, do you know where the patient in ward 6B is supposed to be?" Lydia could hear Denny singing, and talking to himself in the background, and she only hoped that she would be able to keep him occupied whilst she tried to find the wrestler that they had been told about. He had been good, and she felt that he deserved a reward, but if she had to be honest she would admit that she didn't want to have to be in the path of the temper tantrum that he would throw if

he didn't get to meet Culley the Culler. He had been talking about nothing else since they had set his fingers and then put a cast about them, and he had only been so good since Lydia had promised faithfully that he would get to meet his hero.

Now they were here, but Culley wasn't, and she could forecast disaster.

"Yasmine took him down to X-ray," Andrea shuffled some files, as she answered, looking at Denny warily.

"Whew," Lydia sighed with relief. "I thought that maybe he signed out."

"Not a chance with Yasmine around. Hey is that your patient?" She pointed to where Denny was deliberately emptying out the water cooler that had been provided for waiting families.

"Yes! Geez. Denny!" she grumbled, and then moved off to stop him.

"Thanks Andrea," she called over her shoulder, as she made Denny get back into the wheelchair, so that she could wheel him down to X-rays. She hoped Yasmine wouldn't mind too much if she brought an excited boy to meet one of her patients, but she was sure that once she had explained that she wanted to keep him out of the clutches of the man who had abused him so cruelly, Yasmine would understand. Yasmine rarely threw her weight around by reminding everyone that she was a doctor, and that had made her a favourite amongst the nurses. Lydia just wanted a little of that latitude now.

"Okay Denny," she bent next to his ear, "it looks like we're going to have to go back to the bone picture department."

"Why? For me?" he asked suddenly anxious. They had tried to be as gentle as possible when they had arranged his hand to see what was broken, but it hadn't been fun.

"No, Culley and Dr Knittel are down there, so if you want to see them we'll have to go there, but you are going to have to be really, really good okay?"

"Sure," Denny replied. "But why?" he said, after he had thought for a moment.

"Because if Culley is down there, it means that he has to have his own X-rays, and we don't want to be in the way, okay?"

"Got it," Denny agreed, as the elevator arrived smoothly, and then repetitively did what it was supposed to do.

Judd slapped a clip into the AK-47, and then directed the van convoy around to the emergency door of the department of nuclear medicine. He had already sent one of his scouts in, unarmed of course, to open the door for him. The man was one of those wonderfully invisible foot soldiers, who would blend in for now, but once he was armed, everyone would notice, and Judd wanted them to notice.

The door popped open, and his man gestured for them to enter. Judd slid the side door to the minivan back, and stepped out first. The others let him. He was the boss, and he took it personally when anyone stepped on his bosshood.

One by one they emerged, their automatic weapons pointed at the sky, fingers over the trigger guard, but not in as they had been taught, the lesson brought home to them harshly, when Judd had shot somebody for failing to obey instructions.

Quickly, they darted through the door, careful not to brush the battery pack hastily and sloppily fastened to the door, two wires connecting the current so that nobody knew the emergency door was breached, and so that they could conduct their exercise with little interference.

"You see Wilson?" Judd questioned his infiltrator, as they moved with some precision through the jumbled corridor that was a behind-the-scenes kind of place, perfect for an underhand operation.

"He's in the right place. I didn't see Denny though."

"Good," Judd slapped him on his back. He didn't want that idiot underfoot anyway.

"Right," he called out, making everyone snap to attention. "This is what we've been aiming for, putting work into. If this goes right, then we will have power! Power to make our world better, power to see that those who are beneath us stay where they belong, and power to change governments so that white men like us will benefit. Let's do this!"

He pulled open the door that separated them from the real world, and stepped through it, nothing deterring him from focusing on his final objective.

There were gasps of fright, and people danced out of their way as they approached the heavy doors that shielded the hospital from the death rays that were so carefully controlled behind. Judd thought of them more like bank doors. He was going to go behind them, make a withdrawal, and then he was going to live well off the advancement. His followers were just along for the ride, but people could eat well off scraps too, so he wasn't concerned for their well-being, just so long as they carried the equipment and didn't get in the way.

"Over there!" he ordered the security guard, who was the first person he saw, against the wall.

"You! You, you and you, up against the wall!" One of his men shoved three technicians and a nurse against the wall.

All the others fanned out past him, each cornering a patient, a doctor, a nurse, or some one who was generally in the way, and herding them into a manufactured corral. Behind him, two of his soldiers sealed the door between the department and the outside. Yet two others were outside to make sure that their escape route was unhindered. One other man made it to Wilson's side, and then began following his instructions, plugging in the angle cutter, and then funnelling the electrical extension cord out, as Wilson made his way over to the PABX box, and sliced through the PVC conduits that allowed the telephones to work. No phones meant no interruptions, and Judd could feel himself start to relax as they were cut off from the real world. He only needed one other thing now, and he'd have it within the next five minutes.

"What the-?" the MRI technician asked, confused as a loud buzzing came through from the CT scan suite.

"What is that?" Yasmine asked, as the bank of screens flickered, and the picture of her patient's electronically dissected leg was lost.

"That's Judd," Denny laughed, and then began bouncing around like an animated toy.

"Denny," Lydia first scolded, and then grabbed him. "Denny be quiet and stay still." She didn't have time to add the "or else," because Denny ignored her, and went on with his hyperactivity fit.

"It's okay Mr Taffinder," Yasmine spoke into the microphone that was the only point of contact with her patient. She had her own hands full by preventing the big man from sitting up, and then pulling himself out of the machine. There was no need for him to be hassled just yet. None of them knew what was going on, but Yasmine was hoping that it had nothing to do with them.

The overhead lights cut out, and the emergencies snapped on just as quickly. The MRI nurse moved quickly into the booth and began to remove Culley from the MRI machine. Yasmine began snapping switches, helping her colleague to turn off the big Magnet, whilst Lydia used physical force to push Denny around and toward the door. She didn't think that she would have the strength to get him into the wheelchair, even though their insurance required it.

"Oh! God!" The door came between them and Lydia's words, and it was almost as if it was a shield between them and the fearsome monster outside. However they couldn't stay here forever. They didn't know what was on the other side, but if it was a fire or some kind of electrical fault, the results would be painful and fatal.

"Ready?" Tom, the radiologist asked. He was the first person by the door, followed by his

nurse-technician, and then Yasmine who was at the foot of Culley portable bed, his leg not even securely bound, simply tucked between some rolled up bedclothes to keep it still.

"Go," Yasmine bade her friend, prepared to make a dash for it.

"Get your arse out here!" somebody yelled at Tom, as he appeared in the doorway, and Yasmine saw him being yanked out of the way, but the person who was doing the yanking stayed invisible. She hoped rather than believed that it was a fireman, and since there was no smoke her hope was fanned into a figuratively nice ember.

Tom's helper stiffened in front of them, and then her hands came up, and Yasmine's hoped was snuffed out as quickly as Carbon Dioxide would kill a fire. This wasn't some natural manifestation of a disaster, this was something that men had made up, and that was often far worse.

"Come on," said the disembodied voice, and the woman shuffled forward, before she was pulled out of the way.

Yasmine started to move forward, to put herself between Culley and whatever danger there was, but she hadn't bargained on the man suddenly curling his arm about her waist and keeping her anchored to him.

Culley hadn't known what was going on when they had first pulled him out of there, but there had been little doubt after the nurse had raised her arms. There was someone out there with a gun, and he didn't want Yasmine to go out there at all.

Said gun was like a submarine's periscope, scoping everything in its purview as it came through the door first, followed by an obvious skinhead with a good Nazi look in his eye.

The hand that was holding the barrel came up, but the hand around the trigger never wavered, as he waggled his fingers to indicate that they had to come forward.

Yasmine carefully grasped the rail of the mobile bed, and slowly, carefully wheeled it forward. She hoped that she wouldn't be cuffed for her logical efforts, but she was tensed for a blow nonetheless.

Lydia was sitting on the floor, a hand on her bloody mouth. Both Tom and his nurse had their faces pressed against the wall, as did other members of the staff, and some civilians.

Yasmine tutted and then made to bend down to check on Lydia, but the muzzle of an AK-47 got in her way, as did a hand with a wad of her doctor's coat behind her. Lydia was clearly on her own, as Dennis skipped up and down the corridor for the most part ignored by the guys with guns, and yet somehow both Yasmine and Culley knew that the disregard was deliberate. Denny was definitely well known to these criminals, and had the right to run freely between them.

"Up against the wall," Yasmine was ordered gruffly, and she obeyed quickly, positioning herself so that she could see Culley out of the corner of her eye. For such a big man, he was surprisingly dismissed, as if his injury made him inconsequential.

These were the worst kind of bad guys, because they failed to take into account that a person's strength didn't lie in his body or in the acquisition of guns, but came instead from his mind. And that stupidity made them dangerous.

Culley was steaming silently, helpless because he was immobile, and impotent because these bastards had guns, and he could tell from the way they were carrying them, they had no qualms about using them. He knew he just had to endure for a few moments longer, and then they would be gone, and he would be able to deal with the aftermath of a violent act like all the others here would too. All he had to do was remain cool, and they would soon be on their way, with what ever they came for, and little bloodshed in between.

The buzzing, cutting noise continued for a few moments, and there was a harsh acrid smell, like something was burning that filled the generic blue hall. The boy, who had joined them not ten

minutes ago to get an autograph, was still skipping between the bad guys, and Culley clenched his jaw as he realised that the fool knew these guys, and worse that they were probably using him to get whatever they wanted. He wanted to ask Yasmine what they were taking, but with her face pressed to the wall, he doubted she knew anymore than he did. She never took her eyes off him though, and although rationally he knew it was because of her professionalism, in his heart he hoped it was because she cared just a little bit more for him than those around them.

"Boss!" one of the goons boomed through the passageway, and Culley noticed a tall, scrawny looking man turn towards the sound, and then disappear behind the bandits who were standing like interlocking fingers, each facing a wall in a relay so that both sides were covered, and the captives who had their faces pressed against the wall had a gun centred on them.

Culley had the distinct impression that something had gone wrong, or else he doubted that the head honcho would have been called away, but none of these guys was distracted, and that was unnerving. It meant that they were prepared to die for their cause, and Culley had to believe that they would take the hostages with them if they were going into the afterlife.

About a minute later, scrawny man came back, and he went into the suite where the buzzing noise had been coming from, and he came out followed by three other men, two of who were pushing a fat, cylindrical metal canister of some sort on a gurney, which prompted a medical bloke to say: "Hey that's-"

A swift blow to the back of his head silenced him, and he whacked his face to the wall, before slithering down it to lie in a heap.

"From the back, clear out," scrawny guy ordered, and Culley breathed a little easier, because he was one of those at the back. And so was Yasmine. They had what they came for, and they had left them alone, that was all that mattered.

Yasmine waited until she saw the bad guys moving off, and then she peeled herself from the wall that had been propping her up, and moved to Culley's side, bravely trying to keep the fear that she had felt from him. Having a gun trained on one, was not her idea of a good time, and she knew it had to be worse for her patient because he had seen it full on, whilst she had just imagined it. She didn't like being so helpless, and she was glad that it was nearly over. Being helpless was better than being dead, but it was a close enough feeling, and she took a few deep breaths to remind herself that she was still alive, and she looked into Culley's beautiful, composed eyes just to so that she could draw on some of his steadiness.

More sighs and then whispers filled the area, as people allowed the shock of what had happened to seep into their consciousness, and yet somehow they were afraid that if they talked too loudly the bad guys would come back.

Yasmine looked about to see if she could see the boy-man, who had been with Lydia, and then with the terrorists who had invaded their hospital.

"Did you see where your biggest fan went?" Yasmine asked Culley softly, showing solidarity for the idea that the criminals wouldn't be back if they were quiet.

"Nope," Culley watched her hands, as she rolled the sheet, that was keeping his leg immobile, just a little tighter.

A sharp scream made them both jump, and Culley slung an arm about her waist, as the goons came rushing back in. A klaxon began blaring, and they now all knew that somehow security was just outside, no doubt to be followed by the local division of the metro police force. Things had suddenly gone from being okay, to be downright dismal. People got killed this way, and nobody knew that better than these professionals who dealt with the results of criminal behaviour everyday.

Scrawny guy stalked down the hall way, and shoved a lab-coated woman out of the way, after

she had become frozen on the spot. He was followed by the clumsy boy whose fingers had been broken, and who'd wanted Culley to sign his cast, only he wasn't wearing one. The resemblance to one another couldn't be missed. Both of them were gauntly thin, each of them had sharp blue eyes, but the older man's were meaner, and Culley didn't like the way his thin lips were drawn over his feral teeth.

"This him?" he said to the boy, over his shoulder, and he looked directly at Culley.

Yasmine stiffened as the boy nodded and then giggled in glee. It might have been a game to him, but now it was very serious for her patient.

"Bring him," the leader demanded harshly, and two guys stepped up to do his bidding.

"No," said Yasmine and stepped into their path, despite Culley's motion to stop her.

"Kill her." The words murdered Culley's soul, and he hastily grabbed Yasmine about the chest, bringing himself into their line of fire.

"No!" he protested hoarsely. "I will go with you as long as you don't hurt anybody."

"I can't let them do that Mr Taffinder," his doctor informed all those around them loudly. "You are my patient, you need treatment, and you will be going nowhere-" her brave words were cut off as a gun barrel became her official line of sight. As long as she lived, she doubted she would ever forget the ugly emotions that poured through her at that moment, even if she knew that what she was doing was right.

"Put that down!" Culley growled, and swatted the barrel lower.

"I'm not going anywhere, if you hurt anymore people," he spoke directly to the leader.

"He cannot go anywhere," Yasmine insisted. "His knee is damaged, and he needs surgery."

"Tough!" Judd spat. "Take him."

"Fine," Yasmine took up a defensive position in front of Culley, between him and the kidnappers. "You take him, I go with."

"Yasmine!" Culley scolded, afraid that she was going to the extreme by putting herself in harm's way.

"Yeah right," scoffed one of the guys closest to them, and he reached around her to tug at Culley.

"I mean it!" Yasmine said fiercely, and she hit the man's arm away.

"He goes, I go. I'll tie myself to him," she threatened. She was really hoping that they would abandon this idea, but she wasn't holding her breath. If there was security outside, they would need hostages, and famous hostages would be a gift. Somebody had recognised Culley Taffinder from his career, and she supposed he had been a most opportune kidnappee. However, he was not going to go through this alone she resolved. The chances that he would come back home in one piece would probably be increased if he had somebody with him. At least she hoped so. She was not that naive that she thought that they wouldn't do the most dastardly things to the two of them, but she figured that two hostages would make it more difficult.

Judd moved forward, now livid that this interfering doctor, and enraged enough to forget himself.

"Fine," he sneered, "bring her too. I'm sure we can find some use for her." And he gave her body a look that was positively insulting.

Culley cursed silently, but gritted his teeth against making any hollow threats. There was already too much tension in this atmosphere, but if he and Yasmine made it past the security outside, there was no way in heaven that he was going to let them do one thing to her that would jeopardise her well being.

Hard hands yanked Yasmine away from the gurney, and then Culley was pushed toward the exit, a flesh wall between the good guys and the bad. Yasmine was just behind him, he could

hear her small feet tapping as she was rushed out, also a human shield.

After that everything was a blur, with lots of shouting and jarring movements. Culley wasn't even sure of how long it took. It seemed like ages, but he was sure it was but a few minutes, if that long. The only thing he was absolutely sure of once he and Yasmine had been pushed into the side of a minivan, was that they were moving, and that they were in a lot of trouble. Everything else was a guess, as was what Yasmine was thinking. He would have preferred that she stay safe, but right now that was going to have to be his job, even if she thought otherwise, and he had a vested interest in seeing that she stayed unscathed. They had a future together, and he wanted it to be a long one.

## CHAPTER 5

Culley was grateful that he was so tall. Yasmine had braced his naked knee between her own legs, to keep it still against the sway of the racing van. Her own legs reached half way down the one side of his thigh, whilst the other was dangerously placed between. Not only did it threaten great pain, if they braked suddenly, but it also gave him naughty ideas, especially since his bare foot was pillowed against the warm curve of her stomach. Any lower and he had no doubt that their situation would become precarious.

As if it wasn't already. They were surrounded by a bunch of mad men, who had broken open an X-ray machine, stolen the contents, and slung them in the back with them. And he was practically naked under the hospital gown that he was still wearing.

Culley didn't know much about X-rays, other than one treated them with respect, especially since they were radioactive, but the way Yasmine was acting he figured that there was a lot more he needed to learn.

Before she had even sat down, or checked on him, she had taken off her white doctor's coat, draped it over the innards, then pushed as much of the junk that was in the back of the van, between them and `it.'

She had bashed her head as the van had sped off, but she didn't let the pain hinder her actions.

After that she had saved all her focus for him.

Culley had never felt so helpless. The van had no windows, and he had no idea where they were going. He was sure that if he concentrated hard enough, he would be able to get his bearings, but they had turned so many corners he wasn't even sure if they were going straight anymore, he was that disorientated.

He was also feeling particularly emasculated. If he had been well he would have broken someone's neck before he would have allowed them to kidnap Yasmine. If it had just been him he would have taken it on the chin, but to kidnap the woman of his dreams was adding insult to injury, and he was not happy.

He wanted to protect her, but right then he was feeling like a weakling.

"Where do you think they are taking us?" he asked the beautiful woman in front of him, his brow furrowed with concern.

"I don't know," she answered him honestly, fighting against the fear that threatened to overwhelm her.

Nothing in her training had ever prepared her for this, and she was at a loss on what to do, other than to defy their captors.

As far as she was concerned these people were out of their minds, their leader utterly insane. She didn't care about their politics, didn't even want to know about them at all, but she had a feeling she was going to get to know their medical histories very well.

The only thing that she wanted to know was Culley, and she was reassured by his presence, in as much need of comfort as he was.

Culley felt his chest tighten, as fear crawled across her face.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, knowing that if it wasn't for him, she wouldn't be in this position, and he wrapped a warm around her ankle, holding it, like he would hold her hand. He couldn't reach her hand, so he made do.

"Sorry for what?" she asked.

"That I caused this, that you're here because of me-"

"You didn't cause this," Yasmine told him, evenly. "They did, and I am grateful that you are with me."

"You *are*?" Culley asked, surprised.

"They were going to take hostages no matter who was there, and as irrational as it sounds, the female part of me is pleased that they took a man."

Culley wanted to be insulted that she felt that any man would do, until it quickly dawned on him that she could be raped by their captors. It put things into perspective rapidly. Not only were women, like most hostages, expendable, but they were also vulnerable, and Culley didn't like that feeling anymore than he liked being helpless.

Yasmine tightened her calf muscles as they headed up a sharp curve.

"You feel that?" Culley asked excitedly. "We're going on the highway."

The van accelerated to confirm his words, and Yasmine took heart from this.

"They went right, which means we are going East..."

Culley's sense of direction had the magical effect of giving her some hope. She didn't know why, most probably it meant that they were acting rather than reacting, they were taking control of their environment, rather than being victims of fate.

"What do you think they want?" It was Yasmine's turn to ask, and Culley was taken aback.

He had considered her the smarter of the two of them, and for her to admit that she was just as unknowing as he was, made his heart flip-flop with joy and uneasiness.

It made him pleased that she would be able to rely on him, and it lessened his feeling of powerlessness. At the same time it made him uneasy, because he didn't want to let her down.

For now, her own insecurity just made him want to reach out and hold her, to tell her everything was going to be okay, because he would make it so.

"What ever happens, Doc we're in this together, and I won't let them hurt you," he told her earnestly.

She wanted to believe him, and she clutched at that hope, but at the same time she realistically realised that with his injury there was very little he could do, but she wasn't going to tell him that.

"I won't let them hurt you either," she said with a shy smile.

Culley took that smile straight in the heart. She was scared, and here she was promising that she would also protect him - it made him want to take on the world just so that he could see her smile again.

"God, I wish we get there soon," he said, with a grimace, and he shifted to find a more comfortable spot.

Yasmine agreed with him whole-heartedly. The corrugated floor of the van was hell on their backsides, but there was no way in hell that she was going to move those protective boxes, that was between them and the toxic substance in the back of the van.

"What are you going to do once your wrestling career is over?" She knew the best way to take his mind off the painful position he was in, was to distract him, and she had some practice in

that.

"I'll probably go back to working as a nursery school teacher," he said, not daring to look at her face. He didn't want her to mock the information.

"A nursery school teacher?" she prodded, and waited for his nod. "Wow," she breathed. "What kind?"

"I am a fully qualified Montessori pre-school teacher," he told her proudly, impressed that she hadn't found his vocation funny.

"I only got into wrestling because my mom needed a back operation, and we needed quick money."

"I would never have pictured you as a teacher," she told him honestly. "I would have thought that you would be in construction, or something to do with your hands. This makes a nice change."

Culley felt gratified. He was elated that Yasmine could find him note-worthy, it made the possibility of wooing her just that much more sweeter.

"Don't get me wrong," Culley continued, "wrestling has been good to me, but it is just big business. Nothing on this Earth matches seeing those little eyes when something finally clicks in their minds, and the world gets bigger. It's just such a rush."

Culley felt the enthusiasm that he got from teaching fill him again. "Not even being recognised on the street, or signing your first autograph comes close..."

He didn't know how to carry on, didn't have the words to transmit how he felt about being in a room full of kids, and being able to influence them in so many special ways.

Yasmine could understand though. She had the same feeling when someone came back for a check-up and they were better than new.

"Why did you stick to wrestling though?" She was puzzled, because she could see how passionate he was.

"Money," he told her, sheepishly. He didn't want her to think of him as money grubbing though, so he rushed to explain: "My brother and his lover have a restaurant that they have just successfully launched, and my dad wanted to invest in my uncle's boat company, and I helped get them there... My mom said I could stop at any time, but Mr Heard said I was good and I saw the opportunity, so I-"

"You took it. I think that what you have done is admirable," she commended him.

An emotion that she very rarely felt popped into her heart once more, and she quickly squelched it. She was supposed to be immune to the charms of her patients, and she didn't want to be caught caring for Culley when so many things could still go wrong.

"What about you? Why did you become a doctor?" Culley interrupted her thoughts.

"I wanted to fix things," she replied.

"But why an orthopaedic surgeon, why bones?" he quizzed.

"When I was little I was fascinated by dinosaur bones, and I was always bugging my gramps to take me to the museum where they were kept. I couldn't wait to see the real thing, so you could imagine how disappointed I was when I found out that they were extinct. I was so sure that if I took their bones I could bring them back, I just took that in another direction."

Culley could picture the little Yasmine with disappointment all over her face far too readily, and he smiled as the image filtered through.

"I could have become a librarian, I even paid for my medical school by clerking at the library, but I never could escape that grip that bones held for me."

"I suppose some psychologist could explain it," Culley reassured her, but he just understood how she felt.

"Actually some the admissions people at varsity tried to fit some theory of me needing a stable background, but that was shot to hell when they discovered I had a normal childhood."

"I know," Culley groaned. "I hate those psych screenings, you should have seen the fuss they kicked up when they found out my brother was gay-"

They both winced as they hit a pothole, him in pain, her in sympathy.

The engine of the van sounded strained, and Yasmine ignored the muted argument that developed up front, although Culley seemed interested. She was more interested in Culley, and not just intellectually.

He really was a delightful sight, with his blonde head resting back against the vibrating panel of the van, and she enjoyed looking at him. She knew that she wasn't being strictly professional, but it wasn't everyday that a girl got kidnapped with a man who could have easily have been a pirate.

Very soon, her time would be consumed by dealing with the others, and not just in resisting their criminal intentions.

They had stolen the core of Cobalt 60 from the biggest X-ray machine that they had seen, and soon those that had come into contact with that core were going to be ill with radiation.

*She* was going to have to care for them, and it did make her feel a little resentful. Not only would she be taken away from caring for Culley, but these fools had picked their illness.

Radiation sickness wasn't some random act of fate, or something that Mother Nature had ordained that they suffer; they had chosen their course, they had decided to hurt themselves, and it annoyed Yasmine, because her time was more valuable elsewhere.

But she was still a doctor, and she had sworn an oath to heal those in need, and so she would do her duty, even if her heart wanted to tell them to go to hell.

"How much longer?" Culley moaned, and stirred to the right, as his thigh began to cramp. Yasmine felt sorry for him, especially since he should have had a brace to keep his leg still, and she couldn't move around to comfort him. She couldn't even risk moving forward so that she could take his hand. His knee had no give, and she didn't want him to tear anything else.

These fears just compounded one another, and she wished that she was braver, or that she had better ideas.

All these emotions translated onto her face, and Culley cupped his warm hand about her ankle again. He knew that he was scared, but he also had something to focus on, and he would do his best to do right by her.

"It will be okay," he reassured her, lied to her as he flinched with pain again.

"It *will* be okay," she repeated his words, as she rubbed skilled fingers over the knots in his injured leg.

"Promise?" he said, and hissed out a shaky laugh.

"Cross my heart," she told him seriously.

Each of them silently vowed that they would see that the other stayed safe. It was like their minds depended on it.

## CHAPTER 6

It was chaos when they got back from lunch, and they nearly didn't get back into the hospital. Now forced to sitting in the visitors lounge, things were getting more and more scary.

"What happened?" Violet asked concerned, as they were confronted by stonewalling police and security.

"I'll check," Casey's lover, Roger, volunteered, whilst Casey took his big frame off to go and see

if Culley was okay.

Orrin rubbed his wife's shoulders as they waited for the two boys to get back to them. Buzz had left them after lunch, and Orrin was sorry that they didn't have one more reassuring presence with them.

The nearby doors that sealed the radiology and oncology department were cordoned off, and men in yellow decontamination suits were going in and out. They had that ugly symbol for biohazardous on their backs, and Orrin took it as a bad omen.

"Oh God, Orrin, please don't let anything have happened to Culley," Violet prayed.

Orrin could do nothing but hang on to her slight frame, as his own worry gnawed at his bile ducts.

Roger turned away from talking with one of the policeman, and his face was grim.

Orrin felt an appreciable increase in his tension, and he looked down to note his wife's red, worried face. He turned to see where Casey was, sure that Roger would need him, like he needed Violet.

"I don't know how to tell you this," Roger began, and he put his hands over his lips as if that would somehow magically change the news from bad into good.

"Was it an accident?" Violet injected.

"Is Culley okay?" Orrin asked.

"No it wasn't an accident, and as far as we can tell Culley isn't dead." His words weren't exactly reassuring.

"Then what the hell is going on?" Orrin demanded, harshly.

"I-" Roger shook his head, it was so hard to comprehend.

Violet broke away from Orrin, and slid her hands about her acquired son's face. "It will be okay," she murmured in imitation of words that were echoing in a racing van, far from them.

Roger took a deep breath to help calm himself.

"They told me that some nuts swept through here, brandishing automatic weapons. They held up the X-ray department, broke open one of the machines, stole the innards, and then they took Culley and his doctor hostage." He said the words in a rush, because he didn't know how else to tell it.

Orrin went grey, and Violet began silently crying. Roger wished that he had been able to break the news more gently.

Orrin took his own deep breath as he processed the news, and he noticed Roger's sorrow. He laid one of his own big hands on the man's shaking shoulder.

"They said that the kidnappers wanted hostages, and that someone had told them Culley was famous, so he'd be more valuable." His voice became hoarse with his own unshed tears. "I'm sorry Orrin..."

Orrin just hugged him close.

"Mom! Dad!" Casey cried, distress shading every syllable. Orrin watched as his other huge son raced down the passage toward them, not even apologising as he bashed people out of his way.

"They got Culley!" he repeated, breathlessly, fear for his brother palpable.

He reached for his mother, before he reached for his father and lover, and swept them all into one big hug. He drew strength from their presence, and used it to pray that Culley would feel it, and use it.

"Ahem," a voice said nearby, and they reluctantly broke apart.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you folks," a small, balding man pressed on, and the family fanned out a little more, but still acted like a mobile wall ready to keep out intruders.

"This is one of the detectives I spoke to," Roger murmured, as Violet hung on to his hand.

"My name is J.P. MacAllister, and I'm afraid that I have a few questions," he showed them his ID.

"Go ahead," Orrin told him. They had nothing to hide.

"The kidnapped man's name is Culley Taffinder?" The others nodded, and then Orrin made the other introductions.

"Does Mr Culley Taffinder have any enemies, anybody who'd like to hurt him?" he began with out much leading. MacAllister held his pen ready to record their answers.

"Culley is a member of the Professional Wrestling League-" Orrin gave out the information.

"Culley the Culler?" the man asked, surprised.

"That's my brother," Casey choked out proudly.

MacAllister studied their faces to see if he could find any tell tale signs of guilt. He didn't want to be suspicious of them, but it wouldn't be the first time a jealous family member had arranged for a victim's demise. Their faces all registered a genuine shock that something like this could happen to one of their own.

"Does he have any enemies?" he pushed, nonetheless.

"Not to my knowledge," Orrin answered, looking at the others who just shook their heads.

"What about the doctor?"

"I know Culley expressed an interest in her." Orrin knew that the information would come out sooner or later.

"Do you think she might have arranged this fiasco?"

Violet scowled at the other man. For her, he had a terrible opinion of people he had never met.

"Detective what is the situation?" Orrin charged, after he noticed his wife's face.

"An unknown number of assailants, all heavily armed, appropriated a nuclear substance from the X-ray department. When one of the nurses raised the alarm, they took your son, and this..."

He bent to page through his notebook.

"Dr Yasmine Knittel," Violet supplied, appalled that the detective seemed so insensitive.

"Yeah, Dr Knittel as hostage. According to witnesses, they only wanted your son, but she wouldn't be put off. Said she'd tie herself to your son if need be."

Violet had to admire the girl's courage, and at the same time she was relieved that Culley still had medical care. On the other hand, she assumed that the doctor did have family, and she could just imagine what they would say about her decision. Violet hoped that they wouldn't hold it against her own family.

"So what do we do now?"

"We gather clues and we wait," was the succinct reply.

"Wait? What the hell for?" Casey growled, growing incensed.

"Casey!" his mother scolded him.

"Why don't you just tell them the truth. Culley and Dr Knittel were hostages, shields, and now their purpose is served they are very likely dead!"

"Casey!" Roger stopped him, noting that Violet looked like she wanted to faint.

MacAllister had had precisely the same thoughts, but he wasn't about to bluntly express them.

"Look, I won't lie to you. The hostages are in trouble, but I don't think that they will get rid of your son that quickly. He's famous, and they'll capitalize on that. It can become a bargaining chip."

That gave Violet hope and an idea, and she squeezed her husband's hand to get his attention. Now she had something to work with, and that was better than the state of no hope that they were sort of living in. She could either lie down and die right now, or she could fight to keep her son alive. And she wasn't going to be slow on exploiting the idea that the policeman had given

her.

"Roger," she bade him forward, "take Casey with you and go and telephone Mr Heard, and all the media." She rummaged through her ever present, bulging handbag, and she pulled out her diary with its separate card compartment. She turned the pages of her telephone index until she came to the right number.

"Here's my phone card, see if you can't get them here. Orrin, you go and see if you can't get a conference centre so that we can hold a press conference. If they can use Culley's fame, then by God, so can we!"

She had caught the detective unawares.

"Mrs Taffinder-" MacAllister started to protest, and saw that it was useless as the others left to do her bidding, each of them portraying a stubbornness that would either see them through or be the death of the son they cared so much for.

He had to admire her media savvy, but he didn't like her calling in the press. It wouldn't just make their jobs more difficult, and it would likely end in tragedy.

"That wasn't very wise," he said, ignoring her offended look.

"Now we'll have every kook in the world phoning us with demands-"

"Come now detective. Did you really think that I would sit to one side like a good mother and allow you to sit on your hands? Let me make it clear, find my son and Yasmine. If they are dead, get me their bodies, and then find their killers, but do not stand there and tell me to do nothing because it makes your job difficult!"

The last was yelled at him, and he knew that if he took on a belligerent attitude (which he wanted to) she would demand another detective take over, and he didn't want that.

"Fine," he agreed, sullenly.

"Mrs Taffinder?" another voice intruded, and they both turned to see a cultured, grey-haired gent looking at the two of them.

"My name is James Churchill. I'm the superintendent at Rand hospital," he offered her his hand, which she took.

*'Didn't do that for me,'* MacAllister noted, sourly, but let it go.

"I am so sorry," Churchill was saying, as he drew Violet away from the abrasive policeman.

"Words cannot express how shocked we all are at this act of barbarity. If there is anything that we can do...?"

He didn't need to complete the thought.

"What of Dr Knittel's family?" Violet asked, thinking that they didn't have to go through this alone either.

"They have been informed, and are gathering as we speak," Churchill informed her.

"Good," Violet enthused, "would you please tell them that we are going to arrange for a press conference, and that they are welcome to participate."

Violet was sure that they would want to do everything in their power to bring their daughter back.

"I will tell them." Churchill didn't look to sure about the wisdom of this press conference, and Violet wasn't going to explain her reasoning to him either.

"Detective MacAllister told me that they took something nuclear when they... when they kidnapped Culley," Violet managed to control herself, she didn't bother to look at the detective as she relayed his information.

Casey came back to be with his mother, sure that Roger would do his very best to satisfy Violet's instructions. He shook Churchill's hand, and gave MacAllister's back the evil eye as he moved off.

"Does that mean that Culley and Yasmine will get radiation sickness?" Violet questioned.

"I'm sorry I don't know that," Churchill answered honestly, as he led them toward a quiet lounge.

"I don't suppose they could track the radiation if it was leaking could they," Casey seized on an idea that his mother's question had given him.

"Again I don't know, you'd probably have to ask an expert that."

"Do you think that you could get one for us, to help us?"

"Yes, I could have our head radiologist come and talk to you, but I don't think that the police will let him talk with any press," Churchill covered the hospital's butt against negligence.

"I understand that," Violet conceded, "but I don't want to be left in the dark. The more I know the better I will feel."

Churchill wasn't so sure that she *would* like what she heard, but he couldn't fault her trying to do what she could.

"I will see what I can do," he told them, and stood.

"Thank you," Violet shook his hand again, and gave him a relieved smile.

"What do you think Casey?" she asked after the man had left

"I think that if Culley wasn't famous they wouldn't be giving the case nearly as much attention as they should-

"Why?" his mother asked, sharply.

"I don't know mom, I get the impression that although what they have stolen is important, they feel that not much can be done with it. I feel that they are underestimating the trouble, and I don't like it."

"Neither do I, son, neither do I, but let's see if we can't make these disparate parts work for us. Go and get that policeman back, and tell him we need him for the press conference - Casey," she stopped him, "him and no one else. I don't want to make this any more complicated than it should be."

"It already is," he told her quietly.

Nobody noticed the young, pasty-faced boy with the ugly buzz cut, and the Nazi tattoos, pull away from the wall, where he had been silently observing the proceedings.

He had a death's head grin on his pimply face, and he relished the pain of those around him.

Judd had told him and the others that he had seen the future, and then how he was going to change it, how it was going to be good just for them.

Zev couldn't wait to own the world. In a way they had already started. They had fame now, and those two collaborators that they had taken from the X-ray department, would unknowingly bring them more.

He left in a good mood, with plenty to tell Judd and the others, and he wouldn't wreck it like that patsy Denny had nearly done this afternoon. It was going to be glorious when their time came.

## CHAPTER 7

The bright, sinking sun hurt their eyes, when the doors to the dark van were finally pulled open, and those protective boxes pushed to one side. They had taken the X-ray stuff out first, and that made Yasmine feel a little better.

They both felt as if they had been travelling for hours, and Culley was sweating and tense after dealing with the pain, but he was determined not to beg for any thing, not even painkillers.

Yasmine directed them to get a board so that they could carry Culley out, but they ignored her, as they hauled him from his sitting position. He moaned with pain, but he didn't speak out, and Yasmine realised that he was trying to hide his weakness as best as he could, and she respected that.

She had tried to look around as they hustled them toward a rough house, but the sun dug its hook-like beams into her pupils, and she didn't see much, before it was blessedly dim again.

Yasmine eyes were watering as they were exposed to the darkness, and she struggled to keep her balance as they were manhandled down a flight of cellar stairs.

She shot all the men filthy looks as they shoved and yanked a hopping Culley toward a pile of Hessian sacks.

"Nice digs," Culley quipped, although his voice did sound shaky.

Yasmine didn't have it in her to respond appropriately, wanting, instead, to scream and rail at them. It was as if they didn't care about her or Culley, and she was afraid that they were simply awaiting orders to kill them.

She took two of the sacks and rolled them, so that she could make Culley's leg comfortable. She didn't look at their captors as they tramped up the rickety stairs toward the door, and then shut them in.

The cellar was illuminated by a bare bulb, that hung from a length of black flexi-cord, in the middle of the room. There were no windows, only a small air vent with a rusted grill kept the air flowing. The floor was a hard concrete, and cool to the touch, which could have been seen as a good thing in the otherwise stuffy and warm room.

On all sides there were box like shelves, most of which were empty. Only one set contained odds and ends, of the hardware type.

There were also no amenities, and no water, which neither of them liked.

"See anything to get us out of here?" Culley asked, as he watched her stand on her tip-toes to see what was available.

"Plenty," Yasmine replied, honestly. "But with your leg the way it is, we aren't going anywhere."

"Yasmine, if you get a chance to get out of here with out me, you go. Do not worry about me-"

"No way," she shook her head emphatically. "We stay together, unless they forcibly separate us." In her eyes this one thing was about to become a law between them.

"But-" Culley started to argue.

"Would you leave me if our positions were reversed?" Yasmine queried reasonably, interrupting him.

"No," Culley replied, indignant, "but it's different, you are a woman-"

"And you are injured, that makes us even," she said, not sure how she should take his awareness of her femininity. Things could get pretty close in this tiny area, and they could still be here for a long time, and she wondered how they would deal with each other, if they found that they couldn't stand each other's personality.

Culley on the other hand, had no illusions about that. He was an ambitious optimist, and although they were in danger, he saw this as a blessing - she had been thrown into his company for a reason, and he was going to take full advantage: to get to know her, to woo her, to even fall in love with her.

"What do you think they did with the X-ray stuff?" Culley asked, changing the subject before he got carried away by imagining what sorts of things he could get up to with Yasmine.

"The Cobalt 60?" Yasmine blinked at his change in tack. "I'm just glad they didn't bring it down here with us."

"Were we badly exposed to the radioactivity?" He watched as she moved over to the shelf with

the hardware, and pulled something off.

"I hope not," Yasmine said, as she knelt beside him.

Culley looked at her expectantly, hoping that she would elaborate.

"Okay, you asked for it," she said with a smile, as she laid two pieces of plastic half-moon piping next to him.

"Cobalt 60 is a radioactive isotope that comes in pellet form, housed in a boron casing. In normal circumstances, that casing should have been enough, but I also pushed those boxes between us, for extra shielding-

"So this radioactivity isn't like you see on TV. and stuff?" Culley asked, as Yasmine handed him one of the sacks that was supposed to be their bedding, and made motions that he had to tear it into strips.

"The radiation that you get from nuclear bombs and power plants can only be stopped by lead-

"But you said that this only had a boron casing!" Culley said, suddenly alarmed.

"I wasn't sure if you were paying attention," she said with a wicked smile, and she began to wrap one of the first strips that Culley had torn for her, around his knee, using firm but gentle pressure.

"Okay, there are three kinds of radiation," she continued with her explanation. "The first kind is like natural, it occurs everywhere, and it's so weak that even our skins keep it out."

She took the two odd pieces of pipe, and tried to fit them over his now thick knee.

"The second I'll call for simplicity's sake medical radiation. Any metal or thick wads of paper will stop it, so the boron should have done it's job," she explained as she stood and made another tour of the hardware.

"The third kind is bomb radiation, and the only thing that stops it, and then only for a little while, from what I can remember is lead, or burying it under kilometres of Earth."

She had found slightly bigger pieces of pipe that were whole, and she snagged a crusted hack saw, and brought them back to their nest.

"So this Cobalt 60 falls in the second category?" Culley questioned, before leaning forward and taking the unproductive implement away from her.

"Yep," she replied, holding the one end steady for him, so that he could see her drainage pipe in half. "Not that it isn't dangerous. If you get exposed to it long enough it makes your cells in your body start to break down."

"And that makes you sick?" he gasped, as she lifted his injured knee, and put one half of their sawed pipe under it.

"You got it," she murmured, and laid the top half carefully over his knee cap. "If they don't keep the casing around it, or if they bust it open and leave it like that, they will very likely become sick-

"Whilst we won't?" he grunted, as he curled a brawny upper arm, under his thigh so he could keep the injured joint elevated enough for her to get the rest of the strips under it.

"We're underground so we should be safe, unless they put it in here with us. But I don't think that they will. I got the impression that they considered that stuff more important than us."

There. The words were out, and she was slightly relieved that he hadn't taken fright. She finished tying up the strips on his makeshift splint then looked up to gauge his reaction.

His eyes were very blue, but they held no fear.

The cellar door opened, disturbing their closeness, and they both stiffened as a guard stomped down the stairs with an empty bucket.

They both looked him over with disdain, but he ignored them. The stubby automatic rifle clanged against the iron pail, and Yasmine only just managed to keep from flinching.

Culley wrapped a huge hand around one of her own clenched ones, as it lay against her cotton chino-covered thigh, and he wondered if he should say anything, not that he thought he would get an answer.

The other man left before he could think of anything suitable, and he let out a disappointed sigh.

"Our potty I suppose?" he asked when they had the room to themselves again.

"I'll find you a bottle," she commented, and smiled when he rolled his eyes, and looked uncomfortable.

"I am a doctor," she reminded him. "You have nothing that I won't be able to see once you are under anaesthetic," she said and gave an imaginary twirl to her imaginary mustache.

"Gee doc, you wouldn't take advantage of a girl when she's had a few to many, now would you?" he said in a simpering tone, getting into the spirit of the game.

Yasmine shook her head, and gave him a beautiful smile, which seemed to make their dingy surroundings just a little brighter for Culley.

She stood and then looked through the goods available to them again. When she had first taken an inventory of what was available, she had thought about fashioning a weapon of some sorts for them to use, but she didn't delude herself that they stood a chance against guns, so she had dismissed the idea. Now she had another purpose in mind.

She spied a ball of twine on one of the shelves above her head, and she cautiously began to climb up the box-like holders, hesitating with each lift, making sure that the bureau was stable.

Culley's eyes nearly popped out of his head, as she began her expedition, and he silently admired her limber form as she scampered up the cabinet.

He felt himself begin to harden as he appreciated her rounded derriere, as it clenched and smoothed out with her movements.

He didn't dare look away, in case she fell, but it was becoming hellish controlling his thoughts.

He wondered if those cheeks would be cool to his first touch, if they were rough or smooth, or even if she liked having her bottom stroked, but he just knew those mounds would fit perfectly in his large hands.

He gratefully looked away when she jumped down, with some string in her hands.

He took several deep breaths to bring himself under control again, and he whispered a curse that there was no breeze to cool off his hot body.

Yasmine remained oblivious to Culley's plight, as she bent towards the very bottom shelf, where she had seen a brand new box of four inch nails, careful not to spill them.

She stood again, and then did a 360° survey of the room, scouting for the best location.

"What are you doing?" Culley asked as she picked up a hammer.

"Dammit!" she swore, as the head of her hammer fell off with a definite *`clink.'*

"I'm trying to ensure us some privacy," she mumbled, as she rummaged through the stuff again. Just to make things difficult she decided, there wasn't another hammer to be had amongst all this junk.

She crossed to her chosen point, and showed her back to Culley once more.

"I think you'll feel better if you had some privacy when you uh... you know."

She dropped her items on the floor, and she bent over to remove one of her comfortable *`Doc Martens,'* sending Culley into agony again.

He shut his eyes tightly, as her pants drew tight once more. His eyes popped open when he heard an odd sort of hammering, and he softly laughed when he saw Yasmine standing with only one shoe on, her socked foot curling oddly to avoid the cold cement, and she was determinedly hammering a nail into a wooden beam with the heel of the other shoe.

"Are you laughing at me?" she asked, as she reversed her position, so that she could repeat the

procedure at another beam.

"I was just admiring your ingenuity," he told her, and went into more spasms of laughter.

She tied one end of her found string around one of the nails, and then ran it across so that she could tie it off around the other nail.

"I don't think that we'll have enough sacks," Culley said past his smile, thinking ahead.

"I've thought of that," Yasmine said, breathlessly, as she pulled her knot tight. "There are some plastic woven compost sacks on the shelves."

"They won't be long enough if we just hang them over," Culley mused.

"Maybe we could prick holes through the top and run the string through," Yasmine said, and gave her line a dark look, as she thought about undoing those knots again.

"Or we could unpick the seams," she scratched her head.

"Unpick the seams," Culley chose the second option. "We don't have anything to thread the string through, and although I know we have nothing better to do, I don't think I could endure the frustration of trying to do the job with just my fingers."

"Thank you," she said comically, "I'm glad you said that, because I don't think I could undo those knots."

She climbed the shelf again, this time not needing to go so high, and she pulled down some dusty plastic compost bags. She shook them out in the farthest corner, but she couldn't do a very good job because the dust would linger and irritate their sinus passages. Neither of them needed to be sick at this juncture.

She walked back to him, her loot in her hands, and then slithered down next to him.

"What are we going to use to start the process?" Culley asked logically. "Ah," he said, understanding, when she pulled two nails from her outside pocket.

She was sitting on his good leg side, and he was beginning to feel a little better. They had relative control of their surroundings, and although they weren't in the lap of luxury, they had the tools to make things better.

Even better, they each decided internally, as they worked in relative silence, they had a kind of empathy, a compatibility that would make their captivity more bearable. They had each other, and that went a long way to cheer them, as they tried to get around the fact that their lives were no longer very normal.

They just hoped that their captors didn't decide that their time was up too early, because each was feeling that now they had plenty to live for.

## CHAPTER 8

The TV gave off that tinny quality that echoed in the semi silent room. Zev was popping gum, and Denny was chattering inanities that nobody was paying attention to.

The entire pack was waiting for this news conference, and Judd could feel a sort of peace coming over him.

It wasn't the normal peace that normal people feel when they have accomplished something tremendous. It was a weird type of tranquillity. He was excited, and pharisaic, and his mind was stewed by a poison of grandiose schemes of what was to come.

"It's on, it's on, Denny shut up," Dolf said savagely, making everybody sit back hurriedly, their black anoraks hissing as they settled down.

A big, grey-haired man filled the screen, his soft, sad face, causing Dolf to comment derisively on his ethnic origins.

"Shut up!" Judd barked, and they all fell silent, not wanting to upset their boss' good mood.

"I want to appeal to the kidnappers not to hurt Culley or Dr Knittel in any way," Orrin Taffinder was saying through the tube, and everybody felt a spike go through them as they realised that they had live people in their possession.

For some there was the potential that they would bring them something monetary; for others, it was a sliver of guilt that they were threatening living, thinking humans who were no different than they were.

Judd didn't care either way. In his eyes they were dead anyway, just how they actually physically achieved that state was something he would plan, and something he could use to make their cause more noteworthy.

He was a very good planner, he had very many good ideas, and their deaths would be worthy of his efforts.

The next face that appeared on the box had 'Julian Davis - Knittel family member' under it, and he went on to say that the doctor was a valuable member of the community - blah, blah, blah.

Judd just tuned him out. She would be valuable to *their* community.

"Ransom, say the word ransom," Dolf hissed, and rubbed his hands together, the callused palms making a hollow sound in the panelled TV. room.

Wilson flinched when he looked over at Judd, and saw an unholy need fill his sharp, angular face. He wondered if he would be able to persuade Judd to let the avaricious man live, but he wasn't going to hold his breath.

Not that he really wanted to stop Judd from punishing the other man, it was just that he felt it was his duty to do so.

"Yes," Dolf crowed, when Orrin Taffinder came back onto the screen and said that they would pay anything to get their son back.

That set off a celebration amongst the others as well, although some of them quickly checked the impulse, once they had looked over toward Judd to see how he felt.

To Wilson, Judd was like an old microwave with a spoon left in it. He was arcing rancour, and the longer he was ignored, the more manifest it became.

"Dolf!" Wilson finally hissed, and the other man hushed, and grew pale when he saw Judd's burning, blue eyes.

"My brothers, we accomplished a great deed today." Judd's voice quickly slipped into a practised mystical tone, drawing everybody involuntarily closer, like a spec of dust that couldn't escape the suction of a vacuum cleaner. He began circulating the room, moving amongst his acolytes. His eyes were soon filled with a zealot's fire, and Dolf relaxed far too soon.

"Today the Brotherhood for White Freedom took back what was theirs. Today we proved that we are a force to be reckoned with..."

Judd's voice dropped and swelled in the appropriate places, and he began to feel their familiar adulation pouring over him, mollifying his superior ego, and making him feel that what he was about to do was right.

"We will turn back to our former glory. No longer will the kaffirs, jew-boys, ragheads and the other instruments of the Zionist establishment keep us in submission. The global order is going to change, and it will be glorious."

His body language spoke to them hypnotically, and none save Denny could tear their eyes away. However Wilson also noted that the other man had moved closer and closer to Dolf, and nobody else had seemed to notice. Not even Dolf himself.

"We are going to be what we once were, masters of the world, conquerors of the weak and depraved, murderers of the non-believers..."

Judd's hand shot out, his teflon coated Bowie knife, slashing through the air so fast that it was a

like a light being snapped out, and somehow, during its line of movement, it ended up being embedded in Dolf's left eye. He lifted the dead man from his seat with that same instrument, and let him dangle there for all to see.

As one, all of Judd's adherent moved back from the two men, Dolf held up by the power of Judd's grip on his jagged knife, and its position in the soft tissue of his head.

"Heathens, one and all shall pay, but not with money..."

Judd drew back the blade, and Dolf's body dropped in the snap of fingers, the blood seeping out like a knocked over can of revolting maroon paint.

Wilson looked around at all their shocked faces, as they spread out to dodge Dolf's oozing blood. Even Denny was standing to one side twisting his skinny body, and clenching the bony fingers of his good hand close to his face, whilst he used his cast to keep him fixed to reality, beating it arhythmically against his puny thigh.

"Money is the root of all evil, Karl Marx once proclaimed," Judd started up again. "And whilst I find it hard to use the words of a Jew-commie, they have never fit so well in my mouth! Do you see what he did!" Judd screamed. "Do you hear what he made me do? I would gladly go to hell and fetch him, just so I can kill him again for making me sin against my brothers, for making me sully everything that my brothers have worked so hard for."

Wilson knew in an instant that he had them again, that he had drawn them back into his powerful spell, and that none would be able to break free, and then he touchingly knew that everything was back on course again.

Wilson internalised what had transpired, and drew the conclusion that it *was* true. Dolf had sullied their beliefs, he had lowered the doctor, and the man with her, to their lowest denominator, and Judd had been right to stop that infection before it spread too far.

Wilson felt his love for this brother bloom again, and his admiration grew because Judd was so right in everything.

"My brothers we have to prepare ourselves, make sure that we do not fail, believe that if we should fall, someone else will take our place and that we will succeed in bringing this world back to the light."

A cheer went up at his words, and there was sporadic embracing amongst the brothers, as others congratulated each other that they were so wise and true. None of them stopped to think that it was they who needed to find the light. And Judd's flowing words did nothing to help either.

Denny was scared. It was good that the others were now happy, and he would have been too, if he wasn't so afraid.

One of the best people in the world was in his house, but he didn't think that Judd would be very nice to him. Even now he had locked him away in the cellar, and Denny didn't think that Culley had done anything bad enough to be locked down there...

He looked at Judd anxiously, and wondered if he could try and talk to his brother, but he just thought that he would get mad again, and he remembered his last lesson pretty well considering that it was still fresh in his memory.

Standing to one side, Wilson watched Denny closely, and knew that Judd still didn't have his brother's adulation. Judd was not very stable at the moment, any little thing could have set him off, and Wilson went over to keep Denny from ruining Judd's good mood, and bringing more pain on to himself.

"Aren't you glad Denny?" he asked, and curved a warm arm about the boy's scrawny shoulders.

"How come Culley and Dr Yasmine are locked in the cellar?" Denny blurted out, sure that he could trust this friend.

Wilson cringed internally as he heard Denny's accusatory intonation, and he was glad that he had kept him away from Judd.

"Yasmine and Culley are in the cellar so that they can stay safe." He had no compunction in lying to his simple friend. He believed in Judd again, and everything would go according to plan.

"Safe from Judd?" Denny wasn't quite that stupid. He knew where the real threat lay, but Wilson couldn't let him persist in thinking that way.

"No," and he pretended to think about it for a moment. "There are some really bad people who want to hurt Culley, and you know that Judd wouldn't let that happen, so they have to stay there for the time being."

Wilson's movements were small and calming. He didn't want to attract attention, especially since he felt some other need grow in him. It was time once more to show Denny who was his family.

Wilson also prayed that Denny wouldn't ask which bad people because he had just seen Culley's father on TV. telling everybody that they were the bad people. Denny liked things simple like his own mind. Any complications, and Judd wouldn't stop at his fingers next time.

"Real bad people?" Denny questioned, slowly falling foul of the lie that Wilson was telling.

"Very bad. So bad that your brother became scared for them, and he did something very brave and took them away so that nobody could hurt them, unless they hurt Judd first."

"Will Judd hurt them?"

Wilson tried exasperation next. "What do you think? Is your brother bad?"

"No," Denny replied, but the answer was drawn out in a long syllable.

"Denny you know your brother is not that bad. How hurt do you think he would be if he heard you now?"

Denny bit his lip and dropped his eyes to the floor. Wilson did have a point, and Judd did know how much he liked the PWL - if Judd did hear that he had said mean things about how he had rescued Culley, Denny just knew that he would be hurt.

Wilson saw the thoughts cross Denny's face, and relief surged through his gut as he saw Denny accept what he had to say.

"Now remember, Judd has done a good thing, so don't be mean to him okay?" Wilson urged, softly.

"Kay," Denny agreed, but his voice wasn't sure. He had to do something for Culley, but he wasn't sure what, and with Wilson's next words, he wasn't sure when.

"Denny, you've got to promise to stay away from Culley and Dr Yasmine. You've got to promise that you won't tell anybody that they are here, not even old Mrs Bedemeire at the post office." Denny couldn't believe his ears when he was told that the closest thing he had to a mother was not to be told.

Denny didn't like it but he didn't have a chance to protest, when Wilson kissed the side of his forehead. He knew what that meant. It was time for him and Wilson to have some secret time together, to play together like nobody else could.

When it had first started, Wilson had said that it was special, and that he wasn't to tell anybody, or else they could never play like this again. Wilson had even said that maybe they would put Denny in a bad place, an institution where bad things happened to him, and where he wouldn't be able to see Judd. There he wouldn't be able to eat ice cream, or watch Culley and the others at the PWL, on TV., and Denny didn't want that.

As Wilson led him out, away from the others, to their quiet place behind the motor shed, Denny remembered that he didn't like playing this game much either. But he knew he had to.

It still hurt, but not as much as the first time, when Wilson had comforted him and told him that it could only get better, and that maybe he'd stop if Denny was good.

It didn't get better and Wilson didn't stop - it made him so happy.

But this time Denny had something else to think about. Like how he was going to get to speak to Culley and Dr Yasmine without getting into trouble.

And so he endured the sodomy, with other plans to sidetrack him, and a hidden joy that his hero was in the house with him.

Judd remained wilfully oblivious to Wilson and Denny, just as he held himself aloof from his acolytes. He had set himself on a course that nothing could tear him from, apart from death, and even then he was going to indoctrinate these men until they were willing to carry on after he had perished.

He wasn't planning on dying though. He wanted to live to reap the rewards of his efforts, to make all those who had held him down pay. He had to be alive to appreciate that.

Subconsciously he also knew he needed to keep Wilson and Denny alive; Denny because he gave him a moral weight, people believed in him more if he looked like he was sacrificing something for his shit-head brother. If he hadn't been so expedient, he would have dropped the retard off a building a long time ago.

And he needed Wilson because he was like a nurse to his surgeon. Wilson was his conscience, the one person everybody could go to

and ask to act on their behalf, sure that Wilson would make him see reason. And he tolerated that because he wasn't stupid. He knew he couldn't alienate the entire human race, he needed some people to stroke his ego, some people to be his cannon fodder, and in turn they needed him to be more compassionate. Wilson gave him that, and if it hadn't been for that one extra trait, he would never have made friends with Wilson, would never have kept him around, and would never have tolerated his homosexuality.

Wilson was only valuable as long as he kept up his devotion to Judd, and as long as he fulfilled the purpose he filled now. Nevertheless, Judd was on the look out for a replacement. It was hard going, though, because no one stroked his ego the way Wilson did.

So far things had fallen into place the way he wanted them to, but Judd was a past master at how quickly that could change. Even now he raged in his heart that there were too many factors that he was going to have to eliminate, including their hostages, and that rage discharged poison just as readily, and steadily as the Cobalt that he had other plans for.

## CHAPTER 9

"I can't sleep," Yasmine grumbled as she turned over again, this time facing Culley.

Culley knew how she felt. The floor was uncomfortable, he felt like he couldn't breathe, the air was so stuffy, and they couldn't put out the light, the naked bulb glaring at them omnisciently, mockingly.

Yasmine had searched high and low for that light switch, and they had even debated removing the bulb from its holder, but that idea was soon scotched, when Culley had rightly pointed out that they would have an impossible time looking for the black flexi-cord in a pitch black room, so that they could have some light when they woke up.

Neither of them had any idea what time it was, although they fairly guessed that it was night time, considering that they had been removed from the van at sunset, and now both were trying to get some sleep.

"I know," Culley moaned, and Yasmine sat up quickly, to check on him.

"Is your leg okay?" she asked, and then placed her hand on his forehead to see if he had a temperature, brushing back a thick strand of dark blonde hair as she did so.

"Actually, I'm not sure I want to sleep," Culley admitted, looking into her eyes, now that she was so close.

"Why?" Yasmine gripped his wrist and began to count his pulse.

"I'm afraid I'll have nightmares," he confessed. "I mean, I've got an active imagination and we've had an active day-"

"I know what you mean," Yasmine consoled him. "I think I'd have some too."

"I've had some really weird ones," he continued on his dream track. "I've dreamt that my brother - a male - was pregnant, and that he gave birth to some monster, and I've been trapped in a runaway car with a swarm of bees; you know weird stuff."

"No one ever said that dreams were rational, that's why we call them dreams, and some times I'm glad it stays in our imaginations."

"Yeah, but have you ever had some weird dreams?" Culley was beginning to feel like he was peculiar.

"I've dreamed that I was doing surgery underwater, and not just orthopaedic surgery, but doing a heart transplant, and I could see the blood draining away on the current, and the faster I moved the bigger my cuts became-" Yasmine stopped as the dream became familiar once more.

"The point is, dreams are a manifestation of something we have seen or done during the week, and now the psychic part of ourselves is trying to reconcile it."

"I know," said Culley, "but I'd like to be in my own bed and with my mommy nearby when that happens."

Yasmine laughed at his silliness, and Culley lay back down charmed that she wasn't insulted by his show of weakness. All the women that he had dated over the past few months had presumed that because he wrestled for the PWL that he was strong in all aspects of his life, and as a result they had let him take charge of everything. When he had first experienced the phenomenon it had swelled his pride and given him a false sense of masculinity, but it soon palled. He wanted a relationship like his mother and father had, one where they were equals, and where he wasn't responsible for *every* aspect of his woman's wellbeing.

He suspected that he would have that with Yasmine, and he was beginning to feel a closeness with her.

Yasmine lay down next to him again, and scrunched up the sack that she had fashioned into a sort of pillow.

"Did you ever have nightmares about wrestling?" she wanted to know. She knew that wrestling was a highly skilled, choreographed sport, that most things were planned so that the wrestlers didn't murder each other with their dangerous pranks.

"Yeah," Culley replied. "The first time I went into the ring, I thought that I was going to faint, but the other guys got me through it. It's still not easy though," he told her. "I still get a kind of stage fright, and I hope that I don't forget my moves."

"Was this your first injury?" she rolled over onto her elbow so that she could look into his open face.

"Nope. I've dislocated my shoulder, broken three toes, and had my nose busted, but not too badly." He knew his nose still looked the same.

"The doctor did a pretty good job," she told him, and then she reached out and traced a finger over his proboscis, noting that he didn't have the bump that some had.

Culley had to hold himself really still when he felt her gentle finger running over his nose. He

had never thought of that area as particularly erogenous, but he shivered that he was wrong. He wanted to grab her little hand and press a kiss to the centre of her palm, but he didn't dare, because he didn't want to ruin this curious mood.

"How about you?" he asked, when she took her finger away.

"I have been very lucky, in that I have never broken a bone," she said. "Like most doctors, I'm sure I'd make a terrible patient. One time we had the head of orthopaedics from another hospital come in, after he'd sprained his ankle on the golf course. You should have seen the fuss that he kicked up, and the bad attitude that he had displayed," she retrieved the memory reluctantly.

Culley knew the type. He'd dealt with his fair share in civilian life, and it was one of the reasons that he had stayed with the PWL for such a long time. Paul Heard and the rest of the executive of the League were geared to keeping fans and wrestlers happy, and it showed.

"What's the weirdest case you've ever had?"

They were awake now, so he figured that they might as well spend the time getting to know one another.

"I had one of those... uh, how can I put this... a foreign person come in after he had had a religious experience. Somehow he managed to weave two skewers into both sides of his ribs, and he was screaming at us that if we take them out, we'd kill him."

"Did you?" Culley said with an awkward smile.

"No, and he promptly changed his religion the next day, to one even more radical."

"You're kidding?" Culley looked up at her face to gauge her veracity.

"Last time I heard he had burnt himself alive to prove that he was devout."

Culley grimaced at the thought.

"What about you?" it was Yasmine's turn to ask. "You must have come across some very weird people-"

"Hell yeah," Culley agreed. "Wrestling sometimes seems to attract them. And it's not just the wrestlers or the wannabes, but sometimes the fans as well. One time we had this little old lady come to one of the matches. She was brown from the sun, but I mean like a raisin, and she had this white hair, and it's frizzy, it's sticking out. Anyway, she has front row seats, and after about ten bouts, and after about the millionth grab that she's made for a wrestler who has been thrown out of the ring, she decides that she also wants to wrestle, but she doesn't want to do it dressed the way she is. So she hops in the ring, and starts to strip, and Buzz and I are so entangled that we didn't see her at first. The ref gets such a shock, he turns tail, so now we are stuck with this old girl who has let everything out."

Yasmine lay back down, her face scrunched up with laughter.

"I'm red, Buzz is red - and I never knew that blushes could go over an entire bald head but he did - neither of us wants to forfeit the match because it means a shot at one of the championship belts, and she's chasing us around the ring trying to snag one of us. Some fans have stripped just to cover her up, but we're not very chivalrous about giving her the clothes. We're both handing her the T-shirts like you would hand raw meat to a mean dog, but she's not interested. We're both pleading with her to get out of the ring, and yelling at each other to go get help, and the entire stadium is rocking with laughter, I mean it was freaky!"

"Oh that's terrible," Yasmine said, between gulps of laughter, that she didn't mean to let out.

"What was worse was the fact that the whole thing was a set up-"

"Oh no," Yasmine moaned, and started laughing again.

"I'm not joking. Neither of us remembered that it was April Fools day, and neither of us wanted to get too close to the old dear, so we never saw the make-up or that this woman was actually an actress. A rival Wrestling group had hired her as a stunt, and Paul Heard knew all about it, from

the beginning - it's not funny!" Culley tickled her as she lay squirming with the giggles.

"I never knew that make-up was that good, but she fooled us really well," he added his own laughter.

"At least it wasn't a tragedy," Yasmine absolved them both, for their mischievous laughter.

"It felt like it at the time," he quipped, and rolled over so he could see her face.

"Who got the Championship try-out? Is that the right word try-out?" she asked, looking up at him.

"It's as good as any, and Buzz did. They thought I was still a little too green, and looking back I was."

Yasmine was impressed that he had such a healthy ego. She was sure that not many jocks would ever admit that they were once inexperienced. Most of her patients liked to let her think that they were naturals, and that they had never grown into their roles. The result was that they pressed too hard, and they hurt themselves too badly to continue in their chosen field.

"That doesn't mean I don't keep trying. I want to be world champion, and I was going to get my shot when I popped my knee."

"You'll get it again, in six months," Yasmine said, firmly. "I'm not a complete charlatan, and I don't like to see people push before they are ready. It just leads to more injury, most of it worse-

"

"I'm not fighting against your diagnosis doc," he swept his hands about the room, "especially not now."

"I'm sorry," Yasmine apologised, ruefully. "I just hate being second-guessed."

"And I hate being helpless," Culley offered, in return.

"Me too," Yasmine concurred.

"Do you feel helpless here?"

"Sort of," was her reply, and she watched him waggle his eyebrows as he wanted her to explain.

"This situation isn't fair, they have guns we don't. They are mobile, we aren't, it just seems like they have the upper hand, and I take exception to that." She clenched her fists as she felt that her argument was inadequate.

"Do you feel like you are in physical danger?" his question going to another fear of hers.

"We both are," she dodged the issue.

"Yeah, but you more so."

Yasmine looked at him straight in the eye, unable to hide that fear. "I would be lying if I said that wasn't an issue, but I'm trying to deal with only those things that affect us here, together."

Culley couldn't blame her for trying to put it off. Casey had once tried to explain it to him, what it was like to feel vulnerable to rape, but he still couldn't quite feel the perception that his brother, or even this woman lying next to him experienced.

"I understand," he stated, and moved closer to her, hesitating before he slid a warm, companionable arm about her shoulders.

"I-" she stiffened and started to protest.

"Shhh..." he calmed her, but didn't move his arm.

Yasmine relaxed, and allowed some of his warmth to leak past her defenses.

"I shouldn't allow you to do this, you know. I am still your doctor," she murmured, frowning slightly, and refusing to look into his eyes.

"Why?" Culley asked, perplexed.

"Because it's unethical for me to allow you to comfort me. You are my patient and as such deserve the best care that I can unemotionally give you."

"Emotions get in the way?"

"Yes." Her voice was quiet.

"Even though we are in a serious situation, and you need comfort as much as me?"

"I've been trained to keep my emotions under control-"

"Just answer yes or no doctor," Culley cut her off, and then rubbed a warm hand over her fragile arm.

"Are you sure you are a teacher?" she looked up at him, her frown more pronounced.

"Okay," she caved when he stared down at her. "I need comfort as much as you, but I have been trained to deal with my emotions," she still insisted.

"I believe you doc, about your emotions I mean. What I'm trying to find out is: will you still insist on a patient/doctor relationship, despite the fact that we are kidnapped?"

"I don't think I have much choice-" she started.

"Then Dr Knittel, I officially fire you," he interrupted her once more.

"But-" she wanted to object.

"Uh-uh, if you think that you can't take care of me without your emotions getting trampled, then I insist that we move that relationship out of the way."

He had hoisted her on her own petard. He knew that she was trying to put some emotional distance between them, and that she was using the excuse that she was his doctor. He, on the other hand, had better ideas, plus he fully intended pursuing her past this horrid experience.

"But that's just silly," she disputed. "I am a qualified physician, and you are in need-"

"You are still fired," he told her, waving a big finger in front of her face. " But," he countered with a big smile on his face, "if I don't want anymore strangers poking at me, I'd be willing to let a friend do so."

She was nonplussed that he wanted her for a friend, more if she read his eyes correctly, and she wasn't sure that she could handle the concept just yet. Her world had been turned upside down in the space of a few hours, and this was just one more sensation that she was going to have to adjust to, and one she wasn't sure that she should adjust to. It wasn't logical that he should risk his health just so that he could know her.

"But-" she tried again, and he silenced her words by pressing his warm mouth to hers.

Yasmine was stunned by the move, so much so that her mind reeled as he took the small advantage of tasting the edge of her tongue with his own.

Culley didn't dare push things beyond that small sample of her tangy mouth, but that it was enough to leave him wanting much, much more.

"Go to sleep Yasmine," he whispered, and he gently kissed her temple, as he kept her in the circle of his arms.

Yasmine fell asleep drawing the sound of her name around her like a child's blanket, and knowing that she was safe because he made it so.

## CHAPTER 10

*'Clang! Clang!'*

The sound woke Culley, and he was bewildered when he didn't recognise his ugly grey surroundings. The light went spinning wildly, and Culley sat up rashly, only remembering his sore leg, when the pain jabbed the thought into his conscience.

He looked down to see if he had awakened Yasmine, but she was still asleep. He thought that

maybe she was one of those people who needed sunshine to wake up, and there wasn't much of that available.

He knew it was daylight though. Darts of sun were coming through the grill of the pathetic air vent, and they illuminated the opposite wall in an odd pattern, suggesting a freedom that he didn't feel.

"You are awake," someone said, and Culley squinted up to look at him.

"Wake up your friend, Mr Taffinder," the voice commanded, and Culley just knew that there would be consequences if he disobeyed.

He shook Yasmine awake, and he was pleased when she didn't grumble at the break in her sleep. Maybe she was used to interrupted sleeping patterns, he decided.

His eyes adjusted to the sight of two of their captors, up the stairs others moved about so he knew there were more, and once he focused he wished he hadn't. He could feel the same attitude in Yasmine.

The two men were like every cliché of poor white trash that he had ever encountered. Their extra short hair looked like it had never seen shampoo, it had that greasy clean look. They both had tattoos across their arms and one had some sticking out of the black plastic anorak that they were both wearing. Their skins were a sallow yellow, only their teeth showed a more vivid hue, and Culley would have sworn that they both had bathed in nicotine. One was carrying a gun.

In ordinary life they would have been ignored, marginalised, even dismissed, but that gun made all the difference, and Culley knew better than to respond in an ordinary manner.

So did Yasmine. It was their eyes were the actual instruments that enforced acquiescence, they were brown and dead. Even soil had more life than those orbs.

The clanging noise that had woke Culley turned out to be two enamel plates that were trapped between the grimy fingers of the other man, and the two buckets that he was carrying.

"Food and water," the one carrying the gun said. "For the rest of the day," he finished, his finger resting far too closely to the unprotected trigger.

Yasmine didn't know why they were so jumpy. She was afraid, and Culley was injured, and it didn't make a whole lot of sense for the two of them to be attacking an armed man in a confined space.

Food guard, as Culley started to think of him, scuttled forward, and dropped two plastic spoons on the sacks at Culley's extended foot. He noticed the pipe and sack brace about Culley's knee, but he didn't say anything to gun guy.

Neither of them missed much though, their eyes alighting on the changes that Yasmine had made to their semi-orderly cellar, and he wondered if they would say anything about it.

Yasmine knew what her response would be, but she just did her best to ignore them and not give them anything else to exploit. She scooped up the spoons, and then moved to where the food had been left, and lifted the lid to expose a pot of steaming oats. She hurriedly dished up some of the bland fare into the plates that were lying against the pot, and she handed the first plate to Culley before rejoining him for her own breakfast.

The guards left, their eyes fixed on the two of them, whereas Yasmine and Culley simply ate what was before them, really quite happy to be alone.

"Do you want some water?" Yasmine asked, once they had left.

"Yeah," Culley responded, his mouth dry from the sticky oats. "It would have been nice to have some butter or sugar," he commented, as she lugged the heavy bucket over.

"At least they left us plenty of water," Yasmine said in return.

"And a lid to keep the bugs away."

Culley stopped eating at that information, a shiver coursing down his spine at the thought that

they might be sharing some space with creepy-crawlies.

"Oh good," Yasmine blew out, as she got the bucket in the best spot, "they left us a cup.

"Gee, let's ask the jury to give them some slack," Culley replied irritably.

Yasmine couldn't blame him. He was cramped from sleeping on the hard floor, and she had no doubt that the pain killers that had sustained him for most of yesterday, had long since worn off. He wanted to go home, she shared the sentiment, and she had to allow him some time to blow off some steam. Culley ate in silence for a bit, glad that she hadn't made a fuss about his bad attitude.

"What's your best breakfast?" he asked eventually, trying to ease the irritation that he lumped on her, but she groaned as she ingested some of the gluey, rough cereal, almost as if his annoyance had seeped into their food.

She licked away the morsel that stuck to the corner of her mobile mouth, as she really thought about her answer.

"Mmmm..." she pondered all the meals that she had ever had, deciding on the best.

"The best I've ever had was a chocolate covered doughnut and a huge chocolate milkshake."

"Ooh," Culley moaned in delight, and then ate some of his own tasteless food, the sheer relish that her response had evoked making the gummy fare go down a little easier.

"Okay, what's your favourite breakfast?" he asked after a few more bites.

Yasmine frowned, not because she felt that she was being tortured by his question, but because she had no answer.

"I don't have one," she told him. "Breakfast is breakfast, I eat a soya based cereal everyday, and every so now and then treat myself to eggs and bacon, but that's not spectacular."

"Right now it would be," Culley said with an ironic smile.

"Now it's your turn," Yasmine said, looking at his pale face. "What's your best and what's your favourite?"

"My best was a waffle filled with chocolate chips, smothered with chocolate syrup and chocolate ice-cream."

Yasmine scrunched up her face as she took in his words. "I'm surprised you weren't sick," she marvelled.

"Actually, I was, but I had just come from the dentist, and my grandpa bought it for me for being such a good boy."

"Are your grandparents still alive?" she seized the other topic gratefully, getting away from the gut-wrenching subject of delicious food.

"Yeah, all four of them. My one grandfather is eighty six," he said, a smile flirting with his well shaped lips, reminding her that he had kissed her the previous night.

That brought another shift in her thinking processes. She hadn't had the chance to really think about what he had done, and she wasn't sure what she should do about it. She didn't want to bring the subject up because he was going to be unapologetic - she just knew it. At the same time, she had to reign their desires in. They were in a dangerous situation, and they didn't need the added stress of sexual attraction.

Culley watched the game of emotions go through its innings in the ovals of her eyes, and he knew the result, even without her having to say a word. Something had reminded her of the previous evening, and even now she was thinking of ways to stop him getting too close to her. From deep inside he felt that it was too late to start putting up barriers now. He'd had a taste of her, and like an addict craving his next fix, he was already searching for another opportunity to sneak another kiss. Only this time he wouldn't settle for the restrained peck that he had taken last night. He was going to raze her protests, and he was going to vanquish her inhibitions.

She had singed his libido, and he was ever so eager to return the favour. More, he wanted to superheat the need that they had for each other so that they absolutely melted into an amalgam of flesh and soul, and when they returned to their natural state they would be a whole new fused element.

"Yas," he started, "about last night-

"I wanted to talk to you about that too," she was uncomfortable that he had read her mind so easily. She looked down at her surgeon's hands, wishing that they were the instruments that she would be using to cut out his metaphorical heart, instead of her tongue. Her hands she could rely on, her tongue she couldn't.

Culley reached out and lifted up her chin with the fingers of one hand, so that he could see her face.

"I'm not sorry," he told her, confirming her hunch. "I liked kissing you, and if I can, I'm going to do it again."

Yasmine was a little stunned by the last candid confession. She supposed that she had hoped he would be a little more rational about their need not to get physically involved, but now she had learned that he didn't really share her concerns.

If they were under ordinary circumstances, and he had been that blunt at the beginning of their relationship, she would have run from him. But now there was nowhere to run, and he was making his attentions and intentions clear. The everyday no longer applied, he wanted more than just a doctor/patient connection, and she still needed time.

That need for time was one of two things that gave her hope that she could settle this on a more even keel. The other was that he would never force her.

She knew that he would use every technique in his memory to persuade, cajole, and downright seduce her, but he would never violate her.

And she used her only response: "I need time. This is not everyday, where we would have the space and the dates to measure how we feel about each other, to get to know what makes the other tick. Everything here is going to be concentrated, intense... What happens if we discover that we can't stand one another?"

It was a sensible response, Culley thought, but not one that he was going to take very seriously. His mother had once told him that you never knew a person until you lived with them. He hadn't taken her seriously when he was young, but now he knew better. He'd had plenty experience living with strangers ever since he had started wrestling, and his mother's words had proved startlingly true.

He had learned plenty about himself, and others when they shared close quarters, and he had mastered the knack of summing people up very quickly, so that he knew who would meld with his personality, and who wouldn't, and he knew Yasmine would match in any situation.

He also knew that she was a little afraid, her female instincts kicking in, and he reached out his hand so that he could quiet her, the way a person would gentle an animal that was afraid of humans.

"I won't hurt you, you know," he said, and he stroked the skin around her chin and her lips with soft fingers.

"Not physically," she agreed, with a semi-pleasured sigh, "but emotionally... I just don't know..."

"I know," Culley, wrapped his big arms around her, pushing out his strength for her to absorb. "I know."

He was trying to do more than reassure her with his conviction. He was telling her that he believed that what they had could be built on, could be so much more.

The latch of the door clicked in, and they both looked up when sunlight appeared at the top of

the stairs again. A shadow curved on the wall by the door, and gun guy came into sight followed by the leader of the raid, from yesterday.

They were both quiet as they watched the other two march down the stairs, their eyes noting how close Culley and Yasmine were.

"Well isn't this a pretty picture," the leader sneered in his gravelly voice, his face taking on an ugly cast, that was heightened by the artificial light that they were subjected to, and that he came to stand under.

Yasmine supposed he was trying for an halo effect, emotionally trying to convert them into believing he was an angel.

"Tell me Dr Knittel, isn't it illegal for doctors to get too cosy to their patients?" he asked, with a parody of a smile, as the guard with the gun came forward and yanked her to her feet.

"Show some respect," he muttered unpleasantly, his stinking breath too close to her delicate nose.

Culley began to reach up, but Yasmine blocked him, by pushing her arm to the back, her hand extended like a web to halt him.

There were about a million things that Yasmine could have said to curtail his pathetic taunting, but she had better use for her words.

"What do you want?" Culley said, though, his voice hard.

"I thought I'd introduce myself," the man said sarcastically.

"My name is Judd Pierson, and I am the leader of the Brotherhood for White Freedom," there was that veneer that gave away the state of his crazy mind.

Culley managed to barely contain the snort of derision that he could feel rumbling in his chest, as the man gave up the information.

"Now you are probably wondering what we trying to accomplish by taking such good, white, Christian souls such as yourself," Judd said, as he paced looking around their prison. "We had a need and you fulfilled it. Now you are here, and still alive because..., well, we need you for something else-

"I'll bet," Culley snorted, rashly, his eyes flashing his distaste.

Gun guy stepped forward to cuff him, and Yasmine danced between them to prevent him from doing so, her eyes never really leaving Judd's cruel face.

Culley steadied her calves as she came close to tripping over him, and he frowned when he realized that she was standing between him and the other two men. It was rather like a pissing contest, and he didn't want the other two bastards to think that he was a coward.

Yasmine still said nothing, even though she could feel Culley's indignation burning into her, the way the heat of his hands was burning into her calves.

"What do you want?" Yasmine repeated, patiently, taking control over the situation, after she witnessed these men fall into their same old macho routine.

"Your families are concerned for your well-being-" Judd started, only to have Yasmine cut him off.

"Please just tell us what *you* want of us." She emphasised by pointing to Judd, but her tone was still steady, even though she was as angry as Culley was.

Culley watched as it was Yasmine's turn to anger the sadistic leader. He had to admire the way she did it simply with her composure. In her place, he would just wisecrack until the other man was frothing at the mouth, but he would lose his honour with that method.

Here was a small woman, who was challenging the reputation of the man who claimed to be a leader, and she was doing it in the most rational way, and in a strange way there was no way that Judd whoever could reestablish his authority, unless he resorted to violence. And no matter

what, Yasmine would have won, and pride grew in him, at her gutsiness.

Judd emitted hostility, his kind of radiation just as poisonous as the X-rays in their incompetent possession, and just as visible if one saw his face in the right light.

He was in the right light now, and Yasmine didn't need to hear the words to know what he wanted of them, even though she wanted him to admit it.

He wanted them dead, and he wanted them to die in a very public and messy way.

Judd, in his turn, could feel his hatred grow for this puny woman as she stood looking right into his eyes, and refused to be cowed. He expected them to grovel, he expected them to beg for mercy, and here she stood proud and undaunted, her own eyes so piercing that he just knew she could read his thoughts.

There were any number of ways that he could break her, make her see who was in charge, but he would win with none of them. He would turn the others against him, and he had a feeling he was going to need the good doctor's services if they carried their plan through, so he couldn't destroy her the way he wanted.

He couldn't hurt Culley to get to her, and he couldn't physically hurt her either. She wouldn't cooperate if that happened, and Denny would throw a tantrum of epic proportions if he found out, which would happen if either of them were really injured.

Everything was delicately balanced, and it burned his soul when he had to control his impulses.

*'Fuck it!'* Judd flared in his mind anyway, and he lashed out a bony hand, catching Yasmine full in the face. He was still the boss here, and this bitch would learn that.

She stumbled back, stepping on Culley's extended ankle, as Culley swore viciously and tried to stand to defend her.

Yasmine wrapped a small hand around one of his bigger ones as he tried to lever himself up her legs, stopping his momentum.

"I ask you again," she repeated quietly, albeit breathless as she took in great gulps of breath to numb the pain in her cheek, her victory still secure. "What do you want from us?"

"I don't know," hissed Judd, as he stepped a little closer, his face becoming more drawn and monstrous as he undressed Yasmine with his eyes. "I'm sure I can think of something-"

Yasmine endured his repulsive attentions stoically, but Judd had forgotten about Culley, and he wasn't about to behave.

His hand shot out from under Yasmine's, past her leg aiming straight for Judd's nearby crotch.

Judd screamed horribly, as Culley found his target, and his large hand began to pulp the other man's testicles.

Gun guy lunged forward to stop him, and he let go, grabbed Yasmine about the waist, pulling her down and rolling her under his honed body in one smooth motion, his sore leg still straight.

Judd dropped to his knees obstructing the other man in his headlong momentum, and he nearly tripped over his boss.

"Boss? You okay?" gun guy asked, as he stopped to untangle himself from his master, and to help him to his feet.

"Bastard!" he swore at Culley, once his mission had been accomplished and he charged forward, the butt of his big automatic weapon ready to strike.

"No," gasped Judd, making him stop dead, and he turned to look at Judd confused.

Judd wasn't thinking about revenge just then, his face red from dealing with the hurting extremity. He just wanted to get up the stairs and get some ice, and to do that he needed help.

Culley would just have to wait to get punished, and Judd mistakenly believed that Culley would begin to worry about his foolish action and that would just make the punishment worse, which would have been very sweet revenge in Judd's eyes.

"Help me," he said to his guard, his voice high and wobbly.

Culley smiled into the crook of his arm, away from Judd. The other man was going to go through hell as he walked up those stairs, and as far as Culley was concerned that would teach him not to touch Yasmine. She was his, and he wasn't about to let some man who didn't have any respect for life in general mess with that.

They stayed the way they were until they heard the door close once more.

Yasmine had been paralysed by Culley's actions, and even now she lay unmoving under his hard, warm body. Slowly, emotion seeped back into her mind, and the overwhelming thought was that although what Culley had done was good and brave, it was also dumb and rash, and Culley was going to pay for it eventually.

"You're going to pay for that, you know," she echoed her thoughts, and looked up into his big face, and soft blue eyes.

"I know," Culley replied. "But he will focus on me, and that's better," he said, and he scowled when he rubbed sensitive fingers over the bruised area of her face.

"Thank you though," she said with a simple smile, and then sat up, breaking his hold, and disappointing him. She scuttled forward a little, and manoeuvred his leg around so she could see if his brace had held. She winced as she noticed a shoe mark from where she had stood on his ankle. She could have made things worse, and she didn't want that.

"I'm sorry," she apologised, and scooped up one of the dwindling number of sacks so that she could wet the end to clean his foot.

*'I'm sorry too,'* Culley added, silently. And he was he decided as she washed away the dirt. Judd had done more than cause her to hurt him physically. He had ruined the mood that they had hacked out of their pitiful environs, and Culley knew that he was going to have to work twice as hard now, that Yasmine had rebuilt her guard around her emotions.

As she began silently tidying up their surroundings, she was beginning the process of trying to stay away from him, and he was beginning to like having her in his arms.

## CHAPTER 11

"He's crazy," Culley gave her his opinion once more, as she searched through the junk in the cellar for something for them to do. He had repeated the sentiment several times since Judd had left them.

They were both bored, and she didn't think that their camaraderie would go very far if they became ratty. To prevent that, she knew she had to find something for them to do, and whilst she was sure that Culley could find something interesting, she didn't dare ask him. Some of his ideas would probably be sexual in nature, and she didn't know if she could stand the temptation. He had kissed her once, had told her that he would do it again, and despite her better judgement, she absolutely would let him do that and more. She figured that it was the boredom that was making her feel this way, because she was not acting her usual rational self. It certainly had nothing to do with the fact that he was very masculine and sexy, and that he made her feel very

safe, and wanted - she would never admit to that.

"Found anything yet?" he asked, once again admiring her rear as she went through the items that the crazies had so thoughtfully provided them with.

Since that last meeting, nobody had bugged them, which just suited him fine, even though he knew Yasmine was concerned that they might be separated because of his actions. He wasn't going to let that happen. He didn't care if he lost his leg forever, he was not going to let them take Yasmine. But he was beginning to relax about the threat though. Maybe they didn't have space to keep him or her somewhere else, or maybe they didn't want to piss her off because she was a doctor and they might have needed her capabilities. Either way they didn't come back and Culley was revelling in her presence.

"Yeah," she grunted as she lunged for something he couldn't see from the floor.

"Whoa!" he spluttered as she pulled something forward, along with a pile of dust. He coughed theatrically, and waved his arms in the air as the dust swirled around their little room.

Yasmine kept herself to sneezing, and Culley had to smile as she left a swipe of dirt across her upper lip. Her torso was also dusty, and he felt that it was a pity that he couldn't get up, because he would have jumped at the chance to dust her off. But now he couldn't even offer, because he knew what her answer would be. He just had to keep working on her inhibitions.

"Look at what I found," she said, after she had finished sneezing, and she reached up to pull down some boxes.

"Wow, snakes and ladders, abalone, the brick game," Culley rattled off the names as she showed them to him, excitement tinging his voice. "This is great," he said as he put them down in front of them.

"It isn't brain exercise," Yasmine disputed, as she went to their water bucket, to get a cup full to clear her throat.

"No but it's way better than sitting about twiddling our thumbs," he reacted positively. "Thanks," he accepted the cup from her, and then put it down next to him, as she made herself comfortable across from him.

"Uh, Yas, you've got a mark on your upper lip," he touched his own to indicate where. The water had taken some off, but she still had a little under her nose.

"Here?" she asked, rubbing in the right spot.

"Uh, no," Culley lied, indicating that she had to come forward.

"Here?" she questioned again, and moved forward without thinking, just being careful around his leg.

"It's here," he said, as he struggled to keep the wicked smile from his face. He caught her head in the palm of one hand, and then he wiped a finger tip on her lower lip.

"Liar," she managed to get past that lingering digit, but he wasn't paying attention to her. It was as if he had become absorbed in a whole new world, the way he looked at her face and lips, and she just knew that she would be in serious trouble if she didn't break away.

She didn't want to, but she made herself do it, as she angled her head out from under his curving, steadying hand. She just about jumped out of her skin, when, as he brought his hand down in disappointment, he brushed against one of her breasts.

For Culley, that was like having a double victory, even more a triple victory. Not only had he sneaked past her defenses, but he had made her very aware of him just by touching her in a small way. He was sure he was going to enjoy every minute when he finally got to touch her all over.

"You are incorrigible," she scolded him, but he could tell she wasn't really mad.

"I am," he confirmed, nodding his head, before setting her back so that he could lay one of the

games flat.

"Now what will it be? Strip snakes and ladders, or strip brick game?"

There was something else Denny wasn't supposed to visit either, but it was a lot easier to get to, than Culley or Dr Yasmine.

Actually he could easily be around it, when the others were around, and he didn't fully understand why they told him to stay away from it.

It didn't look dangerous, and Kyle and Jason played around with it a lot. They even hooked up an old TV. to it, and he had laughed and laughed when they couldn't make it work very well. Kyle had told him to buzz off then, but he didn't, instead staying with Jason when the other man had gone off to talk to Judd.

They had said something about opening it, and he didn't understand how they were going to do that, anymore than he understood why *it* was important. But he didn't have to worry about that. He just had to stay to one side and be quiet and then he would see what was so special about it.

Oh, he knew about its specialness. It made perfect sense to him why it was special. It had come with Culley and that was all he needed to know. If he couldn't be with Culley in person, then he could be with something that had been with Culley, and he didn't believe that it was dangerous because of that.

"What did he say?" Jason asked when Kyle came back.

"He said we could go for it," was the answer.

"What did he say we had to do with the dummy?" Jason pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

Denny knew that they were talking about him, and he smiled at that.

"Uh, I didn't ask," Kyle replied sheepishly, and ran a grimy hand over his ugly hair-cut. He picked up a crowbar from the nearby work bench, and then bent next to Jason, who was still at its side.

"You didn't ask?" Jason pushed, perplexed.

"Hey they say this stuff is dangerous, do you want to be the one to tell the boss that his dumb brother is hanging out with it?"

"Why is he here?"

"How about because we want him to do the actual dirty work?" Kyle had his priorities right. They said that this stuff was only dangerous if you touched it with your hands, and for that reason, he was going to let Denny move it around for him, after all what was one less dummy in the world.

"Oh," Jason shrugged, as he fit the crowbar into the nearly invisible seal that he and Kyle had discovered whilst they were initially fooling around with it.

"Watch it!" he growled as Kyle pounded on the steel implement with a heavy hammer that he had found earlier.

"No, you watch it!" Kyle shot back, as the crowbar slipped, and nearly amputated the toes on one of his feet.

Denny chortled in the corner, and they both gave him dirty looks, but they didn't send him away. They hammered away at the boron casing, denting and scraping it in their efforts to get what was inside, each of them tiring rapidly, but their exertion paid off.

"Hmmp!" Jason growled as he got good leverage inside the seal of the casing, and Kyle dropped the hammer with a sharp clink, so that he could help him.

"Wow!" Denny cried, and clapped his hands and jumped up and down, as the casing screamed as it was rent apart.

He rushed over to look inside, to see what the other two were looking at.

"It looks like rabbit shit!" Jason said, indignantly, as he observed the unvarying pellets inside.

"All this for something that looks like little round balls of poop!"

Kyle agreed with him, but he didn't say much just in case someone overheard. He had no desire to end up like Dolf. He'd had to clean up after the dead man, and that had not been a pretty sight.

"Whatya think, huh, dummy?" he said after he had looked carefully behind him, and he tapped Denny on the back of the head as he bent over to also see.

"Hey!" Denny said, with a scowl at Kyle, and he stood and rubbed the stinging piece of skin. He bent over again, to see what Jason had meant.

"Oh yeah," he said, with a giggle. "It does look like rabbit poop!"

"Do you think it feels like rabbit poop?" Kyle's tone of voice sounded like a character out of one of those children's educational programmes that were on TV. just before the cartoons, and it was designed to make Denny dip his hand into the pellets before them.

"Does it taste like rabbit poop?" Jason asked, getting in on the act as Denny ran his hands through the beads, the sound against the cast and the texture against his good hand, intriguing him.

Kyle swatted Jason on the back of *his* head.

"What?!" he asked, petulantly, looking at Kyle as if he was mad. After all, he had started it.

"Don't tell him to do that, you idiot!" Kyle hissed in anger. "He'll probably swallow one of them, and then how are we going to explain that!"

Jason hadn't thought of that, so he grabbed at Denny when he brought a globule close to his face.

"Pretty..." Denny breathed, as he looked at the metallic surface, the light catching it in just the right way, so that he could see the rainbow that the refraction created on its outside.

"Can I keep this-" and he began to pocket the object.

"No!" Jason and Kyle shouted at the same time, and Jason yanked it out of his hand.

"Denny, I'll buy you that yo-yo that you wanted if you are good and move this stuff over there for us, okay?" Kyle bribed him, and then showed him the container that they wanted the pellets in.

"God, I touched it," Jason grimaced and wipe his hand over his shirt, to try and take the toxicity off.

"Yeah well, don't touch anything else with that hand," Kyle whispered to Jason earnestly.

"Not even to pee?"

Kyle shushed him with his hands. "Shut up!" he rasped, clutching at Jason's clothing, then looking around to see if Denny had heard.

"Keep that hand away from everything, including your pecker, if you don't want it to fall off!"

"What?" Jason glowered at the other man. "What the hell is this stuff?"

"The answer to all our troubles," Kyle told him.

Denny's skin felt funny, but he didn't let that sway him from the idea that if he could get close to the bad thing, because the others let him, then he could get close to Culley and Dr Yasmine. He just had to find the right person to let him. He couldn't ask Wilson or Judd, and Jason and Kyle were just too mean to him, so he would just have to think really hard about who he could go with.

He kicked off the blankets, and wriggled about in his bed, trying to find a comfortable spot to think this problem through. Silus the night watch man was snoring loudly nearby, and he wasn't helping Denny find some peace.

Denny knew that Silus wasn't supposed to sleep on the job, but nobody ever said anything about it, and Denny didn't know why. Everybody had to know that he slept when he was supposed to be watching out for them, he snored so loudly. Denny called him Silus the Snorker in his mind, because he didn't want to hurt the other man's feelings. He didn't like it when they called him dummy, even though it was true, so he wouldn't do that to Silus, even though his snoring was so thunderous.

He rubbed his burny face a little, to ease the sting, and then he looked at his hands in the strong moonlight that filled the corner of his part of the dorm. He wasn't allowed a night light, even though he was a little afraid of the dark, and the full moon was his best time.

Now he looked at the top of his fingers as the stuck out of the funny bandages that they had given him at the hospital, and he noticed that they were all swollen. He looked at his other hand and saw that it had blisters on his palm, but he couldn't touch them because the hard stuff that kept his fingers in place got in the way.

He thought that was funny, but it didn't bother him too much. They weren't sore, and he didn't want to tell anybody about them because he knew that he would just get into trouble again.

Maybe if he could get to see Dr Yasmine, she would tell him what to do...

Denny sat up, another idea filling his head. What if Silus was the only one on watch? He could probably go to the bathroom to see, and then he maybe could get to Culley and Yasmine if Silus *was* the only one.

He sat up, his pyjama pants tangling around his legs, and he felt like they were hands keeping his legs back. He dropped his legs to the floor, and one of the others snorted, making him scared.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, and he sat really still, waiting for one of the others to wake up.

His heart was going *`doof doof doof'* in his chest, and it was making his mouth dry. He sucked at his tongue to make some spit, and tried to be as loud as possible so as to see if anybody was watching him.

And Silus still snored. Denny wanted to laugh at that, but he was too frightened. He carefully pushed the sheets away so that he didn't trip in them, like he had that one time when they still had that man from Brazil here. He had been one scary dude!

Denny stood, and swayed for a moment, standing still so that he could try and make his heart softer. It still went *`doof doof doof'* not matter how hard he tried, and he didn't know if he should try now.

His face stung once more, and that spurred him into walking toward the bathroom, and after that the kitchen. If anybody asked, he was going to get some milk, and he bared his teeth so zealous was his prayer that Wilson wouldn't want to play any games now.

The cold floor tickled his feet, and he rushed for the last little bit, hiding himself just past the lip of the cellar portico. He cringed when the keys that were kept there tinkled, as he brushed them, and he wished he could turn on the kitchen light to banish the darkness and the monsters the others had cruelly told him lived under the refrigerator.

His fingers flicked through the keys quickly, until he came to the new padlock key that kept the cellar sealed from the outside.

He took it, and he burst one of the blisters on his good hand, as he struggled to get the key in the padlock. It was so new it didn't even make that snicking sound that they sometimes did, and he was so happy that he almost forgot himself, and jumped up and down.

He remembered in time not to, and then he slowly lifted the hooked steel out of the eye of the latch, being careful not to catch the sides on the metal. His last thought before he stepped

through the door was that he hoped that Culley wouldn't be mad at him.

## CHAPTER 12

Culley had been mad, but he wasn't mad at Denny. He had spent an suggestive afternoon together with Yasmine, talking and getting to know one another, and although Yasmine had kept her distance, he knew he was slowly wearing her down.

That was until the light bulb had finally joined the ranks of the recyclable.

It had jolted Yasmine back to reality, and it had made her conscious of the fact that they were in danger, and that they shouldn't be indulging in games that were more of the senses than of skill.

And that was what had pissed Culley off. The situation had grown steadily worse as it became obvious that instead of drawing the two of them together, the darkness had that terrible ability of keeping them apart.

It was as if it enabled them to keep secrets, not about one another, but from one another, and Culley resented it. He had only one saving hope in the entire fiasco, and that was in the morning they would come down here again, and they would give them another light bulb. But hope was all he had. He had no guarantee of any kind, and *that* just fed his exasperation.

Even now, she had separated herself from him, insisting that they put some distance between them, and he couldn't sleep holding her in his arms the way that he had the previous night, and he remained cheesed at the world.

If Culley had truly known how Yasmine felt, he would have been overjoyed. She had deliberately set about alienating him, intentionally kept things in the dark, because she didn't trust herself in that deep nigrescence.

That inky blackness freed her, filled her with a need to shed her shyness, and it nuzzled and nurtured a kernel of feminine passion so much, that if he had so much as mentioned sex, she would have torn all his clothes off, and ravished him.

And she seriously thanked the Creator of all that he hadn't, so all she had to fight was her own libido, which was quietly simmering right then as she struggled to sleep, that blissful state still out of reach. She used the quiet of the room to cool her fever.

Yasmine sat up with a start as the door unlatched, the sound slithering ominously around the room. Her muscles seemed to bunch with tension one at a time, the pain just as real as her imagination conjured up what she could be subjected to.

Now she wished she hadn't obliged Culley to sleep with a space between them, because that tiny space felt like the oceans that kept continents apart, and plenty could happen to a person who felt so alone.

"Culley," she whispered, loudly, and then she scabbled forward to wake him.

Only he was already awake and sitting up, and mentally cursing the fact that there was not light to see by. Even a broken match would have been a blessing just then.

He curved a strong arm about her warm body as she burrowed close, and he could feel her breath coming out in moist pants against his shoulder, as her fear betrayed itself to just him.

"Who is it?" he called out strongly, as they both heard a heavy tread carefully make its way down the black stairs.

"Who is it?" he repeated when he got no answer.

"Denny," came the reply. "Why is it so dark in here?" the voice was unsure, and it confused the hell out of Culley. He thought that their captors would be strong and formidable, not hesitant.

"What's going on?" Yasmine asked, her whisper barely audible.

"I don't know," he came back, just as softly.

"Culley?" the voice wavered. "Dr Yasmine? I'm scared... It's too dark in here..." the last was said on a whimper.

Recognition clicked in Yasmine's brain, at the way the voice said her name.

She disentangled herself, squeezing Culley's hands in reassurance when he made to grab her back.

"It'll be okay," she said, as she stood.

"No! Wait! Yas! It could be a trick!" Culley hissed as he heard her padding away.

"Denny?" she said softly into the darkness, aiming for the stairs.

"Yes?" the sound was dragged out of a hesitant mouth, and Yasmine knew she was right.

"Are you by yourself?" she checked.

"Yes," was the answer and if the previous response had been hesitant this one was downright reluctant. "I know I'm not supposed to, but there something wrong with my hand-" Denny said at a rush.

"That's okay," Yasmine soothed him. "Are you stuck on the stairs?"

Culley was amazed that she was so perceptive, and that she had gained the voice's confidence so quickly.

"Uh-huh," he affirmed, and they could both hear him sliding down the wall, then he sat with a `whump' on the hard wood.

"That's okay buddy," said Culley, still not quite sure who they were talking to.

"What's wrong with your fingers?" Yasmine had to keep him talking so that she could follow his voice, and not trip over him.

"They are all fat," Denny told her, his voice still full of fear. "And there are blisters on my other hand."

"Oh dear," Yasmine empathized with him, as she carefully trod up each stair, her hand flat against the wall, so that she could feel for his shoulder.

"It sounds like you touched something that you are allergic to, didn't you tell somebody?" Her hand brushed a warm cloth, and she knew that she had hit the jackpot.

Denny gasped when he felt her hand, and she steadied him before he could run off and fall down the stairs.

"Yas, what's happening?" Culley questioned, both literally and figuratively in the dark.

"You remember Dennis from yesterday don't you?"

Culley didn't but he couldn't say that.

"He was one of your fans who followed us into the X-ray department remember?" Yasmine gently reminded him.

Culley bit back the unkind thing he had been about to say, now able to recall who she was talking about.

"Oh," he said, and if Yasmine had been able to see him, she would have frowned at his own scowl. Culley remembered just as readily that it was that boy's fault that they had been taken hostage in the first place.

"How come there's no light?" Denny repeated, and Culley snorted at the stupid question.

"Because our light bulb fused," Yasmine told him patiently.

"You mean you've got no lights?" Denny practically screeched.

"Shush!" Culley grumbled, and Yasmine heard the distinct clap that Denny made as he slapped a hand over his mouth.

He had forgotten that he was supposed to be quiet, and she guessed that it was a good thing that

Culley *had* remembered, otherwise Denny was going to bring more trouble to them. She didn't blame Denny for yesterday, he couldn't help himself, and she knew that under his prickly attitude Culley also understood.

"Nope, we've got no lights but maybe you can get us another bulb?" Culley appealed, hopefully. There was a deep silence, and Yasmine could feel Denny squeezing the hand that she given him as security.

"I don't know where the bulbs are," Denny finally said, his voice very small, and she could feel him cringe as if he expected them to explode in anger.

"Well how about a torch, or maybe a candle and some matches?" Culley asked, reasonably.

"I'm not supposed to play with fire," Denny's voice held the tinge of experience.

"What about a torch then?" Culley reiterated.

"I dunno..."

Culley pressed his palms into his eyes, to help calm himself. Here was an ally, somebody who could help them escape, and he was an idiot. There was no polite word for it.

"That's okay Dennis," Yasmine said, and she put her arm around his shoulders.

"Ssss..." Denny flinched with pain, as her arm felt too heavy on the oversensitive skin around his shoulder.

"Sore?" Yasmine asked, her doctor's mind kicking in.

"Yes, it feels sunburny," Denny told her, and he shrugged her arm off.

"Dennis, what did you do this afternoon?" she asked, suspicious.

"I helped Jason and Kyle," his tone was proud.

"Did you play with the stuff that they took from the hospital yesterday?"

Denny knew that tone, it meant that if he told the truth she would tell Judd or Wilson, and he would get into big trouble, so he had no problem lying.

"No, no, no. They told me I wasn't to touch it at all," which in a way was the truth, so he didn't feel like he was lying too badly.

"Okay," Yasmine said, not really convinced, but she was willing to let it go. "Do you want to come and sit by me and Culley for a while, so we can find out about upstairs?"

She was just as eager to get out of there as Culley was, and if Denny could help them, then so much the better.

"Can I?" Denny quizzed, his puppy like manner winning them over.

"Sure," Yasmine confirmed, and then she took his hand and helped him stand up.

"Be careful," she murmured. "Stick close to the wall." She didn't want him to fall on top of her. She needed to be whole for Culley.

"God, I'm so confused by this dark," she admitted to Culley, and she heard him giggle.

"Are you laughing at us?" she asked him in the gloom.

"No," but he couldn't keep it out of his voice.

Yasmine had a keen ear, and she led Denny towards the lulling sound.

"Slowly," she warned Denny. "Remember Culley still has a sore leg," she reminded him, as she didn't want him to bump it.

She stopped when her toe wadded a piece of hessian, jamming her creeping progress.

"Good, we are here," she said, and she knelt, her hand extended in front of her so that she could feel for Culley's extended limb.

"This could get interesting," he teased when she touched his hair roughened calf.

"Behave," she admonished. "It's okay Dennis, you can bend down now." She made sure that his clumsy form was nowhere near Culley's injury.

"This is sort of fun," Denny giggled, and Culley could feel the same sharp resentment forming

again. This was anything but fun. He bit his words back, as the knowledge, that Denny was not altogether there, gripped him once more.

"It's not really," Yasmine told him gently, doing what he wanted to do, but with a lot more finesse.

"It isn't?" Denny's tone was now unsure.

"It's not really nice being stuck in only one place for a long time," Culley chipped in, seeing that she was trying to win him over in the most accessible way possible.

"Yeah, like at the hospital," Denny chirped, and they could both hear understanding in his voice. It was all they had to go on, because it was so dark they couldn't see his face, couldn't check to see if he truly grasped, that they were in trouble, in his open eyes.

"Exactly," Yasmine praised, "there are lots of places you can go to in the hospital if you are allowed to go there, but if you are sick or can't move-

"Like Culley," said Denny, proud that he understood what she was trying to say to him.

"Like Culley," she echoed. "If you are stuck in one place and you have no one to visit you and to bring you things, then it's not fun anymore."

"But I've come to visit you."

Culley groaned audibly at the boy's logic, and he hoped that he wouldn't get it in his head that because he was visiting that everything was okay. Culley had the feeling that Denny was very hard to shake from certain ideas.

"But you are the only one to do so," Yasmine lied, crossing her fingers in the dark. "Plus which I still want to see my sister-

"And I want to see my brother," pitched in Culley, seizing on the notion that Judd was Denny's only family, and that Yasmine was trying to show him that they also had family that they wanted to see.

"I can get Judd to come and see you," Denny said, eagerly.

"No!" they both said harshly, and Denny's snatched, hurt gasp was loud in the closed cellar.

"Denny, buddy," Culley knew that this would probably sound better coming from him, "Judd is awfully angry, even with us, and we don't want you to get into trouble, and make him even crosser, do we?"

"No," Denny agreed, readily.

"Which means that you can't tell him-

"Aw no, I hate secrets, they always hurt," Denny cut him off, and Culley had to keep himself from alternately laughing and growling in anger at the problem that Denny was.

"Okay," said Yasmine, trying another tack, "you can come and visit us anytime, but we don't like it when Judd is so angry with us. So we don't want him to come and visit us."

"How come Judd *is* so angry with you guys?" It had been a question that had been bugging Denny ever since Judd had put them in the cellar, especially since Judd only did that to him when he had done something really bad.

Culley wasn't sure how to answer that. The truth would probably be far too complex for Denny to comprehend, and a simple answer might just alienate the one ally that they had.

"Is it because Dr Yasmine got in the way yesterday?"

Culley instinctively knew that Denny had turned towards him, even though he couldn't see him in the dark. For a moment he wondered if Yasmine had been hurt by Denny's observation.

"That's right," she agreed, dispelling Culley's chivalrous alarm.

"He's mad because he wanted Culley to go with him, and I didn't want to let him because he wasn't finished with the X-rays first."

Culley was amazed that she had told the truth, and at the same time made it sound like it was

some child's argument, rather than the very serious kidnapping that it really was. She had made it clear so that Denny could understand, but she had placed blame on nobody, not even Judd. Denny would not be obliged to defend his brother's honour, and she had also given Denny an understandable reason as to why they needed to go back to the hospital.

"Does Culley need extra bone-pictures?" Denny had seen the see-through pictures of his own hand, and Nurse Lydia had explained very carefully why they had taken those special photos.

"Yes he does," Yasmine replied. "He needs them very badly, or else his knee will get broken and he won't be able to wrestle again."

"No," Denny moaned, as Yasmine's words caught him. The PWL just wouldn't be the same if Culley didn't wrestle in it.

"Yes," Yasmine insisted, although she had exaggerated the seriousness just a little dramatically.

"That's not good, and it's not fair!" Denny's voice had become louder with each word, and Culley was afraid that he was going to have to tackle the younger man so he could keep him quiet.

"I know that," Yasmine said softly. "But it doesn't have to be like that if we can get out of here. Can you help us get out of here?"

Culley tensed as he sensed Denny thinking about Yasmine's bold question.

"Judd won't like it," Denny said, not really answering the question.

"I'm not asking Judd that question," Yasmine said reasonably, putting a smile into her voice.

"Denny what you did this evening was very brave, and smart too."

"Yeah, it was smart," Culley emphasised. "It shows that you are a good friend, and good friends help each other, especially when one of us is sick."

"But it will mean that you will go away, and I'll never see you again," Denny pouted.

"You're supposed to come with us," Yasmine told him, shocking Culley. "You can't stay here with Judd, you have to stay with me and Nurse Lydia, and others until Judd calms down and is not so cross anymore, okay?"

Yasmine's capacity to think in the future was one of the best things about her, Culley decided. Of course Denny would have to come with them, to stay would obviously mean serious pain for the boy, or even his death, and he didn't think he could live with himself either, if that happened.

"Really?" Denny was confused now. On the one hand, he knew that if he helped Culley and Dr Yasmine, Judd would be so angry that he would kill somebody else, maybe even break more of his bones; but on the other hand if he let them stay, Culley's knee would get so bad that he would never wrestle again and that would also be bad. He was torn between two men that he admired greatly, and he didn't know which way to turn.

"Denny," Culley felt it was time to add his own persuasion, "we are not saying that you will never see Judd again, we just want him to calm down first, and then you can come back and live with him, and he won't hurt you because you helped us..."

He let Denny mull on his words for a few moments, as both he and Yasmine summoned other assurances from their collective pasts, just so that they could get away from Judd and his madness.

"What do you say Denny? Do you think that you can help us? Do you think you can help us?" Culley repeated.

Neither Yasmine nor Culley had ever felt so exposed in their entire lives. It was like they were standing naked in a mall, and were asking everybody that passed them not to laugh, only Culley felt that would probably be easier than getting Denny to co-operate.

"I dunno..." Denny finally said, after a few seconds of tense silence.

Culley carefully controlled his breathing as the irritation tickled his emotions again. He couldn't

let it show, he couldn't push Denny into an opposing emotion. Right then, he was their only hope and they needed to be careful.

"Denny," Yasmine began again, "the others have not been nice to us. We haven't had anything to eat, or to drink all day," she lied again. "I don't want to stay here any more, and Culley needs to be where there is medicine." She was determinedly playing on his emotions, and Culley hoped that it would work. It was dark, and Denny didn't have to see the remains of their second rate meal, nor did Culley blame Yasmine for lying to Denny. The others were the true criminals, not them, and they had to use every tool to get out of there and away from those neo-fascists.

"I can fix that," Denny said, and they both felt, rather than saw him, jump up.

"Dennis," Yasmine warned.

"I can," he repeated, emphatically. "I can fix it!"

They both heard him scuffling around, and Yasmine was concerned that he would injury Culley further, whilst her patient just felt his annoyance grow exponentially.

"Dennis," Yasmine called out patiently, and again, this time not so patiently.

Denny ignored her, bent on getting to the stairs and getting them some water, and maybe some food. He really didn't want Culley to leave, and maybe if they stayed and got to know Judd they wouldn't find him such a bad person, maybe they'd even like it and stay forever, and wouldn't that be neat!

"Ow!" he said as he bashed his shin against something in the dark, and then he fell forward on to the bannister of the stairs, and tripped over something else.

"Dennis!" This time Yasmine was sharp in her command.

"Where's he going?" Culley asked as they heard him *`clump'* up the stairs.

Yasmine was tense as she followed Denny's progress, sure that he was going to fall down the stairs and break something else, not to mention wake the whole household. She wondered what Judd would do to them if he found out that they were trying to get Denny to help them escape.

"I don't know," she answered Culley's hissed question, "and even worse, I don't know whether I actually want him to come back," she whispered back.

"I know what you mean," he murmured, as the top of the stairs took on a faint glow, from the full moon. "Aren't you tempted to just leave?" he asked very quietly, as they both noticed that Denny had left the door open.

"Not without you," was her very firm, if hushed answer. Even if those stairs promised her a teleportal to her own bed, she would stay with Culley, although if pushed she would never have been able to say why she wanted to stay.

It wasn't that she didn't know, she did, and that knowledge was the problem. She had come to care for him far too much in the space of just a few short hours. She wouldn't have left him even if she disliked him, or if her had been a pain in the butt, but now she had an extra motivation to stick closely to him.

They both winced as they heard Denny tossing about pots and pans in the kitchen above, and they both wondered if he was going to rouse anybody else. Neither of them had too much energy to resist Judd if he came down here and made more threats. Yasmine knew that she would feel a little better with some sleep, but that wasn't likely with Denny around.

Torchlight made a spotlight on the dank bricks at the top of the stairs, and they were both taken aback as Denny made his weaving, grunting way down the stairs.

"Here's some water, and some *`tuc'* biscuits," he told them proudly, when he stood at the foot of their makeshift bed, once more.

They both lifted their hands to their faces, as Denny shone the torch directly into their eyes, not used to the light just yet.

"Dennis, can I see that torch?" Yasmine asked, and she held out her hand, so that he could give it to her.

The warm plastic base and the heaviness of the body was a welcome sensation in her hand, and the added bonus was that it was no longer being shined in her eyes. She flicked it over Denny, assessing his red face, and then snagging his bracketed, broken fingers so she could examine the swollen digits.

Denny and Culley were quiet as she leaned forward to pull at Denny's T-shirt so that she could look at his extra-sensitive skin. Culley knew that she would not forget why Denny had come down there in the first place, and he watched he finish her examination in the weak light.

"You sure you didn't touch that stuff that they brought from the hospital?" she pressed.

"What stuff?" Denny asked, playing dumb, deliberately.

Yasmine sighed, and then shook her head. She knew that she wasn't going to get a straight answer from Denny, nor was she going to be able to control his movements in the world above, because it would make more trouble for all of them if she tried. The only thing she could do was try and warn him of the danger that he was messing around with.

"Dennis, the others brought a metal thing with us yesterday, do you remember it?"

His shadow bobbed as he nodded his head in the affirmative.

"Okay, that stuff can make you really sick-"

"With blisters and things?" Denny asked, concerned.

"Worse," Yasmine decided to make the prospect really horrifying. "Your skin will swell up like a bee sting, and then it will burst, and so will your stomach if you eat, because it gets inside you."

Denny started to back up, and Yasmine followed him to make her point. With each step she added a new word to her warning, and even Culley was shocked at her bluntness.

"You will bleed from your nose and mouth. Your teeth will fall out, and so will your hair. All your bones will start to ache, and then you won't be able to see anymore, and then you will die. Do you understand, now, why you have to stay away from that stuff?"

Even Culley now understood why she was so concerned, and why she had reacted the way she had yesterday.

"Do you see?" she repeated, this time more gently, standing in front of the cornered boy-man, the torch focused on the floor so that she didn't have to see the tears that she was sure were in his eyes - the tears that would have stopped her from being so harsh, stopped her from saving Denny's special life.

"Dennis, we need you. We need you to be our friend, and you can't be friends if you are sick, okay?" Yasmine lifted her empty hand and curved it around Denny's round cheek, and like the puppy that he had been compared to, he pushed his head into her comforting hand.

In an instant Culley saw the future, more specifically *his* future, the one he was going to share with Yasmine, and it left him stunned from the impact.

## CHAPTER 13

When Judd woke them up, he was glad that they were both decent, and that there was no Denny. The crumbs from the Tucs would have cause immense trouble and Yasmine had somehow stashed the other bucket from prying eyes.

The glare from the new bulb left the two of them horribly exposed, and as a result they had to prepare themselves to deal with whatever Judd could come up with so early in the morning.

Yasmine stood sedately, taking her time, and made odd movements when gun guy tried to get

her to stand quicker. She didn't want him dirtying her skin again, not after she had got it clean. It was one thing to be dirtied by the natural elements, it was another to carry around the stink of foul human habits.

"My, my, my, an ethics board would certainly have a field day here, wouldn't they doctor?" Judd sounded like a stuck record as he pointed out that Culley and Yasmine were still far to close for his version of decency.

"Same question as yesterday," Yasmine returned, "what do you want of us?"

Culley kept his mouth shut this time, although he wouldn't hesitate to move if things got too physical again, but Judd prudently kept his distance.

"What I want is for you to die for our cause-"

"I don't think my death is in your purview," Yasmine informed him calmly. Whether they truly lived or died was not up to them, but up to the Creator, and if Judd did manage to murder them, then that would be one more weapon to bring this bastard down.

"Oh but I think it is," Judd said silkily. "I think that I hold your life in my hands, and that it would be so simple to make you choose - your own life or that of your... Oh dear I don't know what to call this ignorant hulk anymore. He's clearly no longer your patient, and I would hate for you to become too attached to him... After all he has expended his value."

Yasmine sighed, and rubbed her eyes, mostly to hide that she was deathly afraid, even if she was trying to act as if Judd was more of an annoyance. To Culley that took a lot of guts.

"I cannot make you do anything, no more than you can make me do something against my will," Yasmine finally said, with some force. "If you make me choose, then I will force you to take my own life-"

"Really?" Judd mocked. "And I wonder what choice Mr Taffinder would make if I dressed you in a jacket of dynamite, and then told him that I would let you live if he agreed to some elective surgery?"

"You wouldn't dare!" Culley growled, determinedly moving as if to stand. "You come near her, and I'll give you a reason to kill me!"

Judd laughed evilly, mocking Culley's immobility. "You poor fool," he scorned. "I have known for a long time that doctors and hospitals are governed by the unclean, and that most patients are mere guinea-pigs for research so that the Jews and their cohorts can just get richer. Can't you see where she has led you? You are just an experiment to her."

"Thanks but I'll take her tender loving care over your incompetent ministrations any day!" Culley spat.

"Not so incompetent," Judd smiled again, and Culley just knew he wasn't going to like the next words out of his mouth.

"Like Dr Knittel here, I've done some studying about the human body, and I'm pretty sure that I can match her cut for cut."

"You wish!" Culley scoffed.

"Well," Judd shrugged, "I'm fairly certain that I could surgically insert an amount of explosives into your body in such a manner that Dr Knittel here, would have no alternative but to redo my work-"

"You wouldn't dare!" Yasmine was in a terrible rage, every muscle in her body taut with anger, a sense of impotence choking off her natural courage.

"Look about you," Judd finally felt that he had the upper hand, "if I can arrange your surroundings, then there is no doubt that I can arrange your physical well being. Just something to think about to wile away the long hours."

With that he turned away, and left, just a little to smug, even though there was nothing the

Yasmine or Culley could do about it. Not yet.

They both waited until they were absolutely sure that Judd and the other man were gone. During that time Yasmine counted the minutes off in her head, whilst Culley steamed to her side. They had to get out of there. Quick. And Denny was beginning to look like their only hope, and for that reason they had to watch what they said, and they had to pray very hard that Denny wouldn't give them away with his everyday prattle.

"Do you think he'll do it?" Culley asked in a stage whisper, as she stood next to the stairs, looking to see that there were no ears listening.

"Who'll do what?" Yasmine talked back, just as softly. "Will our simple friend come through, or that this Judd person will really make a vest of dynamite for either of us to wear?"

He waited for her to come across again.

"The first one," Culley answered. "God, I don't even want to think about the other," he told her earnestly, as he accepted another bowl of gruel from her.

She shuddered too, Judd's evil lingering in their cocoon. She licked her hand where she had spilt some of the oats on it.

"At least he brought us another bulb," she tried to absolve Judd of his sins against them, in some small manner, as she went and sat down across from him.

"Most probably too chicken shit to face us in the dark," Culley growled, and he shifted so that his open-back gown wasn't open so wide against the rough brick wall he was sitting against.

He was angry at the other man's intrusion, and he was beginning to feel increasingly anxious about Yasmine's safety.

It was if the previous night had taken their level of intimacy to a much higher plane, and for that reason he was feeling very protective not only of her, but of the feelings that she had invoked in him. He wanted to keep them alive just as much as he needed her to be the source for them.

And every time that they seemed to get closer, someone came along and put a spanner in the works. Not just someone, one person in particular, Judd Pierson, and Culley was not particularly forgiving where he was concerned.

He was egotistical, and murderous, and from what little they had learned, he was also fanatical. What he wanted most from him and Yasmine was devotion, and it was the one thing Culley could guarantee he was not going to get. Here, he had only one devotion - Yasmine - and that emotion was becoming more and more intense with every moment that they spent together.

"Man, that guy has the worst timing-" and he stopped when he saw her blush, the colour entrancing him, soothing him.

Yasmine didn't want to talk about what they had done, even though she felt the loss of intimacy just as much as he did. It was because it *was* so extraordinary, and Judd had nearly ruined it for them, and she wanted to hang on to the feeling for a little longer, keep it in the dark, the same way they had been so close in the shadows, use it to keep Judd's evil away.

If Culley spoke about it, he would expose it and make it common, wreck what was unique and special between the two of them.

Culley read what she was feeling, and he could do nothing but respect her need to keep it close.

"Okay," he let her have her way, "do you think Denny will come back tonight?" He had to ask, even though he didn't think the question would do very much for their mood either.

"I hope so," Yasmine answered, fervently, most of her hopes focused on their meeting tonight.

They needed to get out of here, and away from that murderer, and in a deep recess, she had to admit that there was an extra reason. She wanted to see if their passion and their feelings could withstand the forces of the outside world. Like most women, she couldn't throw her heart or her

body into a relationship that was based on an intense few moments. She couldn't be irresponsible, she needed to be able to commit, and she knew she couldn't do that on emotions that were rather like shadows and mist, feelings that could burn away in the light of reality.

"You could have left last night-

"No, I couldn't," she stopped him. "I will not leave you here by yourself." Her words weren't insistent, but they carried all her determination, and Culley knew that he wouldn't have to speak of it again. She was not leaving without him, not even if he begged or pleaded. They would just have to trust that Denny would come back, and help them, and in the mean time all they had to do was stick close together, and pray that it wasn't Judd that came back. In his eyes, the waiting wasn't such a hardship. He had her all to himself, and nothing but time to bewitch her into surrendering. It was going to be an interesting day, and in one way, he was looking forward to it.

Denny was having a terrible day. He had overslept, and so, instead of being able to go and hide away from Jason and Kyle, like he had wanted to, they had woken him up, and they had told him that he was supposed to move that stuff around again.

He couldn't tell them that Dr Yasmine had told him that he mustn't, or that she had told him that they would get sick if they messed with the plain looking pellets. How could he? They would demand to know who had told him about the bad stuff, and then he would be in huge trouble, not only because he hadn't listened to Judd and the others about not playing with this stuff, but because he gone to visit Culley and Dr Yasmine.

He had put on his best whiny voice, and he had dragged his feet and tried his best to get away from these two slave drivers, but all he had earned so far, was a smack on the back of the head from Kyle, and a sick dread that was growing steadily in his belly. He just knew that the bad rays that Dr Yasmine had described to him last night were slowly poisoning him and everybody around him, and he didn't know how to stop it. The blisters on his hands had grown bigger, and now he had them on his arms, and he was pretty sure on his face, even though he couldn't feel them past the water-filled sacs that covered his palms. And Jason and Kyle still made fun of him and now the blisters, and that just made him sad.

He wished that he had listened to Wilson, and to Judd, and that he wasn't moving these little balls from one place to another. He wished that he was watching Culley wrestle right now.

"Don't drop that or do anything to it," Kyle was saying, as they tore open a TV. set and took the insides out, spreading them out like guts to make sausage.

"Why?" Jason asked, and he fingered a plastic board thing, Denny noticed out the corner of his eye.

"Because it's the only one we have, and if you break it, Judd is going to shit-

"Is it important?"

"Of course it's important, you idiot," Kyle hissed at Jason, as he scowled at his moronic question. He shook his head as if he couldn't believe the other man's stupidity.

"Okay," shrugged Jason, as he carelessly put the plastic board down.

"Jesus!" Kyle blasphemed. "Am I talking to myself? I said be careful! If you break it, we are both going to end up like that fucking dimwit, Dolf!"

Jason's eyes flared in fear, as did Denny's. That plastic thing had to be really important, and Denny really wanted to see it. Right then.

He slowly sifted the pellets into the funny-colour-silver container, making sure that he didn't spill any around, but his mind was over at the table, with that plastic thing.

"Watch it!" growled Kyle as Denny let some spray over one side, and he made to grab the pouring container to catch the overflow.

"What a dummy!" laughed Jason, as he watched Kyle and Denny scramble to pick up the absconding metal.

"Man, go watch the door to make sure that nobody comes in," Kyle sneered at Jason, before he clipped Denny on the back of the head again. "Fucking pricks, both of you!" he cursed again, and he virtually threw the last handful of pellets into the boron casing, making Denny jump back.

"Just leave," Kyle told Denny harshly, making a threatening motion with his right hand.

That was just what Denny wanted, but he also still wanted to see the plastic board, and right then, that was more important.

"I said get out of here!" Kyle gestured more emphatically this time, his hand making an ugly chopping motion in the air.

Jason made a snickering sound as he watched Kyle and Denny dance around for a bit. He knew that Kyle would probably call him back in about five minutes. Neither of them wanted to touch the black pellets anymore than they had to, and it was so easy to get Denny to do their dirty work.

Denny knew that it was now or never. He just had to feel that plastic, just had to touch the blobs of shiny metal that dotted its ridged surface. He feinted to the left, and then to the right, his body moving so quickly it belied his usual clumsiness.

Like a basket ball player, he bounced and weaved, pushing Kyle back, as he angled toward the work bench with the plastic doohickey on it.

When he was close enough, he hunched his body down, smaller than Kyle's flapping arms, and he bent around the other man's torso, his inept fingers grappling for the blue, plastic board on the strewn work bench.

"Hey!" both Kyle and Jason bellowed at the same time, but Denny ignored them, especially after his palm and fingers closed over the board, the plastic firm in his grip.

He snatched his hand back, pulling away from Kyle at the same time. He was so quick, that Kyle was grabbing at clear air, as he tried to get the board away from Denny.

Denny spun around and was out of the door, before Jason even had a chance to get up and help Kyle in his endeavour to stop Denny.

"Shit!" cursed Kyle, as he ran after Denny, Jason bruising his heels behind him.

"We have to stop him!" hissed Jason, as they pursued Denny through the house, both grateful that most everybody else was busy with instructing-lessons. Only Cookie was about with nothing to do, but he was assigned to the kitchen, and he only stuck his head out as the three of them blew past him.

Denny was bent on hanging on to the board until he had thoroughly investigated every ridge and blob on it. He knew that Jason and Kyle would try to take it away from him, and he knew the best way to get what he wanted was to stick close to his brother or Wilson. So he ran for their sanctuary, with the other two right behind him.

He crashed through the door to Judd's class - as his brother liked to call the gatherings - startling every one, as he skidded and then slipped on the vinyl floor, sliding to a halt behind Judd, who turned around with a fearsome look on his face.

Denny rolled over to face his brother, and surreptitiously stuck the board in the free, back pocket of his jeans. He gave Judd a beautiful smile, and then waved his broken hand at his scowling sibling.

Judd closed the door on Jason's very loud: "Fuck!"

He was sure that Denny had probably done something wrong, but he wasn't in the mood to find out from the others. It had nothing to do with the burst of guilt that had flooded him at the sight of Denny's braced fingers, and the cast that enveloped his left hand - nothing whatsoever.

"Sit at the back, and keep quiet," he instructed Denny, as he yanked him to his feet. Later he would regret not finding out what had happened, but just then he was feeling important, and Denny was really insignificant when he felt that way.

Denny didn't mind sitting in the back. It gave him the best time to look at the board, and delight in the sensation that he had pulled one over on his tormentors. He just knew Dr Yasmine and Culley would be proud of him, and he was only going to give the board back once he had shown it to them. They *would* be impressed.

Culley shifted uncomfortably again, the third time in ten minutes. Yasmine winced as she noticed his action. She knew that he was trying to be nonchalant about his injury, but she knew that he was getting no better, not even the game of cards they were playing distracting him. The moving around helped, and the trips that he made to their bucket bathroom, seemed to ease the cramped muscles a little, but there was very little else that she could do. And she cursed herself, for feeling so helpless, and then she cursed Judd for making her that way.

She put down her cards, and Culley nearly jumped out of his skin when she lifted his foot up, and began to massage the knots in his hairy calf muscle.

"Do you think Denny will be back tonight?" he asked, and then swallowed loudly, as her fingers began to work magic on more than just his calf muscle.

She wanted to say *'We've been through this already,'* but she knew that he needed a little reassurance, just as much as she did, and she didn't have the excuse that pain gave him.

"God, I hope so," she replied, with a small smile. "Is this thing uncomfortable?" her fingers brushed the edge of her makeshift brace. She didn't want him to suffer any more than he had to.

"I'm just uncomfortable in general," he answered her honestly. "The floor is hard, the food sucks, and I have a list of other complaints that you don't need to hear anymore," he said with a sharp laugh.

"I wish I knew what time it was," she said with a sigh, and she carefully laid his leg down again, much to his disappointment.

"It is dark," he observed, after he had looked over at the grimy air vent, that gave them each some idea of what time it was.

"It's amazing how time flies when you are older," he remarked. "When you're young, everything takes ages. Your school classes always seemed to drag on forever-"

"And Christmas and your birthday couldn't come soon enough," she laughed in agreement. It was a phenomenon that she was familiar with, and even worse she now felt that there was never enough time in the day to do everything she wanted to.

"I don't think I could bear trying to persuade Denny to help us again," he said, tiredly. "I just don't feel in the mood..." he finished listlessly.

Yasmine knew that it was really the pain, and being cooped up like this that was forming his opinion, but she needed his help.

They really needed to get Denny to get out of there. Denny would have to help her get Culley up the stairs, and he also had a better idea of what and who lay where upstairs. It wouldn't do them any good to bust out of there, only to stumble over a guard or somebody who could stop them.

There were a number of ways that she could get him to co-operate, but she knew the best would be the one that would stiffen his resolve. She could only do that by bribing him, or making him angry, probably both.

"Culley we can't give up. If anything this morning should have shown you that."

"I know that," he grumbled, "it's just that I don't think that I have any answers or any patience to deal with the one person who got us into this mess in the first place!"

"We need his help!" She was surprised that he couldn't see that.

"Do we? What if he screws it up again?"

"Then we have to make sure that he doesn't, that he sticks closely to us."

"He's a loose cannon. You saw what happened last night, if we can't control him with words, then how are you going to control him otherwise? I can't move, and if he betrays us, then there's no telling what they'll do to us!"

"Okay," she rubbed her forehead tiredly, "what would it take for you to help me-"

"Why is that you think that this is some kind of negotiation?" he asked, crossly. "What? Do you think that I will co-operate if you give me some kind of reward?"

"That's not what I meant-" Yasmine said, cheerlessly, unhappy that the conversation had gone so wrong.

"Okay," Culley continued, as if she had never spoken. "Here's my price. If I *help* you, as you so kindly ask, then I want to keep seeing you after we get out of here!" Let her make of that what she wanted, he decided.

Yasmine was taken aback. Not only by his words, which she briefly considered insulting, but by the feelings that cascaded through her directly after he had uttered them. The most irrational thought dominated, and that was she wanted him to *want* to keep on seeing her, not as a condition to some demand that she made, but because he felt a need to. She wanted to be desired and needed for herself, independent of the situation in which they found themselves.

She shook her head as if she could clear the stray thought from her head, and Culley scowled, giving Yasmine the impression that she had just made things much worse.

"That's not what I meant," she began again, firmly, "and you know it. I cannot get you out of here by myself, I need Denny's help. He hero-worship's you," she continued, kneeling before him, moving closer, as if that would help her win him over.

"And you?" he asked, suddenly leaning forward, and grabbing her elbows, pulling her into his arms. "Do you hero-worship me?"

He wanted to hear the answer, even though he knew it. She didn't like him because he had been on TV. and was now considered famous. Under different circumstances, they would never have met, but now she knew him, and he just knew that she would never have allowed him that close if she had other motives.

His question made Yasmine mad, and she shoved at his brawny chest trying to get away from his tempting, cradling arms.

"I do not!" she grated, looking at his so close face, fiercely.

Culley knew that he was losing ground badly, and that if he hadn't needed his ego stroked things would be progressing a little better.

"Ah hell," he sighed, and then let her go. "I don't know why I'm feeling so ornery..."

She could have been suspicious of his confession, but somehow she couldn't summon the right emotion. It was stressful being so helpless, and she knew that he didn't want to have to rely on anybody else. Not being mobile required an adjustment that was difficult enough in the everyday, but in an environment like the one they now found themselves in, she was surprised that he had held out as long as this.

She curved a soft hand around his now very rough cheek. "It will be okay." Those words had become a litany for both of them, and she was fast running out of faith that they would come true.

Culley felt his gut clench in guilt, as he correctly read the slow loss of hope in her face. She was incredibly brave, but that strength was not inexhaustible, and he wasn't exactly helping. He sensed that she understood that he was feeling powerless, but he also sensed that she only had so much of her own strength to loan him, and that she was feeling just as vulnerable, if not more. It was that willingness to give him her strength even though she needed it more. That just made him care for her more.

He wound his arm about her again, and drew her unprotesting body close to his again.

"Wow, our first fight," he murmured, and she put up a short struggle to keep from smiling, but all too soon he could feel it in the bow of his strong neck.

"I take it you aren't mad at me anymore," he said, rather than asked, against her warm hair.

"I should be," she sighed, "but no, I'm not angry."

"Good, because if you want to be angry at me, be angry at me for this!"

And he bent his head and fit his mouth to hers once more, luring her into another world altogether.

Denny hadn't been feeling very well the whole evening. Not even the plastic board with its strange design, and the fact that he had stolen it away from Kyle and Jason could make him feel better. The food tasted funny, and his stomach was rolling. The blisters on his hands had also burst and the water in them hadn't dried up like usual, but had become a sticky orange liquid that just wouldn't go away. He also had blisters on his forehead now, and he had spent as much time away from everybody as he could, although no one had noticed yet. He knew Dr Yasmine would have noticed. Even more he bet that she would know what was wrong, and make him all better. But he couldn't go there yet.

All through the day he had thought about the two of them down there in the cellar in the dark, and all day, the feeling that Judd was just being mean had grown in his heart. Wilson had said that Culley and Yasmine had been in danger, but he had seen nobody come for them. Even more he knew that Culley and Yasmine's parents were worried about them. He had seen it a few times on the TV., and they couldn't be in much danger if their parents wanted them back. That meant that Wilson and Judd had lied to him, and although that was nothing new, this time they had lied about someone who was important to him. And for that reason Denny knew that he had to do something. Dr Yasmine had told him that she needed his help, and because of Wilson and Judd's lies he knew that he was going to help her.

But he was still afraid, and that didn't help his stomach any. He felt the sour taste in the back of his throat, as a metallic flavour coated his taste buds once more, and he just knew that he was going to vomit.

As much as he was glad that they hadn't seen him, when he had finished retching, he also wished that there was someone there to help him. He had to get to Dr Yasmine, soon. He didn't like being sick, and wasn't it a good thing that Cook drank himself into a stupor, every night, so that he could sneak down there a little earlier.

He also wanted to give Culley a present, and they were always best given early, just look at Christmas...

He fingered the board like a charm, hoping that it would take the biliousness away, as well as being something that Culley would like. It gave him hope that his friends would make everything all better.

Nice was such a tame word to describe the state of being that they had slipped into, but it was the most apt word to describe the contentment that they felt in each other's company.

As Culley had kissed her, she had been far too aware that the sexual tension that existed between them could flare out of control, but it hadn't. Instead they had slipped into a mode of harmony that transcended the base emotions that so often characterised sex. Not that they weren't there in a dark undercurrent that could have overwhelmed either of them. It was just that they felt something profound, something far more complex and binding, and Yasmine felt herself slipping into unknown and critical territory.

If last night had been intense, and pleasurable, this was far more dangerous, conjuring up an emotion that she knew could live across vast spaces, and eons of time, and yet it was so fragile that if it was built on the most inconsequential of foundations, it could disappear in a poof, like the assistant in a magic trick. And like the audience, a lover was often left guessing as to where it went, and how it was going to come back.

She knew that emotion, it was love, and rationally she was determined to fight it, determined to stave it off until she was sure of Culley's mind.

It was one thing to be out in the real world, amongst others where strong sentiments could be tempered by other people and emotions, it was completely something else when they were subjected to this roller coaster of extreme feelings and sensations. And whilst she was aware that sometimes those emotions were more real, she also knew that they burned out more quickly because they were so potent.

But now, it was just the opposite. The way they felt about each other *was* intense, but it had also taken on a reinforcing sense of peace that she didn't think that she would ever recover from or find again if she lost it.

The latch above them caught, and scraped, and they both tensed, waiting to see who it was. Yasmine moved away slightly, and Culley let her go. They didn't need anymore sarcasm from that Judd person.

"Oooh!" a voice moaned above them, and they both recognised it.

"Denny you okay?" Culley called out, forgetting that the boy wasn't really supposed to be there.

"No," he moaned again, the syllable long and drawn out.

"What's the matter buddy?" Culley asked, as Yasmine broke away in alarm, and then headed towards the stairs.

"I'm sick," he answered, his voice wobbly. "Hey, you've got lights," he observed, and he gave a watery smile as Yasmine came into his view.

"Yeah," Yasmine told him softly, as she tried valiantly to summon a smile of her own. "They brought us a new bulb earlier. You want me to come and get you up there?"

"I think you better," Denny answered in a manner that contradicted his usual addled mind. It struck Yasmine as she quietly made her way up the stairs that he didn't sound himself, and as she got closer she realised why.

"Oh Denny, what have you done?" she said disconsolately, looking at his swollen face, before she quietly closed the door.

Denny didn't even have the energy to lie to her, simply shrugging his shoulders instead.

"Come on," she took his wrist, remembering that his hands were blistered from the night before.

Culley was curious after Yasmine's initial words, but as Denny came further into the room, he wished he had rather not known what was wrong.

It was obvious that Denny had radiation sickness, and that he believed that Yasmine could help

him. And he just had to look at Yasmine to see that it was killing her, because she could do so little.

"Oh-oh," Denny said softly, and Yasmine looked at his sickened face to see what was wrong.

"I'm going to puke again," Denny choked, and she hustled him to the nearby empty bucket, and then soothed him as he retched out what little he had in his stomach.

Culley half pushed, half scooted across to where the others had brought them fresh water, and poured a cup so that Yasmine could give it to him.

"I played with that stuff, you know the stuff I wasn't supposed to," Denny told them, very matter-of-factly.

"I know," replied Yasmine, and she reached up to stroke the back of his head. "It will be okay," she stretched the truth a little, "but we have to get out of here, so I can help you-"

"Okay," Denny coughed, all fight gone from him. She took the cup from Culley's outstretched hand so that he could drink the tightness from his throat.

Both of them stared at Denny, at his capitulating word. Both of them had expected to go through a process of persuasion, and each had armed themselves with the best bribes that they could possibly think of to sway Denny to their side. Now it was a slight let down that their inducements would not be needed, and a huge relief that they finally had their friend's help.

"Are we gonna go now?" Denny asked, and Yasmine could see that he was a little afraid.

"No, later," she answered, "after everyone has gone to sleep. We are going to need a car, can you get us some keys?"

"U-huh," Denny responded, listlessly, "there's a big rack off keys by the door, and the shed is around back. Does that mean I have to go back upstairs before we go?"

"Hell no," Culley cut in. Denny was going nowhere, not only because he was sick, but because they were afraid that he might not make it back down, scuppering their escape. "You can stay here."

*'Where we can see you,'* he added silently. It wasn't Denny that he didn't trust, but rather circumstances. If Denny was with them, then their chances were better for escape, plus which they could keep him away from people who cared very little for him.

Culley could feel anger coursing through him, as Denny walked over to their nest of gunney sacks, and curled up in misery next to his big form. He was looking forward to smashing his big fist in Judd Pierson's face, in repayment for all three of them.

Yasmine sat back down next to him, and put her hand over his clenched fist. She shared his rage, but she was going to focus it where it would do the most damage, and she was going to be patient about it. Soon they would be out of there.

"Where's Denny?" Wilson asked Judd quietly, concern evident in his long, lean face.

"He's around," Judd replied curtly. The stupid git had been under foot all day, never straying far, and he had other, better things to do, than watch out for his dumb brother.

"I'm worried about him." Wilson felt it was time to be frank. As far he was concerned their cause demanded everybody sacrifice something, and in Wilson's eyes Denny had already done so. If Judd wanted more, he was going to have to find someone else. Wilson needed Denny more than anything now, and he was going to do his best to protect that relationship.

He was also going to do his damndest to get rid of their hostages. They were a threat in Wilson's eyes, a conviction that had grown steadily after he had gone to check on Denny the night before, only to find his bed empty. Denny would tell all their secrets to people who, Wilson was convinced, would never understand and who would take Denny away from him. He couldn't allow that.

Wilson could also feel jealousy in his heart. Denny would go to those two without any inducements, follow them blindly, and he couldn't stand that. Denny was his.

"Well you can stop worrying," Judd dismissed his fears, abruptly. "He was around me all day long-"

"And he was with me, but he doesn't look well," responded Wilson, even though he knew that to interrupt Judd was courting trouble.

"He's never going to be well," scoffed Judd, annoyed that Wilson was not getting with *his* programme. "He is sick in the head after all!"

Wilson bit his tongue, deliberately, to stop himself from spewing out the words that would get him killed. He wanted to protest on Denny's behalf, to tell Judd not to be *so* self-absorbed that he failed to understand his brother's needs, but he didn't dare.

Dolf's lesson was too fresh in his mind, and Wilson had no illusions that Judd would be a lot more inventive if he ever found about his and Denny's special relationship. Judd would never understand that he loved Denny.

"What are we going to do with the hostages?" he said, changing the subject, to one no less manageable.

"Use them." The words were flat, unemotional. "When Kyle and Jason are finished, I'm going to return them to the civilized world, with a present. It will add an extra dimension to the horror, and it will leave the others questioning *their* motives. No, actually, now that I think about it," Judd continued, "I think that I will keep one of them back, and use that person for something else..."

Wilson felt his dread kick in. An extra person meant that his and Denny's secret could so easily be exposed, it would mean that he would have to give Denny up for as long as which ever of the two Judd kept, and Wilson didn't know if his compulsion would allow him to keep away.

He was sure that Judd would probably want to keep the woman, and he didn't care about that, didn't care that he had rape and torture in mind for her, just so long as he had Denny.

"Do you think it is wise to keep one of them back-"

"You questioning me, Wilson?" Judd said, ominously.

"No I was thinking that your original idea was good, about using both of them, I mean," he stuttered nervously. "They'll think that we turned them, made them traitors. If you keep one," he rushed on, "they'll know that they were coerced. It will only make you look bad."

It was one hell of a poor save, but he had covered his ass - just barely. Judd would begin to suspect something if he came right out with his objections to the presence of Yasmine and Culley, but at least this way he had come up with a plausible excuse to get rid of the interlopers. Judd enjoyed having his ego stroked, and Wilson knew that it made him blind to what was really happening around him. It was as if he was a cat that had his back stroked in just the right way, and his eyes became half-closed in pleasure, but unlike a cat he missed plenty. That was why Wilson set about wooing Judd's better judgement off course, and Judd let those words flow over him, even though he knew that Wilson had some other agenda. Wilson didn't have to know that he was still on the look out for someone to replace his sycophantic presence.

Yasmine wiped Denny's face off once more, with the damp sack, as his torso lay cradled in Culley's big arms, and his skinny legs lay away to one side.

"This is just awful," she mouthed to Culley, but he had seen what she was feeling long before she expressed it.

She had managed to keep her face straight as she tended Denny, but her beautiful, blue eyes gave away the anguish she was feeling.

Culley had never wanted to hold somebody so close in his entire life, as he had wanted to hold her, but Denny was there and he needed them more.

"Denny, I need to ask you a question," Culley began, looking down at the sick boy in his arms.

"What?" Denny replied, miserably, staring up into his hero's face.

"Does everybody upstairs stay up late, or do they go to bed early?" The quicker they ended this, the better.

"Depends," was Denny's response.

"On what?" Yasmine and Culley said at the same time, and they felt a little better when Denny laughed at them for doing that.

"On what's happening tomorrow."

"What's happening tomorrow Denny? Do you know?" Yasmine asked quietly.

"Nothing," Denny told them tiredly.

"That's good then," Culley sighed, before he tightened his arms when Denny tried to sit up.

"Wait," Denny grumbled. "I have something to give you," and he sat up, although the effort cost him.

"You can give it to us later," Yasmine began to admonish him, as she put her hand flat on his chest to get him to lie down again.

"No, now," Denny said, stubbornly, and he reached behind him to get the blue board out of his back pocket.

"There," he said as he handed it to Culley, who took its slightly bent shape from his shaking hand.

"Thank you Denny," he said awed, although he didn't have a clue what it was.

"I didn't find anything for Dr Yasmine," Denny mumbled, as he toppled over to one side away from her, too sick to really care.

"That's okay, I'll share it with her," Culley reassured him, as he leaned over to see if he was okay.

"Wow, it's so blue," Yasmine said, hastily, as Culley handed the board to her. She had to say something suitable, she figured, if nothing other than to make Denny feel like his gift was at least welcomed.

"Yeah it's pretty," Denny echoed, as the other two shrugged at each other over his head, as they indicated that neither of them had any idea what the thing was.

"It's important too," he murmured, perking up the other two.

"Important?" Culley encouraged.

"Yeah, Kyle was really mad at me when I took it, and he chased me for it."

"Yeah?" Culley sounded surprised, and interested.

"Yeah," Denny answered, "he even told Jason that it was important, a one of a kind thing, I think he said."

Yasmine heard the words, and took one look at Culley's face before she swiftly pocketed the board in one of the large pockets in her smudged and dusty khaki-coloured pants.

"Thank you for the present Denny," Yasmine said, as she moved forward to take another look at his exposed neck and shoulders.

"Do you know what it is?" Denny asked abruptly. "I don't know what it is," he went on, still lying on his side away from them, which was good, because he didn't see Culley's mugged face.

"I think it's an electronic board of some kind," Yasmine answered him. "It like the inside of a computer-"

"It probably came from the TV.," Denny snorted.

"The TV.?" Culley probed, looking at Yasmine again.

"Yeah, they took apart a TV. upstairs-"

"Why?" Culley blurted out. It just seemed such a waste.

"I don't know," supplied Denny, before he said: "I think I'm going to be sick again!" Which finished the confusing conversation.

"How much longer?" Culley asked quietly, after, and Yasmine shrugged. She had no idea of the time.

"I'll go upstairs and see if the kitchen light is off-"

"How?" chirped Denny, giving them hope once more.

"I'll look under the door. Pray that no one has locked us in again," Yasmine finished, as she got to her feet and sprinted to the staircase, before treading up it lightly.

She knelt at the foot of the door, like a supplicant at the base of an altar, and she offered up a prayer so fervent, that this would go right.

There didn't seem to be any light peeking under the door, and she cupped her hand around the base, shielding it from the light within their own room.

She quietly blew out of her mouth when she confirmed that there was no light under the door, and that nothing seemed to be stirring when she pressed her ear to the door to listen.

She heard Culley hiss: "Yas!" as she tried the lock, the scraping sound so very loud in the tense atmosphere that they had surrounded themselves with.

"Thank you," she breathed, as the door came away from the frame, and the elation that she felt was that much sweeter when no one pounced on her, as the light, from their hole, crept across the tacky linoleum floor.

On her hands and knees, she crept forward, her eyes sweeping from side to side, hoping not to brush against legs that could end their efforts.

There was no one, although she could hear the loud snoring of someone nearby. She withdrew swiftly, fearful that she would make some inadvertent noise and wake the snoozing guard. She didn't even close the door properly, leaving a tell-tale chink of light, so that she didn't make the sound that would bring the house down on them. And she crept down the stairs, as slowly and as lightly as she had come up, even though she carried the extra weight of heightened emotion.

"What's happening?" Culley asked, as he looked at her face, his large hand over Denny's shoulder, as he lay on his side still.

"We are good to go," she whispered excitedly, and Denny lifted his head and smiled at her good news.

"The hard part will be getting you mobile," she said to Culley, "but if we take it in stages we will manage."

Culley thought that she was understating things a bit, especially since they required speed to get the hell out of there, and it was the one thing that he didn't have. But he only had to look at her face to see the determination there to know that she was bent on getting them all out of there. There would be none of this: *'You go on, bring back help'* endeavour. They would all go, or she wouldn't go at all, and he knew Denny needed help in a big way.

"Okay," he said, and he leaned forward to roll Denny to face them. "It's time to go Denny. It's time to get the hell out of here."

There was nothing to gather together, nothing from here that he wanted to take with him, save the memories of Yasmine. It was now time to move, to deny the Sadists above the victims that they had been.

Even Yasmine felt the urgency, and she acted on it. She knew that Culley was bare foot, and she could have lingered to see to that, but it was time to push on. Here was an opportunity to go from being sacrificial vessels of some evil league, to being the aggressors who could stop Judd and his heinous plans. Yasmine had no idea what those plans were, but she knew that she and Culley were factored into them, and if they were gone, then the equation was lopsided in favour of the side of the angels.

That alone was going to make it worth the trouble and pain it took to get out of there.

"Okay," she began, "first we get to the stairs, then we rest, then we get up the stairs-"

"Then we rest, I get it," Culley told her, appreciating what she meant by taking this escape in stages. He didn't agree with her, but he understood why she was doing it, and he felt his heart give a little more, as he came to realise that she cared for him, more than just like a doctor would. Otherwise she wouldn't have been so adamant about being so methodical.

"Okay Denny, up the stairs, and wait for us there," she instructed their co-conspirator, before she knelt next to Culley to wedge her own shoulder into his armpit, as he levered himself up the sticky, brick wall.

Denny instead hesitated, watching the two of them as they braced themselves to move. Yasmine had had plenty of experience over the past two days in moving Culley over short distances, so it wasn't that much of a shock to get his heavy body over to the stairs, and Culley did help, even though he was unbalanced because he had to keep his leg straight.

"Matthew mind," Yasmine directed him, indicating that he had to get out of their way with her head, as he stood in their way, watching the two of them.

"Undo my leg," Culley panted, once they had reached the bannister.

"No-" Yasmine protested.

"Do it," Culley ordered. "I'll be able to bend my leg, and we'll get to the top faster."

"What?" Yasmine said, still confused. "No," she argued again, "it will just damage your knee even more-"

"Yasmine," Culley cut in, patiently, "if I can bend my leg, I can hop. It will make moving around easier. Don't worry, I'm pretty fit," he tried to reassure her, as he incorrectly read the worry in her face.

"No," Yasmine reiterated, firmly, "there has to be another way."

He moved away from her to lean against the rickety wooden railing, whilst Denny watched them with both anxiety and amusement in his eyes. For him this was just like on TV., where normal kids had normal moms and dads, and not just brothers like he did.

"Yasmine, unless you can do a fireman's lift and put on another hundred pounds within the next five seconds, you won't be able to get me up those stairs without doing the damage you are trying to avoid anyway."

It made perfect sense to him, and he could tell she was mulling it over.

"I could carry you," offered Denny, who was still standing watching the two of them.

"No Denny, you can't," Culley told him, but he was still looking at Yasmine, convincing her that he was right.

"Why not?" Denny queried, petulantly, and he put his hands on his hips, as if that would make either of them look at him.

Yasmine closed her bright, blue eyes in acquiescence, and then she turned to look at Denny.

"Because it will hurt you that's why-"

"It will not!" Denny stated emphatically.

Yasmine knew there was only one way to settle this argument quickly, so she reached up and around, and lightly rubbed her hand over Denny's covered back and shoulders.

"Ow!" he complained, and *his* eyes went round and large as he felt Yasmine seemingly hurt him.

"That's why," Yasmine repeated, her face neutral, although she felt like a heel for not proving that he couldn't help in a different way. She was going to need his help later on anyway, and he might have thought that he was strong, but the reality was that he was very weak, and she didn't need to make that status any worse.

She knelt at Culley's feet, and began to tug at the knots that held the brace in place. They were tight, and it took her ten minutes to work on them. Culley braced himself several times as she pulled and worked on the stiff material, and he looked down once she had finished to see what his knee looked like.

It was still all purple, but even she had to admit that the swelling had gone down some what. It was a relief for Culley to have the hard plastic off his knee, but he winced when he bent it slightly. The whole front of it was agony, but he was willing to endure it, if it meant that Yasmine and Denny were safe.

"Let's go," he insisted, and he hopped to the foot of the stair case.

"Go by the wall, so that you can lean against it," Yasmine advised him logically. "Now take it nice and slow. It won't be good if you fall down these stairs."

Culley gave a broad smile at her words. He didn't plan to fall down, and he didn't plan to stop now, either.

Yasmine remained at his side, whilst Denny trailed dangerously behind them. If they fell, Denny would take the brunt of their weight, and it would not be pleasant.

"Wait! Wait! Wait!" Culley hissed, once he was half way up.

Yasmine stopped, tensing her entire body, so that he could use it like a crutch, as they loitered half way up.

"What is it?" Denny uttered, behind them, confused that they were stopped.

"I just needed to get my footing back," Culley replied honestly. He really was fit, Yasmine realised, because he wasn't even out of breath, and she could feel the dioxide burn within her own chest along with the short, choppy breaths that she took to compensate.

"Okay, let's go," Culley hopped off, this time making it all the way to the top without pause.

"Rest here," she said, as she helped him lean against the wall next to the door frame. She pulled the door open, widely, allowing the light to absolutely flood the alcove and part of the kitchen. She scanned the area, her ears taking on the characteristics of a radar dish, as she turned her head from side to side to hear if someone was on to them.

The snoring hadn't abated, and she gathered neither would it, after she murmured to Culley that he should come through the door, and sit down there, to keep his leg straight.

"Denny," Yasmine called him closer, very softly. "Which one is the car keys?" She indicated that he had to show her, as they stood next to the board that contained so many keys she thought that she was in a locksmith's workshop.

Denny riffled through the metallic Abacus of keys that was strung before him. The light helped, as his fingers sifted to the ring that held Wilson's truck keys, the silly fish emblem telling him that he had the right ones.

The harsh breaths, that passed through the open mouth of the seemingly only other occupant in that house, didn't stop as Denny ran his fingers through the board's steel hair, even though it

sounded as loud as a rock concert in Yasmine and Culley's ears.

"Here, these," he said, as he handed the bunch to Yasmine.

"Okay, go to the door, and open it for us," she bade Denny, before she turned back to Culley, who had ignored her advice, and was still standing against the wall.

"Ready?" she asked, as she pocketed the keys, the board clicking against them as they slid down into the cavity of the material.

"Yeah," Culley answered her, and then curved his brawny arm about her slim shoulders once more.

Their progress was slow, as they dodged the obstacles that the refrigerator, kitchenette set, and cupboards represented, careful not to bash Culley's leg, as he hopped about towards the door.

"Rest here," Yasmine insisted, once they were outside, and Denny had quietly shut the door behind them. The night wind bit into their underclothed bodies, and Yasmine shivered as she was tempted to cuddle into the warmth that Culley was giving off at her side.

But she left his side, because she had something more important to do than tarry with her lover.

"Which shed is it?" she asked Denny, looking gratefully up at the full moon, that lit up their landscape. There were three sheds before them, each a distance away, and Denny pointed to the middle one.

"Wilson's truck is in that one," he said weakly, and Yasmine knew that he was going to be sick again. She quickly turned him away, toward the papyrus reeds that grew next to a tap at the back door, so that he could vomit.

"Okay," she soothed, "sit here next to Culley, so that I can go and see if it is safe for us to move to the truck, all right?"

Denny nodded, and then drooped against the decorative bricks, his head and stomach slowly meeting one another.

"Yas," Culley stayed her, "I know it would be easier to start the truck and bring it around so that I can get in," he correctly guessed her intentions, "but don't. The engine will wake somebody up, and..."

He didn't have to spell it out for her, and she couldn't resist his logic. They would have to do this the hard way, even though it went against everything in her hippocratic oath.

"Okay, but you rest here. I still want to check things out." Denny might have thought that there were no sentries about, but Yasmine had to be sure that there *were* none.

The wind tickled the trees, and they writhed and twisted, like a child would from the joy of the sensation. She preferred to think of it that way, because it was dark and if she made her thoughts follow a trail that was ominous, she didn't think that she would have the guts to go into that shed by herself.

Culley had a fair idea of what she was feeling as she sprinted off into the darkness, and he wished that their roles were reversed, so that he could take on the fear that night brought on.

"Denny?" Culley called, softly, as he looked over to where he was lying. "You okay?"

"No," his companion moaned, from his supine position, which brought their conversation to a quick halt. Culley could tell that Denny was not in a talkative mood, and he didn't blame him.

He had the distinct impression that the boy was too far gone to want the reassurance which Culley thought he might need, and instead had become absorbed by the pain and nausea that was now governing his lanky body.

The rough gravel told them both that someone was coming, and Culley could feel his body tense as he hoped that it was Yasmine.

She came into view, and swallowed loudly as she tried to get her breath back.

"Nothing," she panted, "nobody there."

It was all Culley needed to push himself away once more, ready to hop the hell out of there.

"Come on Denny," Yasmine urged him up, and he followed them lethargically, hunched over and dragging his feet, as if they were weighted down. If Yasmine didn't think it would be better that they stick together, and go at once, she would have made him sit down, and then come back for him, but they didn't dare risk wasting anymore time.

Culley bore the pain and the gravel rash stoically, gritting his teeth so as not to give the pain away to Yasmine, even though she knew, could feel it as they manoeuvred toward the shed.

It seemed to take ages to get there, and each minute brought with it an increment of pain, in Culley's leg and feet, but they got there, got inside the door where Culley blessed the cold cement as it took the sting out of his foot and scraped toes.

He planted a firm arm against the rough boards, whilst she stepped away from his warm body to get the car open.

There were three shiny vehicles there, and one old dusty pickup, and Yasmine didn't know why but she had the most overwhelming feeling that the keys, that she now held in her hand, were for the most inappropriate vehicle in that shed.

That dusty old pickup, would never be big enough for the three of them, unless the men went into the back, and she couldn't allow that. The cold night air would give them hypothermia if they sat there, whilst she tore across the country side.

"Shit!" she cursed, as her worst fears came true and the pickup door came open after she had turned the lock.

Both men looked at her, shocked. Such an inelegant word coming out of her delicate mouth, Culley didn't think it was possible.

"This is Wilson's car, isn't it Denny?" she asked for confirmation, from the boy who had slowly slid down the shed wall earlier.

"Yes," he replied, "those are the only keys I know..."

They would just have to make do, Yasmine decided. She was not going back to see if she could find another set, plus which she deemed that they had been out there long enough, and at any moment they were going to be missed.

She reached through and popped the lock on the passenger side, and then swung the door open, making an ugly dent in the 4x4 next to them, which she didn't care about.

"That's it?" Culley echoed, as he came to realise the same thing she had just established in her own mind. "We'll never fit-"

"Yes we will," Yasmine was going to brook no argument. "Come on Culley, you first."

She helped him over to the cab, and then lowered him in.

"Lift your legs on to the seat next to you... That's it, so that they are straight," she encouraged, showing him how she wanted them.

"You're next Denny," she said, as she moved to his side, and helped him up. "You are going to have to lie on your side, with your knees up, on the floor..."

She led him over to the pickup, and then tried to make him comfortable.

"Come on Yas, there has to-"

Denny's heartfelt sigh stopped his words. "Is good," Denny murmured as he seemed to find some ease in the cramped position that Yasmine had been forced to put him into.

Culley didn't have any reproach to that, no criticism of the way things were panning out would take away Denny's peace, and Culley couldn't deny him that.

Yasmine climbed in behind the wheel, and then lifted Culley's long legs so that they rested on her lap. She knew Culley might be uncomfortable that way, but he had been so brave so far, and she just hoped that he would hold out a little more.

So far she was sure that she had used up all her favours with the Creator of all, but that didn't stop her from sending up a few more beseechments, for petrol and that the car would start as soon as possible.

"Thank you," Culley echoed her earlier prayers, when the car caught on the first turn, and sputtered into life. Yasmine pumped the pedal twice, shifted into gear, and then took off, turning on the lights as she bumped over the hump that guarded the shed, and then speeding off, in what she hoped was the right direction.

Wilson knew the sound of his truck anywhere, and when it started up, he awoke. It wasn't supposed to be used by anybody but him, so what it was doing idling in the deep of the night, made him sit up abruptly, and then leave his warm bed in a hurry.

"That your truck?" Judd asked, as they met in the hall, along with several others. A loud snoring buzzed in the background, which everybody - except Wilson - assumed was Denny.

Wilson could feel that sick heaviness, fall through his gut to his feet, as he became aware of just how negligent they had all become.

Of course he would never have been able to point out to Judd that they weren't professional enough, hell they weren't even professional. Judd had thought that once he had all the tools under his fingers, and hostages to manipulate and torture, that he would accomplish anything. And he and the others had let him believe it. Now they were going to pay for their blindness.

"Denny..." Wilson whispered, dread making his tongue loose.

Judd looked at him sharply, and then he sprinted down the hall towards where his brother was supposed to be sleeping.

"Denny!" he roared, as he came across the empty bed, and he shoved past several bystanders, as they stood in his way.

"Deeeennnyy!!" he was apoplectic, when he saw the light spilling into the empty kitchen. That dummy had gone too far, and he was going to kill him for what he had just done.

"Get dressed," he grated, almost unintelligible with anger.

"Now!" he bellowed to all the others, even though some had already hopped to it.

Cutlery sprayed out, as Judd yanked open a drawer, and removed the biggest knife there. As much as he wanted to get going after his brother, and that ox of a wrestler, first he was going to take care of some business, before he hunted the others down, brought them back, and made them wish that they had rather died.

Wilson flinched as the knife made a soft squishing sound, as it hit the soft belly of the old lush who was supposed to have been on duty whilst the doctor and her cohorts had escaped.

Judd hadn't missed Silus standing in the doorway, even if nobody else had noticed him. He was just the first to pay for this escape, and Judd promised himself that he wasn't going to be the last.

## CHAPTER 16

Denny's need to vomit saved their lives. Yasmine had pulled over to the side of the road, as Judd and the others blew by in rage and hurry, and the cornstalks had hidden Wilson's pickup admirably as their lights had hurtled past.

"Better?" Yasmine asked, after she had helped Denny back to where Culley was waiting for them.

Denny was too tired to even answer her, and Yasmine felt the urgency that had been wriggling

around like a spider brushing her skin, suddenly bite into her doctor's conscience. She had once known a black South African nurse, who had used a word to describe how she felt

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Culley didn't say anything once she had settled back next to him, he just stroked the back of her head, letting her know that even if he didn't have the words to comfort her then, he felt what she was feeling, and he was going to express it in another way.

"Which way, do you think?" It was dark, and she had no idea of which way to get back to civilization.

"Just drive," Culley replied, "we're bound to hit people and town sooner or later."

"I'd rather it was sooner," Yasmine waved her hand toward Denny.

"Is it bad?" Culley generalized, guessing that she wouldn't want to upset Denny.

"There is damage on a cellular level," she answered, "and I think it is going to get worse..."

"Stone!" Culley diverted her, and she steered around it.

"It shouldn't have been this easy," Culley murmured, after a period of silence. "We should never have got free."

"It's not over yet," she reminded him. "They could still come after us," she whispered now, not wanting to upset Denny, although she suspected that he was already pretty much out of it.

"We got out once, we can do it again."

Yasmine wished that she had his confidence, even as she could feel his conviction that they were free and clear seeping through her. Culley's certainty endeared him to Yasmine more at that moment, than at any other time during the past three, hectic days. It was like he had become the very Earth on which she stood, and she knew that she would never recover if anything happened to him.

She was in love with him, and she wasn't even sure that he felt the same emotions. For all she knew he might have just wanted sex, and now she was on a whole other level, that felt as if it had come out of nowhere. It was just so different from any other emotion she had ever experienced, even her feelings for her family couldn't compare.

It wouldn't do to dwell on it now, but like a stuck melody, it would come back to possess her mind, most probably when he was gone, and she was alone in the deepest of night. She knew that she wouldn't be able to escape it, and she wasn't even sure that she wanted to, although she knew that it would be so painful to experience.

The dark hid her thoughts from Culley, who, if he had known what she was thinking would have jumped at the chance to prove to her that he was feeling the same thing, with the same intensity.

For Culley it was both wonderful and frightening; wonderful because he knew that it would lead to a whole new dimension of emotion, and it was frightening because he knew that it could overwhelm him, and he was unsure of that newness. It was like the first time he had wrestled - he had been sure of himself, but at the same time he had been afraid that he *might* just fail. That same feeling now suffused his soul, but he took courage from the fact that he had come through that experience and it had led to greater things. He was sure that the same thing would happen with Yasmine.

And then there was still Denny to consider. Yasmine hadn't wanted to say anything, but she could tell that he was dying, and she didn't think that there was anything that anybody could do for him, other than make his last few hours or days comfortable. Like the proverbial *Humpty Dumpty* he was broken beyond repair, but she didn't want him to die like this, on the floor of a dusty old pickup, with pain as his last memory. Now he had no family, save them, but the between her and Culley they had plenty to spare and she wanted him to experience that just once

before he left the world. So she raced through the night with an extra motivation to see her finish this trip that none of them had willingly started.

"We missed 'em," Dutch, a Judd veteran grouched to the others that were with him, as they hauled ass across the black country side. They were following Judd's Nissan 4x4, as it tore up the miles, with the same savagery a hyena used to tear the udders from a birthing buffalo.

"They turned off somewhere, I'm sure of it-"

"You gonna be the one to tell him, Dutch?" Jason snickered. Kyle wasn't there to remind him that they were in worse trouble than anybody in that car, and he had conveniently forgotten that Denny still had that plastic board that was still so important to their plans.

Dutch said nothing, he didn't even let Jason's mockery annoy him. The best thing to do in this situation was to keep his head low, and hope that Judd took the stupid prick out.

The car in front hit the brakes so hard that they could even see the smoke off the tyres in the bald moonlight.

"Now what?" Dutch muttered under his breath, careful not to let the others hear him. It was becoming obvious that Judd was not in complete control, and yet somehow he couldn't bring himself to go against the other man.

Whilst they all held Judd's ideals in their hearts, the difference between them and him was that he was prepared to do something about it. It was one thing to harbour hatred against other races and creeds, to speak about how things would be better if those scapegoats were eliminated; it was another thing altogether to actually vent that hatred, and to put together a plan that would kill off invented enemies.

Judd was different from them in that he didn't hesitate to kill anybody or destroy anything that he felt was in his way, and that included some of his compatriots. Two people had already died in the last two days, and Judd wanted more bodies to feed his psychopathic rage, only Dutch wasn't prepared to be one of those corpses.

Judd's 4x4 made a spinning turn, the screeching tyres so loud, that the others could hear it throughout the closed cabin of their own vehicle. It had taken Judd about two minutes to figure out what Dutch had known for five, and now he was turning back to see if he couldn't hunt down the others.

"Hang on," Dutch commented, as he put his own car into a 360° spin, before trailing hurriedly after Judd. Dutch knew that sooner or later Judd was going to have to stop to coordinate their hunt, but now he was rage-blind, and Dutch was silently thanking the god of the far-right that there was nobody else on the road then. It would be nothing for Judd to pull over a least one of the mud people and put a bullet in their brains just to cool off, and that wouldn't do. Dutch just hoped that Wilson would calm Judd down, and that they found those other three.

If they told anybody about the Brotherhood it would mean the end of their plans, and Dutch, like Wilson could feel success so close to them. It was for that very reason that he stuck on Judd's tail, as they began stalk their prey once more.

"I'm going in circles," Yasmine said frustrated, as she came to another T-junction, with yet another board for towns she had never even heard of.

Culley chivalrously disagreed with her, but he had the same feeling. They had come across some houses on the road, but these were all dark, all the occupants asleep and safe, and although they had felt that it would probably be prudent if they stopped to get help, there was every chance that Judd would discover them and massacre the lot of them.

So they had kept going, stopping only in isolated areas occasionally so that Yasmine could

check on Denny. She hadn't heard from him in a while, and she was beginning to think that he had slipped into a coma. She didn't know if that was actually a blessing or a curse. She had so much wanted him to know what it felt like to have some family who loved him just because he was him, and not because he would further some aim or goal which wasn't even rational. She wanted him to know that there were other people who wouldn't consider him underfoot, and would think that whatever he had to say and do was valuable even if it was just in a tiny sphere of life. But that chance was decreasing with every turn she took, and every second that Judd and the others were chasing them.

"So what do you want to do?" Culley asked quietly, when he realised that he wasn't getting anywhere with his reassurances.

"If only we could get to a small town, one with a policeman of sorts," Yasmine wished as she steered down the inky road, the headlamps barely picking out the curves and lines on the tar.

"That asshole certainly chose his lair perfectly," Culley concurred in a whisper. Like Yasmine he didn't think that Denny could hear much, but he didn't want to insult the only family that the boy had, too loudly. Just in case.

"I don't know Yas," he continued. "What do you want to do? As much as I dislike the idea, maybe we should just carry on 'til daylight, maybe we'll stumble on to civilization."

"You mean if it ain't broke don't fix it," Yas summoned a tired laugh.

"It's worked so far. I mean what are our options? We stop, they catch up with us, and whoever helps us is dead. We stop and hide, and they'll probably still find us, this way we'll stay out of reach."

"I'm worried though," and she pointed to where Denny was laying. "It isn't getting any better and I was hoping to make it more comfortable."

"He isn't complaining," Culley pointed out logically, cruelly. "I think as long as he's warm and safe, there's little we can do, except try and save our own skins, and maybe his in the process."

Yasmine knew he was right, even though every fibre in her being protested. They had to keep going and see if they came across an area where there were enough people to neutralise the threat that Judd and his gang posed.

"Okay," she agreed. "But first I have to stop and check on Denny. I don't want him to suffer."

Culley would not deny her that. It just made him love her more, because she would not give up on a lost cause, and that alone gave him immense hope for their futures.

"Fuck!" Judd cursed, and then slammed his fists on top of the steering wheel as another mile sped past without any sign of Wilson's truck.

"This is all your fault!" he had screamed at Wilson, when he had finally stopped to co-ordinate the hunt for this elusive prey.

Of course nobody had had the guts to point out that Judd was the most to blame, that he had failed to set up a proper guard system, that he had failed to separate the hostages, and tag Denny with someone so that he couldn't get close to them. It was what a truly veteran outfit would have done, but they all knew Judd was on his own plane, and to have told him at anytime that he was wrong would have been like giving a pig's head to a Muslim - a violent response was guaranteed. An opponent would have been revelling in Judd's failure, but those around him, and those that had joined with him, were simply scared.

He braked abruptly, making Wilson, who was in the back, choke against his safety belt. Pulling out the state of the art radio that he had been given by some misguided patron in the past, he punched in one of the numbers to the other radios that the Brotherhood had managed to obtain.

"Have you found them?" he screeched into the flat box that he held pressed to his ear. "Where

the fuck are they? You should have found them by now!" He disconnected whilst the other party was busy trying to explain that they had not seen either the hostages, or Wilson's truck.

"We sent teams to all the major routes! A least one of these fucking idiots must have seen them by now!"

"Maybe they're lost," suggested the man who was brave enough to sit with Judd and Wilson. "I mean they are not familiar with the area, not like we are." That earned him a hook into his cheek bone, which effectively shut him up.

"They are not lost. You lot are just incompetent!" By the same logic that made him botch the hostage situation, he felt that obviously that woman and her wrestler were a lot smarter than he had given them credit for, a lot smarter than his own people, and he had to have them back, if nothing but to show them that *he* was smarter than the lot of them put together.

"I don't get you people," he ranted, after he had tuned up another number, and went through the same questioning process as before. "They are accompanied by my brother! You all know how retarded he is! So how come you can't find them?"

Wilson didn't think that radio would last very long, the way Judd hammered it into the dash out of pure frustration.

"Wilson!" Judd jolted him out of his internal criticism. "You hang out with that dummy the most. You tell me why he hasn't caused them trouble yet. Made them stop."

That left Wilson gulping, as he tried to come up with a soothing answer.

"Never mind," Judd rescued him. "It'll be because of him that we catch them. That stupid fucker is going to be their down fall, and when I catch the lot of them, they are going to pay in spades!"

Denny had gone into shock, and Culley had lifted him into his arms to keep him warm, whilst Yasmine stood on the passenger side, gently wiping away the blood that had started to trickle from his incongruously delicate nose.

"Are you my mom?" he asked, as he looked up into her face, and she struggled desperately not to cry her heart out.

"No, sweetheart," she told him gently. "Your mom is waiting for you on the other side." At least Yasmine hoped that she was, having never died herself.

"Oh yeah, you're Yasmine. You're so pretty, just like my mom." Denny's words were slurred, and Yasmine tried to shush him so he could save his strength.

"That's Culley," his fingers went up in the air, generally waving in the big man's direction.

"Mama he's broken, he needs help," he looked at Yasmine again, and she rubbed a knuckle over his mouth, so that his spittle wouldn't drown him.

"I know he's broken," Yasmine smiled through her tears. "But we're going to fix him so you can see him wrestle again."

"Really? That would be the best! Culley?" he looked up into his hero's drawn face, "do you think I could go into the ring with you one day? You know, so I can show Judd that you're my friend and that he's not supposed to hurt you?"

"Denny, no one is ever going to hurt me or you or Yasmine again."

Yasmine didn't dare look in his face because she could see the anguish at an angle already, and if she had to see it full on she knew she would have hysterics. She had to be strong, so that Denny could make his transition calmly and at peace. He had to know some peace before he passed on.

"You know what Mama? I don't feel sore anymore."

"That's good Denny," Yasmine said softly, taking his cold hand into her own.

"Isn't it strange huh? I've been feeling yucky for two days now, and because I'm with Culley and

you, I don't feel so bad anymore."

"Yeah," Yasmine agreed, because there was nothing else to say. More blood seeped from his nose, and Culley cradled him higher so that it didn't run down the back of his throat and suffocate him.

"Mama I can hear your heart beat," Denny's eyes became glazed, as if he could see something neither of them could, and he took a deep breath. "Hey, I can see a really pretty white light," he said on the exhalation, and smiled so beautifully that Yasmine knew that he was already an angel. And then he slipped away so gently...

*'How can it still be so beautiful if my heart is breaking?'* Yasmine asked herself, as the sun brushed, sketched and smudged colours in the red range across an awakening sky. Perfectly formed cotton wool balls drifted off in the distance, and all around them the trees were decorated in hues of scarlet.

They were still at the look out point where Denny had died, just still and contemplative. Culley had held her when she had cried her guts out, after scribbling Denny's time of death and it's probable cause on a scrap piece of paper that they had dug out of the old, corroding upholstery, and he was the one to rationally point out that there was no way that she would get Denny's dead weight into the back of the pick up, when she had wanted to move his body out.

Even now, when she was sure that every instinct he had had to be screaming that they ought to get the hell out of there, he sat with her, not ruining the tranquillity, just quietly making her love him more.

"Mmmm..." he murmured, "strange."

"What is?"

"How beautiful and cool it is," he echoed her thoughts. "You would never know that there are bad guys out there."

"I know, but there are." She leaned forward and turned the key, which made the engine splutter as it protested being started for the umpteenth time that morning.

"Is he heavy?" she indicated to Denny, as he lay at an awkward angle in Culley's arms.

"No, not really," he hiccuped as she drove over some rough gravel and returned to the smooth tar. "Where are you going?" he asked as she drove into the sun.

"If they took us East, then the way back to civilization has to be West, right? Away from the rising sun."

Culley had actually forgotten about their trip into the waiting arms of the Brotherhood, and he was gladdened that Yasmine hadn't.

The sense of direction gave them hope, an aura of daring, that nothing would stand in their way, and Culley could feel another dangerous emotion coursing in him - he would rather have died than let Judd Pierson take them hostage again. That was not a good state to be in, it would make him reckless, and he couldn't be that with something as precious as Yasmine in his possession.

He watched her profile as she followed the road, gearing up and down as the hills and valleys required, and she seemed tense, almost as if she expected the enemy to pop over the horizon and destroy them.

Hell, he expected that too, and even now he was trying to emotionally arm himself for the fight to come, and yet this whole process never once detracted from the good feelings that he was getting every time he looked at, or thought about, or heard her breath, talk or cry. As long as they had each other, they were their own lucky charm, and every moment that they spent together weaved another strong strand into the blanket of universal love that all compassionate people seemed to manufacturing in their everyday actions.

The road split again, and Yasmine kept to the slow side, since the dirty red cab didn't have much energy, and a large truck took the other lane as they both chugged up the steepening hill.

"Oh shit!" Culley yelled out, as he got the first glimpse of the big black 4x4 that was speeding down the opposite side.

"I know," Yasmine damned their timing. "Is it them do you think?"

"I'm praying that it isn't," but he wasn't holding his breath either. "Okay, let's not panic," he calmed down slightly. "I don't think they saw us past this truck. They were going to fast."

He turned and looked at the blurring vehicle, over his shoulder, his fingers unconsciously crossed, and for a split second he felt elation as the vehicle seemed to keep going. After that everything he felt was pure dread, as the 4x4 hauled a U-turn, and started racing back after them.

"Ha! Gotcha!" Dutch growled as the dirty colour of Wilson's pick-up scanned itself on to his retina. They were going up a hill toward the little town of Kosmosdale, and Dutch knew that he had to stop them before they got there. His nearest support was ten minutes out, and only God knew where Judd was, perhaps just ahead of them for all he knew.

"Hang on boys," he threw the 4x4 into a sharp turn, coming around a full half circle, before he accelerated up behind Wilson's old rickety truck, ignoring the real thing to his side.

"We have them now," and he smiled evilly, as he deliberately rear-ended the other car, barely feeling anything past the big bull bars that were specially installed by an outside supporter.

The engine to the pick up was screaming, as Yasmine lowered the gear to gather some pace.

"Come on, come on!" she cajoled the out-moded transport, her nose slowly inching past the cab of the white and yellow eighteen wheeler next to them.

Culley was turning the air blue, as he angled his head over his shoulder to see who it was behind them. The other guy was that close that he could see his face, and know that it was a new one, someone else in the service of evil.

"Bastard!" he swore again, as they were rammed from behind once more. Culley at least had the protection of Denny's body, but he knew that Yasmine had taken two blows to her dainty chest where the steering wheel had dug into her pitching body.

"Come on, just a little more!" Yasmine begged, absolutely flooring the peddle.

"Uh Yas," Culley began to wince as the road started narrow to single lanes again, and the big truck started encroaching on their space.

"Oh yeah!" Yasmine began to celebrate as she just cleared the gargantuan monster which was hogging the road.

Culley took a deep breath in relief as he watched the black pursuer hit the brakes hard, and then fall behind the truck, or risk being driven off the road. He appreciated it all the more because he knew it wasn't going to last. These guys had their scent now, and they weren't going to give up until a bigger entity intervened.

It was a good thing that neither Culley nor Yasmine were in the other vehicle, because Dutch would have told them to go do something anatomically impossible, as he screeched to a halt at the edge of the tarmac. As it was, he verbally threatened the truck driver who was blithely continuing up the hill, a large toot of his extra loud horn blasting away any defiance that Dutch might have harboured in taking him on.

"Get on the radio, and get reinforcements," Dutch ordered Jason, as he hit the brakes hard, before gearing down and pushing the accelerator to the floor to make up some speed.

He started straddling the white line that denoted the blind curve that the eighteen wheeler was snaking round, every ten seconds or so popping his nose out to take a look at what was headed toward them.

There were nothing but headlights coming out of the shrinking shadows, and there was no way that Dutch could overtake the

gargantuan that was between him and Wilson's dawdling truck.

He didn't say the words that were running through his head, there was enough tension in their vehicle, in their lives without him adding to the fear that they may have lost them.

"Four way stop," his shot-gun passenger informed him, as the behemoth began to slow, and Dutch growled with impatience.

The truck pulled off with a hiss and a lurch, and then it was Dutch's turn to make a complete stop. He didn't know why he had done that, when it would have made more strategic sense to just yield and carry on driving, but if he had done that he would have missed the flash of drab red as it passed between two shrouding trees, the early morning light exceptionally bright without the filter of pollution that was a common occurrence in the city.

"There they are!" he crowed, and yanked the steering wheel into a sharp turn, quickly focusing on his quarry and ignoring the other traffic that was around them.

"Damn!" Yasmine cursed as she noticed the big black SUV barreling towards them.

"What is it?" Culley asked grimly, although he was sure he knew the answer.

"They're behind us." She would not panic, nor would she go all girlie and get hysterical she decided quickly. The town was a few hundred metres away, and she just knew that there had to be a constable's station there.

"Jesus!" Culley blasphemed, as the bad guys behind them whammed into the seemingly fragile Datsun, making it rattle and quiver, and Culley looked in the side mirror to see where the metal, that had clattered on the tarmac behind them, had come from.

"Geez," he sounded surprised. "This old rattle trap is pretty strong!" Behind them, the front of the SUV was a mess, with steam frying the chips of paint that had come off, after the rear metal bumper of the truck that was protecting them had somehow made a big hole in the radiator of the chase vehicle.

"They don't make them like they used to," Yasmine hiccuped, and then aimed for the parking area with the most cars. Like Culley, she was surprised that the old Datsun was still going, but she figured that whilst she had the advantage, she had better make for that place that held safety in numbers.

Dutch floored the accelerator again, and aimed for where he thought that Wilson's truck was positioned, because he couldn't see anything in the windscreen, the hot water vaporising furiously as he pushed the engine to its limit, the haze denying him a clear picture, just as his political beliefs made him blind to the realities of normality about him.

He struck Wilson's truck a glancing blow, but his momentum and weight was such that he sent the other vehicle careening off on to a pavement, into a post box, and then into a hard concrete pole that marked where the parking lot began or ended, depending on which side of the pole you were on.

At the same time, Dutch yanked the steering wheel of his own vehicle to gain even more effect, only he was going so fast, and the steam when it cooled turned back to water, which in turn made his front tyres slippery, and he skidded, the SUV almost graceful for a moment, before it harshly banged into the side of the building that was standing across the street.

"Ow!" Dutch's shot-gunner moaned as he lifted his face from the air bag that had deployed in a fraction of a second.

"Jason?" Dutch barked hoarsely, seeing to his occupants first.

"Yeah?" there was a weak answer from the back, and Dutch was impressed that all of them were still alive.

"Look at that would you?" And all three of them peered out of the shattered windows on their clear side.

Wilson's truck was still partially intact, and there were at least thirty people either milling about or congregated about the destroyed front end.

"Shit!" Dutch cursed. He had been so intent on stopping and capturing those three betrayers that he had developed a kind of tunnel vision. There were too many people around now, for them to fulfil their objective, and that was something he had not anticipated, or even planned for.

"Hey! Hey! Are you guys okay?" voices could be heard calling out, and Dutch watched in horror as a bunch of people carefully picked their way around the first accident scene, and then made a speedy beeline for them.

"Get us out of here Dutch!" said a panicked Jason, and he began slamming an urgent hand against Dutch's headrest.

"I'm trying, I'm trying," replied Dutch, who was frantically turning the key, and pumping the pedal to give it some diesel.

"You're flooding it! You're flooding it!"

Dutch didn't know who said that, but he knew them to be right.

"You're on your own!" Jason brayed, and kicked the door out, just managing to evade the concerned citizens as they made it to the wreck.

"What the hell!?" said the first man to arrive, and he turned his head to watch Jason high-tail it down the street.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," Dutch lied, and then punched him in the face. He used the door as a shield, determined to escape, but the idea suddenly died when he found a gun thrust in his face, and a resolute policeman standing behind it.

"Guess what guys?" said the policeman, to those around him. "The people in that car over there are Culley Taffinder and the doctor that they kidnapped just the other day."

"No way!" claimed a disbeliever.

"How are they?" asked another voice, this one breathless.

"Well someone in that cab is dead, and it's all your fault!" With that he cocked his gun, and took the fight right out of Dutch and his companion. It was really a concentric sound. The ripples would last for months.

## CHAPTER 17

"They found them!" Orrin was ecstatic, as he hugged his wife close.

"Thank you God," she breathed, and then bit her lips as she fought to keep the tears from her eyes.

"Culley's okay, but they were in an accident," the words came out in a jumble, as Orrin relayed the news that he had just received from a newsman. "They said that Yasmine has a concussion-

"A concussion!" Violet cried. "Is she going to be okay? Is she hurt in any other way?"

"Violet I don't know, but I'm sure that they are getting the best of care. The hospital has sent a helicopter to transport them to the hospital, and Paul Heard Junior has gone with them. He said he would phone as soon as he had seen the both of them with his own eyes. Casey! Julian!" he

called, as soon as he saw his other son, and Yasmine's brother-in-law. "They found them!" Violet stepped into the ladies room, where Amy, Yasmine's mother had gone to find a little peace. The press had been a mixed blessing, allowing them to appeal for help, but at the same time invading every aspect of their privacy until they had nothing left. Even Violet had resorted to hiding in the bathroom from time to time, since it was the only place where they were left alone.

"Amy?" she called, knowing that the other woman would have ducked into one of the stalls the moment she heard the door squeak. She and the others had become experts in the cosiness of hospital toilets, they'd used the tactic so often. As it was, she, Amy, Josette, and Fenella, Yasmine's sisters had had some of the most riotous conversations whilst hiding out in the bathroom. They had even involved the cleaning staff on occasion, and it had been a good thing too, because an ambitious female reporter had tried posing as a cleaner to get an inside scoop, only to have her plan thwarted by a genuine hospital employee.

"Vi? You alone?" Amy sounded as if she had been crying. Even the bravest of them had been overwhelmed by worry at times, but Violet had some good news at least.

"Amy, they found them," she said calmly, not ready to break the news of Yasmine's concussion until she saw her new found friend face to face. She moved around to where the stalls were.

"They did?" Amy squeaked, and she practically bolted from the middle door, the way a race horse would leap away from the starting gate.

"Oh! Thank you God!" she cried, and then burst into tears.

Violet wrapped both her arms around her, and let her sob against her shoulder. She knew the relief must be acute, she could feel it herself, and she couldn't wait to have her child back in her presence so that she could check him over, to make sure that he was okay. It would be like when he was a baby and she had seen him for the first time, stroking over his skin, and his fingers and his toes, just to make sure he was real, and she would be doing the same thing all over only now there was more of him to investigate.

Amy was probably feeling the same way, that the minutes couldn't tick away fast enough until they saw them for themselves.

"Mom!" Josette banged the door as she rushed in to find her missing parent.

"She's here," Violet put a smile in her voice, not that she could keep it in anyway.

"They found them, Vi!" Josette exclaimed, her face was just as joyful. "I'm so glad!" She swept her mother and Violet into a communal hug.

"When will they be here?" Amy sniffed, after they all let go, and Violet knew she still had to tell her about the accident.

"They are coming in by helicopter-"

"They should be here soon then!" Amy skipped into a nearby stall, and pulled off a wad of tissue paper to wipe her nose and eyes.

"Uh, Mom," Josette knew, and she looked at Violet, unsure how she should break the news.

"Amy, we don't want to have to say this..." Violet began firmly.

Amy stopped, not liking the tone that the conversation had suddenly taken.

"What? What is it? Are they hurt? Shot? Stabbed?" The possibilities were endless.

"They were in an accident. Now, I don't think we should panic just yet," Violet pacified her, as she began to physically fret.

"We don't know much, other than they are safe amongst the authorities, and that the hospital sent a helicopter to get them."

"Yes," Josette agreed. "We shouldn't make things worse by guessing. Let's just wait until they get here, and take it from there."

Amy took courage from their reasonable words, and she drew in a deep calming breath. "You're right, you're right," she clenched her fists as she pulled herself together. "We won't be helping if we get hysterical."

Violet put her own hands around Amy's balled extremities.

"They're back, that's all that matters. Our family is safe again."

"Yes!" Josette bopped for the sheer joy of it, and Amy laughed at her daughter's excitement. Whilst there was bad news to go with the good, the good far outweighed the bad. They *were* back together, and family could face anything as long as they stuck together.

"Let's go phone grandma," Amy said to her daughter. "Make time pass quicker."

"Amen to that," Violet echoed, as she followed them out.

"Goddamned backboard!" Culley bellowed from his helpless position. Strapped down once more, debilitated again, the manufactured paralysis compounded by the fact that he couldn't see what was happening with Yasmine, and nobody would tell him anything.

Not that it mattered, because he couldn't hear a damn thing past the head brace and the dull thud of the helicopter blades and engine, but he still would have liked to have known that she was okay.

He knew in the aftermath of the crash, that she had lost consciousness, and the bystanders and then the paramedics hadn't let him move to check on her. They had spent an awful amount of time tending to her, and although he thought that he had heard her voice, he hadn't been sure, and nobody had said anything, despite his queries.

He had also told them of Denny's death, and had tried to insist that they bring his body along, but the chief of the scene had over ridden his appeal, and had called in the biohazard team to collect the remains. Yasmine would not be happy once she found out, Culley knew that for sure. The radio crackled up ahead, and then he felt himself dropping, and wondered if his psyche would remember the sensation, and replay it for him during his dreams. And then the doors opened, and they pulled him out first, and he felt the wash of the rotors on his face, before he was wheeled away with about ten people surrounding him, shouting at each in that incomprehensible language that medical staff had specially developed to keep the non-medical people in the dark.

"Mr Taffinder?" A pretty dark-haired nurse leaned over, and blocked out the elevator's fluorescent light.

"Yeah?" Culley asked, warily.

"Are you in pain anywhere? Does your head hurt? Your neck?"

"No," he answered. "Hey, can you tell me if Yasmine is okay? They wouldn't tell me anything-"

"She's behind us, with another team so I can't say right now, but I can find out."

"Geez, can you?" Culley was relieved. "I know she hit her head, and that she passed out."

Someone said something to the nurse over his body, and Culley tried to follow the sound with his eyes, but couldn't see who had spoken.

"Okay," the nurse answered, before she looked down at him again.

"You were here before?"

"Yeah, I tore the ligaments in my knee - Hey! Christ that hurts!" he blasphemed as someone stuck probing fingers into the injured joint.

"It's okay, it's okay," the nurse tried to soothe him, as he wriggled within the confines of the immobilising straps, sharp pain shooting up his leg.

"Don't do that!" he ground out. "I've already been diagnosed by a doctor ten times better than

you!"

He couldn't see the offending party, but he hoped his words had the desired impact. It had been bad enough when he had deliberately hurt himself to get the hell out of Pierson's lair, but he really didn't want some stranger poking at him without Yasmine's say so.

"No, no it's okay. They have to check it," the nurse tried to reassure him, but he wasn't having any of it.

"They might have to check, but at least get someone who knows what they're doing!"

The elevator pinged, and the doors opened, and then he was wheeled into the chaos of the emergency room. Some idiot quickly stuck a digital recorder in his face, and began screaming questions at him, running alongside, and interfering with the emergency team's procedures, but he or she (it was hard to tell) was quickly removed by a black jacketed security guard.

"Will someone please tell me how Yasmine is?" He was becoming strident as they lifted him, board and all on to a bed.

"They're still checking her," another voice said, one that Culley recognised. Pickering, the ER chief from the other night came into view, and Culley gave him a big smile.

"Hey doc, did I miss anything whilst I was away?"

"Not much, just policemen, press, family, press, wrestlers, oh and press," he shined the little mini torch that all doctors seemed to have into Culley's eyes.

Culley laughed, feeling a little better now that he could see a face who would help him with Yasmine.

"I'm sorry. They can be a real pain," Culley apologised, as he sensed them manoeuvring some equipment around the bustling room.

"Just hang in there. They are going to take some x-ray's of your neck and spine-"

"You sure they'll show up?" Culley didn't want to waste time.

"I mean we were exposed to some radioactive material-"

"You aren't sick, so the exposure was minimal," Pickering began.

"And if we were around someone who was badly exposed?" Culley needed to know everything, just in case Yasmine *was* still unconscious, and unable to tell them about Denny.

"Doesn't work that way," he pulled on the lead vest, and fastened it between his legs. "It's not a virus, so you can't pass it on. Were you with someone who had radiation sickness? Hold still for a moment."

The machine next to him made a click, which was followed a semi-audible `br' noise.

"Too right, we were. Those wing nuts, not only took it, they opened the casing, and then let some poor mentally retarded boy fool around with the stuff inside-"

"Were you around the exposed Cobalt?" Pickering's tone took on some urgency, as Culley's words spilled out.

"No, neither of us were-"

"Hold still," Pickering instructed again. "Watch his leg," he ordered one of his staff, as they took another picture of the bones in his body.

"You and Yasmine weren't, but this other person was?"

"Yes," his answer was muffled, as they rolled him to get another transparency.

"What happened to him?" Pickering pointed to a nurse, silently telling her to get the x-rays down to the lab, so that they could have the results in minutes.

"He died this morning." Culley's voice was so sad. It made the room pause for just a moment, and then it started to flow again.

"I'm sorry," Pickering comforted. "Once they're badly exposed, there's not much we can do except make them comfortable."

"Try telling Yasmine that," Culley returned. "She took it real hard, and I don't know if she'll be able just put it away in a hurry."

Pickering leaned over and looked at Culley's face, nodding his head in understanding. "Maybe that's a good thing. It's something you can tell the police, and maybe they can use the information to catch the sods."

"They caught some of them," Culley gave him wicked smile, leaving no one in doubt of how he felt.

"Wishing you were in room with one of them now, eh?" Pickering laughed dryly. "I'd like to join that line."

A nurse moved to Pickering's side, and whispered something into his ear.

"Okay," he nodded, and he looked back at Culley. "Is it okay if your mother and father come in to see you?"

Culley briefly wondered why he asked, and he answered: "Yes, of course."

"I'll go get them-"

"Wait!" Culley stopped him. "Can you also find out about Yasmine?"

"Sure," he replied. "Gordon take over here," he charged someone, whom Culley couldn't see, to carry on in his stead.

Whilst Pickering went to fetch his loved ones, Culley was subjected to another few minutes of testing, poking and questioning. His X-rays came back, they took him off the back board, and removed the neck brace. An orthopaedic consultant blew in, strapped his leg into a protective brace, and had the same argument that Culley and Yasmine had had the night they first met, with the same inevitable results. However, he was suitably impressed when Culley vaunted Yasmine's inventiveness in keeping his injury immobile during their ordeal. It seemed that her efforts had paid off, because the swelling had gone down some, enough for the doctor to speculate that they would probably be able to repair the ligament within the next couple of days. That blasted ligament was both a pain and a boon, and although Culley wished he had never damaged the damn thing, at the same time he knew he would never have met Yasmine if he hadn't. In a strange way the pain was his ally, even if it had taken him and Yasmine on a roundabout journey which neither of them had bargained on. It had allowed them to get close in a short space of time, cutting through all the bullshit so deftly, that Culley was left with no option but to marvel at the shrewdness of the Universe, as it had brought him and the one person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with together.

"Culley!" four voices said at once, as his family filled the room, pulling him away from his thoughts.

"Oh Sweetheart, I'm so glad you're okay-" His mother kissed him on his cheek, and then brushed his hair from his forehead so that she could see his eyes more clearly.

"Us too, son," his father made a circling motion with his hand, including Casey and Roger, as they moved closer, both of them touching him in some way to assure themselves that he was here.

"I'm sorry I made all of you worry-"

"What rot!" Orrin interrupted harshly. "You weren't the one who volunteered, or the one to commit the crime, so don't you go blaming yourself for our worry."

"You're safe now," Roger added. "That's all that matters."

"Absolutely," Casey echoed.

"Has anybody heard anything about Yasmine?" Culley asked anxiously, still in the dark about the woman that he cared for.

"They haven't told me anything, and I'm worried about her."

"She's right across the hall way," Casey said half smiling, half frowning. "If you sit up you can see her."

"Really?" Culley sat up with a frown of his own, doing a jiggle to see past his bulky relatives.

"Didn't you see her?" Roger laughed.

"No, I was strapped to a back board, less than five minutes ago," he told them facetiously.

"Uh brother dear," Casey said, laughter clear in his voice.

"I don't know where you think you're going, but in case you've forgotten, you still can't walk anywhere-"

"Get out of my way then!" Culley made a shooin motion with his hand, his mind and eyes not on his moronic brother, but on a semi-shadowed area, so tantalisingly close - if only he could get there!

And then there was movement, and a smile he knew so well, as Yasmine turned her blonde head so that she could see him, and that's when Culley knew everything was going to be okay.

## CHAPTER 18

Things were not okay, although MacAllister was sure he was looking on things just a bit too dimly. However, he always believed in preparing for the worst, it saved on disappointment later. The local constable was in that state already, and they were just in the beginning stages of lengthy and exhaustive questioning sessions. MacAllister had told him from the onset to can his frustration, but the youngster was used to being a big whig in his little neck of the woods, and consequently failed to listen, which was why he was getting rattled so easily.

"Okay let's go through this one more time-"

"We've already been through it!" Raye, the constable, growled at MacAllister.

"Just to get it straight," MacAllister said, almost patiently. In fact his tone was more sarcastic, than patient, but then he figured Raye was too stupid to notice.

"We've got these two guys in custody. One gets away. The lot of them were chasing the doctor through this little burg you call a town, nearly did her in, but according to the pictures that we have of the hospital raid, they weren't in it. So, how come they're chasing them clear across the country side?"

"Maybe they were highway robbers, and saw the doctor and the wrestler as easy marks," Raye was acting decidedly hard done by, because the prisoners weren't talking, and his `big' arrest was beginning to fizzle down to a reckless driving charge.

"They see someone as big as Taffinder sitting in the front seat, and they think that's an easy mark? I'm not finished yet," he cut in, as Raye took a breath to try and cut a hole into MacAllister's argument.

"What are typical highway robbers doing with sophisticated communication equipment, like this?" He pointed to all the stuff that they had pulled from the slightly mangled black SUV, that Dutch and the others had ran to ground in their attempts, first, to capture the doctor and Culley, and then to try and get away from the constable.

"Not to mention these lovely little beauties that look like they belong on the nearest army base, rather than in the hands of some psycho nuts!" He held up a nasty looking foreign manufactured, automatic weapon, with a specially modified, extended clip, that could take more bullets than normal.

"And then there's their failure to defend themselves from the accusations we've levelled at them - how am I doing so far? Still think that we've got the wrong guys?"

"I never said that we got the wrong guys," Raye's face was stony.

"No," MacAllister nodded his head, "but you were thinking it. In fact, you are so eager to crack this case, that I can see you kicking these guys free in a couple of hours, on the pretext that you have to concentrate on finding the original criminals. You my friend, have to learn some patience, or these guys are going to slip right through your fingers."

MacAllister's face and tone were hard, as he made the facts clear to the greenhorn who was slouched in the big chair, behind the big desk, which gave him a big head.

"Fine," the other man foolishly shrugged, and then stood. "Let's see if *you* can make them talk." He grabbed the keys to the cells, and then moved out from behind the wood that consumed three quarters of the moving space.

*'Oh I'll make them talk alright,'* MacAllister thought to himself. *'And then we'll see who gets all the glory then.'*

Jason was on his knees, before the man who had crashed into the territory of the mad so quickly, that it seemed as if he had been struck by a lightning bolt made of psychopathic material.

Kyle was lying just a foot away, his viscera trailing from the huge slit that Judd had made over his belly.

"Tell it to me again," Judd was hissing softly. "I want to hear that whining tone sing in my ears once more, before you join your brother over there--"

"No boss, please," Jason begged hoarsely. This morning had been pure hell, but he really didn't want to experience the genuine thing just yet.

"Tell me!" Judd yelled, before he stepped forward and clawed the other man around the back of his neck. "Tell me!" Spittle flew a little way around them, but most of it landed on Jason's face.

All the others looked on in dread, wondering which of them would be next.

"Please, please boss," Jason assumed the attitude of someone who was praying as he pleaded for his life. "I'm telling you we tried to get Denny to stop bugging us--"

"Bullshit!" Judd slapped him hard, forcing him down. "You used him. You made him do all your dirty work." Judd kicked him in the stomach, hard.

"No!" Jason coughed, and then gagged.

"Yes!" Judd hissed viciously. "You made him move the stuff, that was why he was so fucking sick!" His foot blurred into Jason's huddled form once more.

"No, no, no," Jason sobbed. This was not going the way he had hoped. He had escaped from the scene, and hot footed it back to their headquarters, anxious to spill his guts about what he had seen, and be rewarded for that. But he had forgotten that the blue board had been with Denny, that it was still with Denny, and Kyle had been forced to admit that.

"Wilson!" Judd made the other man who had been leaning against the wall leap to attention.

"You saw Denny last night. As a matter of fact you were the one to point out that he wasn't looking well."

"Yes Judd," Wilson nodded. It was the truth, but Wilson was in a world of misery of his own so he didn't care what happened to Jason.

Jason had breathlessly told them that he had thought that Denny had been seriously hurt when Dutch and the other man had forced the doctor off the road, and Wilson was overwhelmed with dread for his friend. Denny was really a fragile soul, and there were many reasons for that, not the least of which was Judd's neglect of his brother. But they were paying for that now. Denny was having the last laugh. He had Wilson's board, and the means to disclose the whereabouts of the Brotherhood, and thus the Cobalt. Judd's plan was beginning to look like it was still born, but there was some hope.

"And what would you say was causing his ailment?"

"He looked like he had a bad case of sunburn," Wilson answered, remembering the blisters that he had seen on Denny's forehead.

Judd reached down and gripped Jason's face in a claw, cruelly squeezing his jaw and mouth to get Jason's attention.

"How come, if Denny was always bugging you, always inside, he had a case of sunburn?"

Jason began to weep piteously as he realised that there was no lie that would cover his ass in this instance. Denny's countenance, his skin and physical features had told Judd the truth, and Jason could not hide from that.

"Just as I thought," Judd yanked him upright, and he tucked his head in under his arm.

"Useless piece of shit!" he said, and in the same manner that he had used to break Denny's fingers, he snapped Jason's neck, and his rage was such that he did it with ease, the sound of the popping vertebrae loud in the descending quiet. Almost everyone stiffened at the action, each secretly hoping that these deaths had assuaged Judd's blood lust.

"Listen up," Judd ordered quietly, as the body slithered down his legs, and then rolled on top of his feet. "We have to prepare for a siege. The Zionists and other mud people are going to get here. Are we going to give in without a fight?"

As one the voices echoed in unison: "Hell no!"

"Are we going to let them take away our birthrights, our dignity as white men who have don't have the mark of Cain on them?"

"No! No! NO!" The echo in the room was booming, and it sounded like music to Judd's morally deaf ears.

"Then let us see to defending what is ours, see if we are capable of passing this test that all Christian martyrs long for..."

"What are you protecting them for?" MacAllister pushed, standing next to Dutch, really leaning over him, trying to get into his face.

"They don't give a rat's ass about you. They left you to rot here with me!"

It was a standard technique in interrogation. The purpose was to make the suspect isolated, make him or her feel as if they were indeed all alone, and then MacAllister would send in someone else who would make them feel as if they were the only friend they had. Of course he couldn't do it. His job was to be a complete bastard, to be the one whom, if the prisoner saw him, would make him or her clam up. He had to do the breaking down, and he had to be so effective that the perp would run into his designated comforter's arms.

So far it hadn't worked on this old, grizzled veteran, but it was working like a dream on the other man that they had pulled from the car that had just about killed the doctor and the wrestler. That was another tool that MacAllister had at his disposal. Keeping alleged criminals in the dark. The trick was separating any partners from one another, and then using any information that they gave up against each other. There were several ways of getting that kind of information - the first was to really listen to what each suspect was saying. Most lines of questioning began with something that was inadvertently let slip. Next came coaxing, persuasion, manipulation and then outright threats and coercion.

This man had so far resisted saying anything at all, so he had already thrown the first tack out. Right now MacAllister was down to manipulation, but he had no qualms about stepping into that realm. This Dutch person was part of a group of bad guys, and that was MacAllister's speciality - he caught bad guys. He slept well at night not really caring how he did it, and if it wasn't for a bunch of limiting rules, he would have beaten any information out of a bad guy if he

thought it would do any good.

However, he was savvy enough to know that pain was not one of those methods that would work on *this* man. He knew that he just had to find an 'in' with this man, a chink that he could use to open him up, so that he could verify the information that was pouring from the scared, spineless youngster that he had been with.

There was so much of it, no one on this task force was quite sure of what was true and what wasn't. A problem arose when someone was scared for their own hides, they often felt like they were in pain, and they were willing to say anything to stop the torture that they were under. It didn't make for very reliable information, but somewhere in that morass was a kernel of truth, and Dutch was going to corroborate it for them.

"Just think how it's going to be in prison," MacAllister went on his haunches next to Dutch, who was sitting in the little grey room, at the institutional table with his arms folded.

"Think of all the dregs of society that you will have to consort with, all the blacks and other non-whites who will be sharing your space..." he paused to let the words sink in, and Dutch shot him a dirty look after a moment.

"Now there is a way around this," MacAllister was elated. That look had been the first sign of emotion that this man had shown the whole day.

"If you co-operate, then maybe we can get the charges reduced. I mean, all you've done is pushed someone off the road, that could be knocked down to a charge of reckless driving, you carry on resisting, and there's know telling what the public prosecutor will come up with-"

A sharp rap at the door cut him off, and MacAllister whispered a dirty word under his breath.

Dutch smiled smugly, and MacAllister was tempted to smack him about the chops, but he didn't.

"What's going on in there?" Raye asked, once MacAllister was outside and he had the door firmly shut against the world outside.

"I'm questioning the prisoner," MacAllister answered, irritably. This man had just ruined ten minutes of good headway.

"What's taking so long?" Raye continued, dumbly.

"These things take time," MacAllister said harshly, tired of the other man's petulance. "And you're not helping," he added.

"Whaddya mean?" Raye became surly all over again.

"What I mean is, until I come out of there, until I actually ask for something, *do not bug me!* This is a delicate time, I'm trying to win this guy's trust-"

"What for?" Raye was now angry, and squawking.

"Keep your voice down," MacAllister ordered. "In case you hadn't noticed, it wasn't a bunch of amateurs who raided that hospital the other day. They went in there with a purpose, and they took specifically what they came for. We don't know who they were, and why they took that stuff, but he does," MacAllister pointed to the door, and to the man beyond it. "Got it?"

"I get that you are wasting time-"

"Listen you little prick!" MacAllister hissed into Raye's face. "This is a lot bigger than your emasculated ego, and I've been doing it for a lot of years so I've seen twits like you ruin a good case because they figured they could cover themselves with glory. That guy has to be massaged into letting us know what we want to know, and that takes time. He can keep his mouth shut indefinitely, but we don't have that luxury. They've got at least a kilo of radioactive Cobalt, if not more, and it's leaking poison all over the joint. He needs to sing like a canary, and soon."

With that, he turned around and went back into the room, to work on Dutch some more.

Whilst hostages were usually a pain in the butt, in this case they were valuable evidence, and

MacAllister was going to use the fact that Dutch and his cohort were chasing a small woman, an injured man, and a dead boy across the country side. He was going to use it like a crow bar on a box of illicit imported goodies, and he intended to be finished by that evening, even if he had this sick feeling that he was way too late.

"Wilson!"

Judd came across the other man as he was manning one of the sand-bagged windows.

"I need to see you," he indicated that someone had to take his place, and then moved off so that he and Wilson could be alone.

"Do you think you could replace the board that Denny took with him?"

"Well, yeah," Wilson just managed to keep the hurt out of his voice at the mention of Denny. "I mean, I've got the beginnings of a second. Shouldn't take me more than a day to complete a new one."

He wanted to ask why Judd wanted to know, but he knew better. That would probably send him off into another one of his rages, and they needed their leader focused.

"I've been thinking," Judd began, and Wilson felt himself relax a little. It was always good when Judd took him into his confidence.

"This shouldn't be a disaster," he waved an elegant hand about, and Wilson was reassured even more. It was even better when Judd had a plan.

"When the government comes for us, there is nothing stopping us from using their oppression to make our cause look good."

"Nothing at all," Wilson echoed.

"But I want to take it one step further," Judd rubbed his chin, as the plan made even more sense in the twists that made up his logic.

"I want to be able to prove to our followers that we are the chosen ones, that God has inspired our cause, and that they can put their faith in us. That's why I need you to take the Cobalt 60, the set-up for it's dispersal, and the board and get to the safe haven."

Wilson was shocked, and it showed. "Me?" he almost squeaked.

"You are the only one who can put it together so that it works, and to do that you need to get the hell out of here. It won't do any good amongst us, it needs to be done in the outside, and you are the only one with the expertise to see that it gets done right."

"I don't know Judd," Wilson hedged. He hadn't been by himself in quite a while, and he was afraid of what he would learn if he went out by himself. That sort of thing always promoted self investigation, and Wilson just knew he wasn't going to like what he saw in his psyche.

"Wilson I haven't exactly been keeping you around because I like your personality!" Judd spat. He had seen the other man's spinelessness. "In case you haven't noticed, I could have promoted anyone of these bootlickers to be my right hand man."

Judd kept his voice down. He didn't need a mutiny just yet.

"I kept you on, made sure you stayed alive, tolerated your crap with Denny, because you were the only engineer we have, and it's the only reason that you haven't joined the ranks of the dead either."

Wilson was pale as Judd's true self came through, the hatred and rage focused on him now. In his heart he knew that Judd wouldn't do anything to him just yet, but there was always that element of unpredictability in Judd. There was nothing to stop him from removing Wilson from the face of the Earth anyway, and then taking the Cobalt to a secure location outside, and leaving these other nutters to fend for themselves.

But Wilson wasn't going to give him the opportunity to change his mind.

"Fine," he acquiesced. "Is there any place in particular that you want me to place the device?"

"Yes," Judd smiled, evilly. "I want it to go into the centre court of the shopping centre I've been working at. I want all those fat Jewish bitches to be exposed, and I want to stop them from whelping, from bringing more of that kind of filth into the world!"

It took Wilson under ten minutes to collect everything that he needed. He didn't want to be in Judd's company any longer than he had to. Because if Judd had found out about his need to find Denny, he would never have trusted Wilson with such an important task. That was what he was going to do very first, and Judd's need to get revenge on those he deemed inferior was going to wait.

*'How the hell is Judd going to do anything about it anyway, if he's stuck at the compound, if it's under siege?'* Wilson justified a few minutes later, as he carefully turned off the protective dirt road that would tell them if anybody was coming, and on to the tar to face his very own demons. If anybody had asked him what kind sacrifice he would have made for their cause he would have asked for something physical, not this terrible uncertainty. Denny just had to be okay, he just had to be.

Once Dutch started talking, it had become hard for him to stop. MacAllister was convinced the other man was trying to convert him to their cause the way he talked to the detective. Everything was in the open, and everything sounded so rational, only MacAllister was a cynic down to his bones, and he didn't hold very many beliefs, and he wasn't about to start holding these either.

"The world is not a collection of people with different beliefs. It says in the bible that Jesus died for all our sins, for all of us - so what right do the other races and creeds have to decide who they'll believe in?"

Privately MacAllister thought it was because the other people at least had brains, and had probably put some serious thought into their relationship with God or whomever they chose His name to be.

"I'm sure you are right," MacAllister tried to agree with him, "but-"

"Of course I'm right. Doesn't it say in the bible, that Jesus is the only way?"

"Dutch," he pushed some more coffee towards the man, "I could let you point out all the ways that God has intended for me to live, but right now I have to point out to you that *I'm* the way out of this mess. Jesus put me here, at this moment in time so that you could atone for your sins, so that more people don't have to die."

Dutch sat up straighter as MacAllister's words penetrated his zeal.

"Right now, you and your young partner are looking at charges of kidnapping, attempted murder and genocide. Now I don't know the ramifications of all this, but I think I heard the public prosecutor's office say that they would probably have to bump this case to the international court at The Hague." Any moment MacAllister expected a great big bolt of lightening to come down from up high and strike him dead, not only because he was lying, but because he was claiming to be speaking on behalf of the Creator of all. But then he figured that the Great One would cut him some latitude. He was trying to stop a catastrophe.

"I don't know," he carried on, as he stroked his jaw. "It seems a bit much for something that can basically be written down to a charge of reckless driving."

He had been carping on this reduction in charges all afternoon, and he was now thoroughly sick of it. He couldn't believe that this man could be that thick that he didn't grasp the life line that MacAllister was throwing him. It was such a simple thing - give up some information, and he would go in front of the judge and get a slap on the wrist. Heck he would be on his merry way inside of twenty minutes if he would just tell them where the Brotherhood and the Cobalt were.

"I'm a soldier," Dutch became belligerent again, and MacAllister had to clench his fists to stop himself from becoming violent.

"They can't prosecute me for fighting a valid war."

"They can and they will," MacAllister told him calmly. "Their idea of valid, and yours are guaranteed to be poles apart."

Dutch looked at him, and although his face was impassive, there was something in his eyes that made MacAllister pause.

"What did you think that they would play fair? You did, didn't you?" MacAllister probed. "Did you think that they would be honourable?"

"They got voted in didn't they?" Dutch shot back. "Our taxes pay their salaries and yours, so why won't they do what is necessary to protect our rights?"

"What country are you living in, up here?" MacAllister tapped his own head. It wouldn't do to have the prisoner squeal that he was a victim of police brutality.

"This isn't some liberal, forward thinking, 'lets-rehabilitate-the-prisoners' state. We still have the death penalty here, and what you guys have done is both seditious and treasonous, both capital offenses."

"Humph!" Dutch snorted. "Typical of a Zionist pig regime."

There were a thousand sarcastic quips MacAllister could have tossed out, but that was not going to make Dutch crack. This was a time for finesse.

"So then why give them the satisfaction? Look Dutch, I see that you have given a lot of thought to your doctrine, and that you would be willing to die for your cause, but that would be lost on those in authority. They would consider you one less bad guy in the world, and they would move on to the next target. It will do the Brotherhood no good if you were to die, and take your wisdom with you."

Dutch let his chin sink to his chest, as he mulled over MacAllister's words.

"Nah, Judd will kill me." If he was released and Judd found out, there would be no stopping his leader. Judd would hunt him 'til the edge of Hell, and then he'd demand that Satan allow him to finish Dutch off.

"Judd?" MacAllister's ears picked up. He knew that Judd was the leader of the Brotherhood. The youngster that was still in custody in another room had already given up his name and surname. Dutch was just confirming the information.

"Judd Pierson," Dutch sighed. "As if you didn't know," he stated.

"You're right we did know. But you just confirmed it for us. Your friend was pretty scared and he sang very prettily, very quickly."

"So then why are you harassing me?" Dutch was annoyed now.

"Because it's good for your soul."

"Judd is going to kill that boy, you know."

"Dutch," MacAllister began, "despite what you might think, the police don't punish people by returning them to the criminals that spawned them. We are a lot bigger than the Brotherhood for White Justice, and we can protect those that help us."

"Well that's good, because we made a big mistake, and we are going to need protecting."

Wilson made the mistake in believing that because he was out from under Judd's thumb that he was free to do anything he wanted, and that made him listen to the radio, just so that he could sing along to some truly forbidden music.

He regretted it tremendously when the news came on. The biggest story was the return of the woman doctor and the wrestler, the ones who had stolen his Denny, and he felt a terrible taste

come into his mouth when their families gushed about how happy they were to have them back. Those two had destroyed his family. They didn't deserve any happiness.

And that feeling grew as more terrible news dropped on top of him. Denny, his Denny was dead. Dead, dead, dead.

He was all over the road as the hideous truth was let loose from the box in the front of the dash. He finally managed to pull over, and he fiddled with the knobs chasing the news, bashing the front panel when the bulletin had little or no information. Just the mere mention of Denny's name meant that he was still alive in some form, and he spent minutes trying to keep that illusion going. Anything was better than knowing that he was never going to see that sweet, precious, angelic smile ever again. Never.

The static hiss of the last radio waves on the dial, spoke of the emptiness that lay before him. But he still had one thing going for him.

He vowed, as the tears streamed down his face, that he was going to make those two lovebirds pay for taking his own love away from him. He now had his own plan, his own reasons, and Judd was not going to be there to stop him this time.

## CHAPTER 19

They had to be careful. The stuff they were carrying would be considered contraband, and would be very firmly removed from their possession. It might have even resulted in them being thrown out, without them having completed their mission.

They couldn't allow that, so they skilfully hid their cargo, and kept their faces neutral, and did everything that was expected of visitors to a large city hospital, including keeping a low profile, which was pretty difficult, since they were hardly invisible. So far they had managed to get through to the orthopaedics ward, which was their intended end. That was where their target was.

"Is that thing properly hidden?"

"It's under my jacket," came the reply.

"Don't wave it around," yet another voice contributed, and he gave a passing nurse a smile, untruthfully giving her the impression that there was nothing wrong, even though their very actions were opposite. "If someone catches a whiff, we're done for."

That seemed to make them speed up, for they had to get to a specific point as soon as possible. The longer they tarried, the more likely it was that they would be caught.

"Here it is-"

"Wait! Wait, there's someone in the room with him!" They could hear the muted voices through the door, and they pulled away to the wall on the opposite side of the busy ward way.

"Man, that's probably his Mom and Dad, and what difference would that make?"

"What if it's not? We've all spent a lot of time and energy on this, and we've come this far, let's not get caught-"

"Exactly," added the third voice. "We should wait for a couple of minutes, and then go in there."

"Or one of us could go in there, and see what's what. If it is the family, well then we know what to do..."

"Agreed," two voices said in tandem.

"You go then-"

"Hey, it was your idea," the other pointed out logically, when it appeared that he was about to protest.

"Fine," he sighed, and then caught the gap between a passing gurney and the food trolley that was making it's rounds. Having food around was good. It meant that people wouldn't suspect anything.

The others watched as he pushed through the door, and then disappeared behind it.

One of them looked at his watch, and began to count off the seconds, still not sure at which point this would count as a failure. Twenty seconds in, the door opened again, and a laughing nurse left the room, with her plastic container, and she turned away from the loitering scoundrels, and headed back to her station.

"This is it!" The one tapped the other with the package, and they both nipped across the sparkling tile toward the concealing door.

"Buzz! Rory!" Culley greeted as they walked through the door, glad that his friends weren't avoiding the hospital.

"Culley!" Rory high fived him, whilst Buzz waved a blue and white box in the air.

"Good news buddy, we sneaked you some barbecue ribs!" He pulled the lid open, and allowed the delicious, insidious, fragrance out.

"And they're all for you," Paul Heard junior said with a smile, and then tucked a huge linen cloth under his friend's chin.

"I don't know," Yasmine responded tiredly. "I was focused on my patients, they had to come first." She had been answering questions for the last fifteen minutes, and although she had thought in the beginning that perhaps this process would be cathartic, she was finding it frustrating. The police simply asked the wrong questions as far as she was concerned. It was like they weren't even aware that some lunatic fringe group had a potentially devastating substance in their possession, and that they were planning something catastrophic.

"That's okay honey, I'm sure Officer Minnion understands," her father offered his support, although he could see her discouragement in her pretty eyes.

"Can you think of anything else? Maybe something that Mr Taffinder might have pointed out when you stopped?"

Yasmine took a deep breath, and was about to answer him, when the door to her ward swung open, and two large figures entered, one with his leg extended in front of him.

"Officer Minnion, this is Culley Taffinder," Craig Knittel introduced the two men.

"We met earlier," Minnion confessed, looking down at his notes again.

"Yeah we did, and I told you everything that happened then," Culley said firmly, his tone bordering on being angry.

He rolled his wheel chair behind the man, and with one hand flicked an empty plastic chair out of his way, so that he could position himself next to Yasmine's bed.

"You okay?" he looked her over, noticing the ugly purple bump on her forehead, and the red mark half-mooning itself over the notch at the base of the front of her neck.

"You were out pretty good this morning, are you sure you're up for this?" He snagged her little hand, as it lay on the worn, generic covers of her hospital bed.

Rory began eyeing Minnion like he was an opponent in the ring, and Yasmine wasn't sure she was up to anymore blood today.

"That's enough," bade Yasmine, feeling like she had been immersed in a vat of testosterone, as she noticed the way the lot of them were acting. There were far too many men in this room, not even counting the visitors that her room mate had. Emily Hayes, her husband and her son had so far been interested, if not passive observers, but this was getting to be a bit much.

"I'll answer a few more of your questions Mr Minnion, but please try to make them brief. My

head can't take much more of this," she scrunched up her face to show them that she had the beginnings of a monumental headache.

"I'm sorry," Minnion apologised again. "Like I said, anything you can tell us, that can help us narrow down the area, will be of help."

Yasmine was silent for a few moments, as she logically went over the sequences, that led to their escape, in her head.

"I guess we were pretty slow, weren't we?" she checked with Culley.

"Guess so," Culley agreed. "We kept having to stop for Denny, and that old rattle trap couldn't go very fast anyway."

"The road was also narrow, and pretty windy, and one section had like about five stop streets, and we turned down two, hoping that they wouldn't find us."

"I think they blew by us, pretty early," Culley looked at Minnion, "so we were behind them for much of the time."

"Any idea of where you might have been?"

"What are you asking me for? I'm a man remember, I don't even stop to ask for directions!" That made everybody laugh, even Minnion, who was manfully trying not to.

"Nope, it was dark, and we weren't really caring about where we went. The only thing I can tell you is East, about forty-five minutes away from the hospital, but not even that's accurate."

"What about the house?" Minnion directed the question towards Yasmine.

"An old-fashioned one," she responded. "It had a cellar, and the floor in the kitchen was covered by parquet squares, with an old *Frigidaire* on the one side of the doorway-"

"Opposite the key rack," Culley concurred. He gave her a gentle smile, as some of the memories of what they had shared came back. Not everything about their kidnapping had been bad, some of it had been downright immodest, and he wasn't going to forget that in a hurry.

"Three sheds out back," Culley continued, "with three vehicles in each, and a gravel driveway." His toes were still covered by band-aids to remind him.

"How about a gate?"

"I don't remember," Yasmine answered.

"Fence posts?"

"I don't remember," she replied, and then sank back down the bed, so that she could lie on her side, the way Denny had just before they had got the hell out of their jail.

"What colour roof-"

"Okay, that's it," Culley stopped him. "Yasmine is done answering questions for today."

"I agree," said her father. "If you want anything else, come back some other time." He lifted the blanket to cover her shoulders, as she lay with her back to him. "You okay honey? Do you want the nurse to bring you a pain pill?"

She was tempted to say yes, but what she really wanted was to be alone with Culley, and she couldn't do that if she was drugged to the gills.

"I'm okay Daddy," she patted his hand.

"Craig?" her mother and her sister brushed past Minnion as he left.

"Daddy, who was that?" Josette asked, her roving eye always looking for a new conquest.

"Minnion from the police," her father grunted. "Come along son, I think it's time we let Yasmine have a little peace." He moved behind Culley and prepared to pull him away.

"Uh, Craig? Do you think I can have a few moments more?" His blue eyes pleaded with the older man to let him stay a little longer. It was like Yasmine was life saving medicine, but they were only allowing him small doses so that he didn't become addicted, only nobody besides him, and maybe Yasmine, knew that it was way too late for that. If Yasmine were like heroin,

he would gladly overdose with a smile.

"I'll send a nurse," her father understood. "Say, could I buy you a beer?" He asked Rory. "The name's Craig by the way. I feel like celebrating, and I don't feel like doing it alone."

"Damn straight," Rory trumpeted, giving the other man's hand a good shake. "Not everyday that a man's daughter comes back safe and sound from a bunch of loonies, I reckon we've got reason to party!"

"Amy?" Craig asked his wife, looking hopeful.

"Oh what the hell!" she exclaimed. "I figure we all deserve some carousing. Let's have a party!"

The lot of them left, noise reduction being the direct result of their departure, and Culley smiled widely, his relief acute at being alone with Yasmine once more.

"I was worried about you, you know," he told her, as he reached for her hand once more.

"I was worried too," she returned. "What did Ganton say?"

"He said tomorrow." He knew that she was referring to his consultation with her replacement. His surgery was scheduled for the morning. "I would prefer that it was you though."

"I can't," she smiled. "You fired me, remember?"

"Can't I hire you back?"

"Nope, it would be unethical. There's a conflict of interest."

"You mean you don't get to be my doctor at all? Nuts!" he scowled. "What about being my nurse? Can you be my nurse?"

"Uh-uh, I'm not qualified for that."

"You mean I can't hire you to take care of my person at all?" Culley was disappointed.

"Well..." she drew out the word. "I can do other things besides be a doctor."

"Such as? Tell me," he insisted, leaning toward her. "I do believe in fair and equal employment for all, and it seems to me that you are out of a job." He curved a warm hand about her cool cheek, and fervently wished that she had a private room like he had.

She shrugged, and gave him an enigmatic smile.

"Okay how about visits? Can you come and visit me? My room is private," he whispered, "and oh, how I wish we were alone, so that I could hold you, and kiss all your aches away."

"I wish you could hold me too," she turned her face into the pillow, so that she could hide the tears that she could feel forming.

"Hey, it's okay," he threaded his fingers into the hair around her ear.

"No it's not okay," she looked at him sharply. "We could have died, I could have killed you today-"

"Shhh... There are lots of way to look at what happened today, and apart from what happened with Denny - which neither of us was responsible for, so don't even go that way," he spoke softly, authoritively, "I'm so glad we got the hell out of there."

"I'm glad we're safe too," she sniffed, delicately. "I don't blame either of us for what happened with Denny, but I still feel guilty about leaving the Cobalt in the hands of those psychos-"

"I don't," Culley frowned. "I hope they fuck around with it the way they made Denny do it, and I hope they get just as sick. It's what they deserve, the bastards!"

"Shhh," it was Yasmine's turn to soothe. "Let's not talk about them any more." She moved over and put her hand over Culley's mouth, to stop him from saying anything else.

"Mmmm, what is that smell?" He smelled like food, and she hadn't had a decent meal in three days.

"I had ribs for lunch-"

"Ohh, go away!" she moaned, and playfully shoved at his chest.

"Hey, Rory, Buzz and Paul junior smuggled them in for me. How could I say no?"

"I hate you," she laughed, and wailed at the same time. "All this time, eating hospital food, and you've got friends sneaking delicacies in!" She punched him playfully.

"Ow!" he laughed, and then kissed her fist in repentance.

"Mr Taffinder?" Neither of them had heard the nurse walk in, Craig being true to his word, by sending someone to collect him.

"It's time for Dr Knittel to rest now."

"Okay," Culley sighed, and looked at her downcast. "I'm on Three. I have a room to myself, promise me that you will come and visit me, and save me from the boredom," his voice had got progressively louder, as the nurse disengaged the chair brake, and turned him away, toward the door.

"Promise me!" he yelled, angling his body around the nurse so that he could see her.

"Okay, I promise!" she vowed.

## CHAPTER 20

"Yasmine!" a voice, she recognised, exclaimed, when she stepped on to the orthopaedics ward. She knew the staff by name in this section of the hospital, and although there had been times where she had been forced to exert her authority in medical matters, she hoped that she had earned her share of respect from these highly professional people.

"Hello Lynette," she greeted, when she saw whom she was talking to.

The tall, muscular brunette looked concerned for a moment, and Yasmine realised that she had been silently examining her to see if she was supposed to be out of bed.

Yasmine's day had been one of those 'jerky' one's, the kind that starts off with intense excitement, and then lurches along from one extreme moment to the next, with very little respite in between. People had been coming in and out to see her all day, and she was now actually grateful that they had all gone home for the evening. The hospital had insisted that she stay overnight, and even though she could have protested, and proved that there was nothing wrong, she had given in without much of a fight. Culley was going to have surgery in the morning, and she knew she would feel a lot better if she was close to him, and able to see him before he went under the knife.

However, in her deepest heart she knew that she was just a big faker, and that there was nothing physically wrong with her - even her headache had tapered off - so she had decided to wander up to where she knew Culley lay.

"Have an exciting day?" Yasmine asked politely, not really wanting to linger, and not really sure why. She could have easily slipped into work mode, even checked on all the patients on the ward, and helped out a nurse who was worried about one of her patients and had no doctor to call on. But, somehow, this evening she just didn't feel like it.

"Not nearly as exciting as yours," Lynette said, with a sympathetic smile. Hospitals were small places, and gossip and news spread like wild fire, and it didn't surprise Yasmine that everybody knew of her ordeal, she just hoped that they didn't make too big a deal of it.

"You here to check on Mr Taffinder?" Lynette asked with a slightly sly smile.

"If I could," Yasmine nodded, and accepted the clipboard file with Culley's details on it, once they reached the nurse's station.

"Stubborn man," Yasmine griped, when she noticed that he still refused to accept any anti-inflammatories.

"He is yummy though," Lynette smirked, and Yasmine felt an irrational need to put her into her

place, but she bit her tongue because she was going to have to deal with the simpering woman in the near future.

"Do you think I could see him?" Yasmine asked, as she handed the file back, and then folded her hand into the pocket of the generic hospital dressing gown that she had borrowed from downstairs. She was still stuck in the backless hospital gown, because nobody had thought to bring her something else, not that it mattered because she was leaving in the morning, and what was more she had the next few days off. Sometimes there were perks in even the most dire of situations.

Lynette looked down at her watch and saw that it was about a quarter past nine. She mulled over Yasmine's request for another quarter of a minute, and then nodded her head in the affirmative.

"Sure," she smiled again. "I'll let you know when it's time to head back to your ward."

"Thanks," Yasmine called, as she hurried down the hall way towards Culley's room, not willing to miss a single minute of being with him.

She caught him flicking through TV. channels, as he lay on the bed looking as bored as she had been some minutes ago.

"Yas! I'm so glad to see you," he welcomed her, when she pushed into his light blue room. He shifted in his bed, making a mess of the covers, as he tried to sit up properly.

"Damn thing," he muttered, and flung the remote control, that controlled both his bed and the other accoutrements in his room, to one side.

"More like impatient man," Yasmine pursed her lips at him, as she moved around to his right, and adjusted the bed so that he was sitting more up right.

"Squish," she commanded, and he moved over a little, so that she could climb up next to him, and settle beside his warm flank.

"You came, I don't believe it," he grinned, and laced his fingers with hers.

"I came," she agreed. "I wanted to see you once more, before they took you to surgery-"

"Why?" he pressed.

She shrugged. "I'm not really sure. It was just a crazy feeling that I had." She looked at their legs, her feet at his calf's midway, and marvelled for a moment at their differences, before one of his big hands broke her line of sight, and then her concentration as his fingers glided under her chin, and he turned her face to look into her clear, blue eyes.

"Still worried about me, aren't you?" It wasn't really a question.

"Of course," she answered, without any guile. "We shared something intense, something no one else in this hospital has ever been through, and nobody can take that away from us. Even if we went our separate ways, there will always be a part of me with you, and vice versa."

"Don't," he put one of his fingers over her lips. "Don't talk like that," he said, meaning about them being apart.

She had always been a practical sort, always ready to face reality, and once more they were in the real world, with real considerations, and yet she couldn't bring herself to think of life without him in it somewhere either. So she dropped it.

Culley lifted his arm, and then resettled it back about her shoulders, cuddling her small frame into him.

"I don't know how they expect me to sleep without my bed time kiss, or even my life size doll," he meant her, and he bent his head and kissed her warm lips.

"I could always prescribe something to help you sleep," she teased.

"No way, I'll sleep tomorrow!" he pouted at her suggestion, and she laughed softly at his expression.

"Besides which if I'm going to get addicted to something, I'd rather be addicted to you..."

"Don't say things like that," she gave her own warning, and she looked down again.

"Like what?" He lifted her face again, and touched his lips to hers once more. "Things like I want to see you everyday..." Another kiss. "Things like I want to keep holding you..." Yet another sip. "And things like, if we were in a really private place now, I'd make love to you..."

"Oh!" Yasmine breathed, and Culley pressed his advantage, gently tasting the very inside of her mouth with his tongue, before voraciously sweeping inside, and taking all her thoughts with it.

Voices just outside the door broke them apart, and Culley swore viciously at the intrusion.

"No," Yasmine moaned, and shut her eyes to keep the outside at bay. "I'm not ready to go yet-"

"Dammit! Why do we keep getting interrupted?" he asked, although it wasn't strictly true, because no one came through the door, and the voices moved off after a few moments.

They both sat there as tense as mannequins in a window display, willing the door not to open, and hoping that no one would come and keep them apart.

"Tell me that this door has a lock," he clenched his fist in frustration, virtually shaking it at the door, as he asked the question.

"No," Yasmine whispered. "They're not supposed to, in case of emergency."

It made sense, but that didn't help Culley's feelings.

"This is too much," he grumbled, tightening his arms, and bringing Yasmine closer. "It's enough to make me want to discharge myself-"

"Shhh," Yasmine silenced him by kissing him once more, as an idea took shape in her mind. She disengaged herself, from his arms even as her lips remained attached for a few seconds more.

"No! Wait!" Culley called, as she hopped off the bed, and he was left with empty arms.

"It's okay," she soothed. "I have an idea." One which she was having slight second thoughts about, but one she knew she would be able to implement. It would be all right she decided, her hospital gown was voluminous enough, and if she angled her body correctly, then he wouldn't see much.

Once she was in position, she pulled the robe from her shoulders, and carefully knelt down, trying not to expose too much skin, as she moulded the fabric, and solidly wedged it under the door.

Culley had sat up fully when she had left, and if he could have, he would have followed her to stop her from leaving, but now he was dazzled by her ingenuity, as well as aroused by the glimpses of bare skin that he had caught whilst she was performing this simple act of privacy.

"Think it will hold?" he queried softly, conspiratorially, asking of the gown that was stuffed under the door.

"No," Yasmine responded honestly. "It's not enough to keep them out, but maybe it will buy us some time to repair our modesty-"

"Planning on doing something immodest?" he quizzed, interestedly, as she came back to where she had been sitting earlier, and gladly moved back into his arms.

"We'll see," she gave him a cheeky grin, and he could feel his heart strings tug they way they had that night with Denny.

Yasmine looped her arms around Culley's neck, and succumbed to Culley's magical seduction again. Kissing was great, but soon it wasn't enough, because he knew exactly the right place to touch her, at exactly the right time, feathering his fingers over all her hot spots which were repressively covered by cloth. And soon, those restrained touches weren't enough either.

"Please," she murmured, and shifted so that she could be a little closer to him, turning so that her breasts were flattened against his chest, and finding some relief in that spot, but not enough.

As if to demonstrate what she wanted, she slid her own fingers and palms down across the seams of his own hospital gown, and then they slipped under to assay his strength and texture. She wondered at the softness of the skin on his flanks, before all thought was obliterated by the touch of his own fingers on her naked skin.

"Mmmm..." she hummed as his fingers strummed over her one breast, returning time and again to the sensitive centre, whilst his mouth slid down her chin, to just where her tongue started in her throat under her skin.

Whilst he could spend hours in just that one spot, tasting her skin, and drinking in her scent, he also knew that was the path to nonfulfillment - for both of them. He wanted more. He wanted to be able to see her in the clear, clean light that they lay under. He wanted to be able to kiss every centimetre of her skin, just so that he could master her perfume.

And right then, he didn't have the capacity to move on either. He was hampered by his leg, the cramped pose that he was in, and the smallness of the bed, but he wasn't about to stop what he was doing - not in this life time.

"Uh, Yas," he rumbled, close to her ear. "I think we might have a problem-"

"Shhh," she licked her lips, and moved back slightly. "I'll take care of it..." Her words caused him brief panic, until she moved, straddling his lap in the most divine manner, and then quickly leaning down to retrieve the remote that controlled the bed.

"Better?" she queried, huskily, as the bed slowly sank back down, so that it was flat, and he was laying against the hard, foam pillows.

"Much," he sighed, as his fingers and hands fully mapped out her chest and shoulders, discovering plenty that he had missed during his last limited sojourn across her body. He walked his fingers from her collar bone, around the sensitive area of her neck and spinal cord to where her hospital gown was loosely knotted, and slowly, tenderly undid it.

Yasmine didn't help much, as she leaned forward and kissed him on his inviting mouth, savouring every millimetre that her tongue came into contact with.

Culley pulled the coarse fabric away from her splendid form, down her arms, and then just left it to lie demurely at her waist, as his curious digits went prospecting on her naked skin.

"Oh!" Yasmine broke away from his kiss, and moaned as she arched her back, filling his hands comprehensively. He was an expert at touching her in just the right way, and she wondered how he had learnt to know her so well, so quickly.

She looked down at him, staring down into his hungry eyes, and knew that her own held an echo of need. She was burning up, and only he could quench that fire.

For Culley, Yasmine was the most beautiful creature that he had come across for some time, and he felt blessed she would trust him enough to allow him to get so close. He had the feeling that she would not give so much of herself to just anyone, and that made this very special.

"Lift up," she bade him softly, and she slipped a hand under him, just to where his own knot was lying uncomfortably pressed between his shoulder blades. A binding flashed past the corner of his eye, and he could feel the material becoming slack across his chest, before cool air wafted across his bare body, and the gown went sailing down to the floor.

Yasmine bit her lip, and then shifted slightly, settling more comfortably, so that their complementary body portions met, his rigidity nestling softly in her folds.

"You feel so good," she sighed, before she leaned forward to nibble at his mouth once more.

Culley would have echoed her sentiment, but his mouth was definitely preoccupied at that moment, so he had to show her with his hands and the rest of his body just how much he agreed with her.

"Uhh, Yas..." he moaned as she moved her stirring mouth from his, down his chin, and on to his

chest. "I don't think I can take much more of this..."

"I know," she mumbled against his strong collar bone.

"What if..." He couldn't concentrate when she did what she did with her hands. "What if someone comes in? I think we should stop now-"

"Shhh..." she stopped him, with one fore finger on his lips. He opened his mouth, and gently drew the digit in, sucking on it ardently when her own mouth traced the outline of one of his masculine nipples.

Yasmine had no intention of stopping now. It had been an inevitable conclusion to their association ever since Culley had first kissed her in their prison cell, and although she had initially fought this, she couldn't any longer. Everything that had happened, all the senselessness that they had been bombarded with, had stirred her sense of vitality, her need to appreciate life, and nothing was more life affirming than making love to Culley.

Culley ran his hands up from her delectable derriere, to just under her arms, slowly stroking his way around to her front, to where her own nipples responded to the feathering of his fingers, and then down, down her torso, over her gently curved stomach to where he knew she would be most sensitive.

It was like having bolts of delicious electricity shooting along her nerves, Yasmine decided, as Culley caressed and smoothed his fingers over the tremblingly alive fan of her femininity, allowing it to fill out, much to their mutual pleasure.

"Mmmm... Now..." she moaned, as the pleasure became unbearable, and a slow ache began to burn deep inside of her.

"Yes," Culley agreed, as he lifted her face and nibbled on her lips once more.

She broke away, as she lifted up and guided herself over his hardness, before sinking down ever so slowly, all the more to absorb the deliciousness of the act. He amply filled her, and she sat ever so still for a few moments, the newness of it all momentarily overwhelming.

"Yas?" Culley whispered softly, his big blue eyes curious, and then apprehensive, as if he was afraid that he had hurt her.

She soothed his fears with a big angelic smile. "This is what I've been missing?" she laughed softly, before a shiver coursed through her, as Culley moved to better appreciate their position.

"You'll miss a lot more if you don't hurry!" he groaned, and arched into her. She was tight, and giving at the same time, and he knew that soon he would be beyond his endurance. His urgency was contagious, and Yasmine knew she couldn't wait any longer either. She lifted herself off for just a moment, the drag of his tumescence inside of her just too enjoyable to deny herself, so she sank back down to repeat the process, and quickly developed a rhythm that left them both sighing.

Culley couldn't keep his hands still though. Every patch of her skin seemed to hold secrets that he needed, wanted to explore, and that, plus the way she was moving over him, around him lifted the experience to a whole different plane. It was intense, and it made him feel alive right down to his toes. Even his knee felt good...

Yasmine was desperate now. There was a deep need inside of her, a contradictory need to be sure, but one that existed. On the one side she craved the culmination that her actions would bring, on the other she didn't want this to end. It felt too good.

"Oh! Oh! OH!" she gasped, the words loud in the otherwise still room.

Culley just managed to remember that it would do nothing for Yasmine's reputation if she was caught with him, and before he lost his head he reached out and caught her head in his large hand, bringing it closer to his own face, so that he could seal her mouth in a deep, involving kiss.

Yasmine stiffened in his embrace but didn't break contact from his mouth as her release sprang free. That contact was infinitely precious, and it made her culmination richer. In a matter of seconds Culley had joined her in that state of bliss.

For a few minutes, they lay nestled so intimately, savouring their closeness, no words necessary.

"You okay?" Culley asked eventually, and he looked down at the top of her blonde head.

"Absolutely," she grinned, and looked up at his handsome face.

"I feel wonderful, and you?"

"I have never been better." He echoed her smile.

"Isn't it funny what fate throws in our way?" she sighed. "I mean I've had the best time meeting and being with you, but at the same time we've been through the worst experience of our lives..."

Her words dribbled away, as he strummed his fingers down the indentation of her spine.

"Do you think that what just happened was an extension of the trauma we've been through?" He didn't want to say the words, but they needed expressing.

"No," she answered simply. "What happened between us just now, was something we both wanted. Events just pushed us along faster."

"You mean, if I had asked you out before this happened you would have gone out with me?"

"I would have been tempted," she teased.

"Only tempted?" he sounded insulted, and insecure at the same time.

"Well you would have had to work at it-"

"No I wouldn't have," he stopped her. "I would have worn you down so quickly-"

"You wish!" She sat up abruptly, still over him.

"I know," he replied, and she realised that he had said the words deliberately. It was in his eyes, as was the reason why he had said them. He was looking at her like she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and it frightened her a little. Everything about them was so new, and it came upon them with the speed of a tornado. She only hoped that it wouldn't leave as much destruction.

"You beast," she scolded softly, before leaning down to plant a soft peck on his giving lips.

"Hey," he murmured, "that wasn't a kiss..."

It took another while before either of them spoke again.

"I have to go before this gets out of hand," she breathed, sure that it was far too late for that anyway.

"No," he moaned. "Stay. I need to hold you."

"Somebody is bound to come looking for me," she cautioned.

"But until they do, stay in my arms. Please," he asked gently.

If she had asked, he would have told her that his request was born out of the need to reassure himself that she really was whole and safe here in his arms. But she didn't need to ask. She was feeling the same thing herself, and that was why she acceded to his request, and made herself comfortable over him once more.

"Shouldn't we at least put our gowns back on?" She folded her hands over his chest, and then rested chin on them.

"What for?" He had nothing to be ashamed about, nor done anything that would make him embarrassed.

"I like looking at you, especially since for the last three days we've either been in the dark or apart."

His words made her smile again.

"I like looking at you too," she admitted, suddenly shy.

"Aha! I knew your interest wasn't strictly professional all the time."

"It was in the beginning."

"But?" he encouraged.

"But I didn't bargain on the effect that you would have on my hormones."

"Well at least one part of you was swayed early-"

"Not that early. I don't want you to think that I'm easy."

"I would never think that you are easy. What I do think is that you are incredibly brave, stupendously beautiful, and you fit so wonderfully in my arms, around my body..."

That earned him another kiss.

"And you make me feel warm and safe."

"You are safe now." He tightened his arms about her. "Sleep. You *are* safe now."

## CHAPTER 21

"This is better than I expected," Mrs Hayes observed about their breakfast, as they tucked into poached haddock and powdered eggs.

"Well it's a lot better than I've been eating over the past three days," Yasmine agreed, as she peeled the foil lid off her orange juice. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to eat oats again."

"Oh dear," Mrs Hayes grimaced, sympathetic to her memory. "That is one food stuff I've never been partial to. Of course just to keep things interesting, it happens to be one of my Gil's favourite foods. I remember one time, when we had a huge argument about the fact that I didn't make oats often enough, or I didn't make it like his mother did, I don't remember..."

Yasmine only listened to her natter with half an ear. Instead her mind was on another memory, and the description of another breakfast, only now she was particularly worried about the describer because he was already in surgery.

She had managed to sneak away from Culley's enveloping arms just before they made their first rounds, and then make it back to her bed without being observed. It was if fate approved.

And if Mrs Hayes had noticed her gone in the middle of the night she hadn't said anything, but Yasmine had few doubts that the other woman would have been understanding.

Still, Yasmine couldn't help feeling depressed. She was worried about Culley, and she also knew that she and the rest of her family were going to have to take charge of Denny's body and funeral. The mere thought of him lying in the local potter's field; with no grave stone, save a numbered marker; or worse lying in cold storage as a piece of evidence until an eventual trial; was more than she could bear. He had already been let down badly whilst he was alive, she wasn't going to do that to him again even if he was beyond such banality now.

"Hello Yasmine," Bob Pickering greeted as he came through the door.

"Mmph," Yasmine mumbled as she struggled to swallow her mouthful. "Bob, you're early for rounds," she remarked, looking at her watch.

"I'm not here to make rounds," he replied, as he pulled a plastic chair over to where she was.

"I'm here to check on you as a person. How are things Yas?"

"I don't know," she answered him honestly. "I don't think it's hit me yet." Bob was too good as a doctor for her to lie to him, he would see right through that.

"I know, and if you ever need a sympathetic ear-"

"Don't come nattering in my ears," they laughed at the same time. Despite his words, she knew that Bob would there if she needed him.

"I'm also here to give you a heads up," he continued, serious now. "That policeman - um-"

"Minnion?" Yasmine asked ominously.

"Nah, the other one, um, MacAllister," Bob supplied. "He's the guy in charge, he's the one headed this way. I had Tonia stall him, so you could gird yourself."

Yasmine rolled her eyes in agreement. "I don't know what else to tell them. I told them everything yesterday."

"Do you want me to cut him off with a medical excuse?" Bob offered chivalrously.

"No," Yasmine sighed. "I'm going to be released today, so if he doesn't get me here, he'll just nail me at home."

She just finished her sentence when Tonia pushed into her room, followed one of the most sour looking individuals Yasmine had ever come across.

"Here are your personal belongings," Tonia held out a thick, blue plastic bag, without preamble. Yasmine could tell she was upset, and that put her own back up.

"Dr Yasmine Knittel? Detective J.P. MacAllister," sourpuss waved his ID in her general direction, and began to crowd Bob, so that the other man was beginning to look decidedly intimidated.

"That's enough detective." Yasmine had no intention of letting him get away with his bully boy tactics.

"What?" the other man tried to look innocent.

"I asked Dr Pickering to stay already. Once you've asked your *very* few questions he and I will have discuss patient loads. I've got the rest of this week off," she smiled at Bob, but the warning was for the surly man fiddling with his pen and paper.

"Fine," he pursed his lips. The doctor was going to be as difficult as Violet Taffinder, MacAllister decided.

"Do you remember anything more than you told us yesterday?"

"No, but then I haven't spent any time thinking about the last three days any way."

"Do you think that you could try to go back mentally now," pushed the policeman, "try to see if there was anything distinctive about yesterday?"

Yasmine put her finger tips to her bottom lip and stroked it, as she turned inward mentally, trying to help, because she knew that it was important.

"The house we escaped from was on a big piece of land, at the bottom of a rough dirt road. There were no gates though, which was odd," Yasmine began chronologically. "Well maybe there were, but it was just too dark to see - the truck had candles for headlights," she shrugged.

"We went left once we hit the tar, and drove for about ten minutes, before Denny got sick again, and I drove into a field, just in case they were up and about. I don't know how long we were there, and then it was just a maze, of twists and turns."

"What about this Denny person, did he say anything?"

"Just that they playing with the stuff."

"Anything of intelligence?" MacAllister grunted.

Yasmine reached for the bag of affects that Tonia had left, to give her hands something to do, or else she was sure that she would have been charged with assaulting a police officer at that moment.

"The stuff he was referring to," she squeezed out through clenched teeth, "the stuff that killed him, was the Cobalt 60 that came from the x-ray department."

"I thought that stuff wasn't dangerous-"

"Most radioactive substances are dangerous, detective," Bob chipped in, "that's why x-rays are in a whole separate department, well away from the main body of the hospital."

He leaned forward, and helped Yasmine pull the thick plastic away from the wad of cloth that

had represented her clothes the day before.

"Great!" muttered Yasmine. "They cut everything away," she grumbled as she held up the tatters of her T-shirt, and camel coloured pants. Not even her socks had been spared, although her comfortable shoes would still be useful.

Bob laughed as he looked at her disgruntled face. "Hey what's sauce for the goose..."

Yasmine was tempted to show him a rude sign, but Mrs Hayes had more than enough gossip about Rand Hospital to pass on to her friends.

"Ahem," MacAllister drew their attention back to him. "So," he turned to a clean page, "why are x-rays so dangerous?"

"Long term exposure causes permanent cellular damage," something hard in her pants caught Yasmine's notice, so she really wasn't paying attention to her answer.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," prompted MacAllister.

"If you are exposed to radioactive material it causes a reaction in your cells, and they start to break down." The object seemed to be knotted in the material, and Yasmine was both intrigued and annoyed at the same time.

"Then how come we have x-rays?" MacAllister was confused.

"I'll handle this one," Bob stopped her, as she took a deep breath to launch into a proper explanation.

"Okay, an x-ray machine is specially designed to emit only a short burst of radioactive energy, just enough to light up your bones on a photographic plate, or to kill the cells in a cancerous growth. It has a core of nuclear material in a specially designed case that keeps it safe until we want it to emit this ray, but it's only safe in this case. That's why the x-ray department has a rotating staff, and special clothing because they are around that stuff all the time."

"Oh so that's why they have those lead aprons," at least something made sense in MacAllister's mind. "So then why take that stuff if everything is so controlled, if it will only work in the machine?"

"It works all the time, it always emits radioactivity, the machine is the part that controls it. As to why they took it, I don't know. Their agenda, apart from them being Neo-Nazi freaks, was not something I wanted to know about." Yasmine finally managed to get the last of the clinging material from the blue board that Denny had given them on that fateful night.

"Here," she said as she handed it to the policeman. "Denny said that this was important. He said something about it being one of a kind, and that it might have come from the TV. they were taking apart."

"Well it couldn't have been one of kind then," MacAllister said sensibly, as he gingerly took it from her, holding it by one corner. "If it came from a TV. then every set must have one."

"It didn't make sense to me either detective," Yasmine turned back to her breakfast.

"So then why did the loonies open the casing? If it's safe in there, then why risk poisoning themselves just to get at this stuff?" It was a puzzle beyond MacAllister's limited scope, and he didn't like that.

"Why take the stuff at all?" Yasmine shrugged.

"And a TV.?" MacAllister probed deeper.

"Probably the cathode tube," Bob mused, lost in his own speculation.

"What?" MacAllister snapped.

Yasmine's food was half way to her mouth when Bob's idle remark hit her, causing her to drop the forkful of cold eggs.

"If the fuel inside an x-ray machine constantly emits radiation, then we control where the radiation goes by giving the fuel a good jolt of electricity. In order for us to do this we use a

thing called a cathode tube, the same thing that a TV. set uses to put the picture on the screen."

"So in other words..." MacAllister wanted Bob to go on.

"In other words we can make the stream of radioactivity weaker or stronger, direct it where we want it to go with this cathode tube, and so can they. They can put this thing in a movie theatre, turn on the juice and poison a bunch of people with radiation using the tube to a TV. set."

MacAllister was now writing furiously. "Can they hold a city hostage with this stuff? Poison the whole city?"

"No, there wouldn't be enough to target an area that big, but they could do plenty of damage in a confined space. Those that didn't die from intense exposure, would die over a span of years from cancer, neurological disorders, some people would be rendered infertile, others would have genetic mutations..." Bob's picture was pretty graphic.

"Whew, as a weapon to target a specific population group, this stuff could be devastating," MacAllister remarked quietly.

"That's probably what they intended it for," Yasmine concurred.

"They could put it in a *shul*, in a hidden cove, leave it on for weeks and a whole community could be wiped out."

MacAllister pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and two fingers as Yasmine's opinion lay in the cold silence between the lot of them.

"Wow, I've suddenly developed a whole new respect for nuclear medicine," Bob expressed mutely.

A visible shiver ran through Yasmine, as she realised just how close she and Culley had come to being victims of something unspeakable.

"You okay?" Bob put his hand over one her fidgeting, little ones.

"I'm not sure. We were in the presence of a madman and he's still out there. I mean Bob, he threatened to make me surgically insert dynamite into Culley-"

"Shhh!" Bob stood and swept her into a hug. She didn't need to carry on, he and the others in that still room could figure out just what kind of ending there was to that threat.

"Hmmm," MacAllister ruminated, as he studied the pattern on the hospital blanket, much the same way Orrin Taffinder had before Culley had been kidnapped.

"I'm constantly amazed," he mumbled, "at the inventiveness of the criminal mind, and at its poor grasp of the value of things."

"What do you mean?" Bob asked, turning to face him once more.

"I mean it's amazing how they can take something to heal and turn it on its head, make a weapon out of it."

"It's enough to make one want to ban everything nuclear!" Mrs Hayes spoke for the first time since MacAllister had come into the room. They hadn't been quiet in their speculations and she'd had a pretty graphic explanation of the hazards of nuclear material.

"That wouldn't work Ma'am," MacAllister informed her. "It's like this gun," he patted his hidden holster. "It's just a tool, an inanimate object, but it can be used to protect just as much as it can to kill. It all depends on the person."

"Yes, well I curse the person that came up with this one!" Mrs Hayes kicked the blankets aside, physically showing her fear and displeasure.

"That might help in the long run," MacAllister scoffed, "but I do need a more practical solution. Is there anyway that I can stop this threat?" he asked Yasmine and Bob.

"It depends on what he's done with the Cobalt, how he's configured it. I think you'd need an expert on this," Bob began.

"Explain," demanded the other man.

"I mean, will he keep it all in one place, or spread it out over many locations? We *are* talking about a substance that comes in the shape of hundreds of pellets - the more pellets, the more he'll be able to concentrate the radioactivity."

"Shit!" MacAllister cursed, and scribbled furiously again. "What about a bomb, could he make a nuclear bomb from this stuff?"

"Nuclear? No," Bob replied, "but it would probably make pretty good shrapnel."

He would know, Yasmine decided, since he was the head of emergency medicine, and he had seen what bits of flying debris, known as shrapnel, had done to fragile bodies firsthand.

"What about in a water source? If they dropped it in the local supply-"

"They wouldn't risk contaminating themselves." *She* should know, she had been there first hand.

"Then why use the retard?"

"Don't speak that way!" Yasmine was upset again, even though the word was true, and it had been the very reason that the Brotherhood had used him so despicably. "They used Denny because he was expendable..."

"Only he had the last laugh," MacAllister observed, pointing down to where he had carefully laid the blue chip board. "A one of a kind component - an *important* one of a kind component. I think your friend might have just bought us some time Dr Knittel," MacAllister finished, flipping his note pad closed. "I think that one simple act just swung the stakes back in our favour. Now all we have to do is find these bastards, and stop them from carrying out whatever plans they have."

He should have known that it was not that simple. They didn't have the Cobalt, and they didn't have the circuit board maker, and the odds were still split between good and evil.

## CHAPTER 22

The house was full, the area around the pool even fuller, and the sound of the television and the radio competed with the screams and shouts of the some twenty children who played dodge amongst the adults. Every so often, at the behest of an interested party, the channel on the TV set flicked between a football game and the twenty four hour news channel, mostly so that someone kept an eye on the whereabouts of the bad guys. They did not want them to escape and make good their threats on the guests of honour at this barbecue.

Culley was stationed next to the cooler, and had become the unofficial barman, dispensing the occasional beer between the mostly fruit juice and sodas that the kids guzzled with gusto in the heat. He figured that he had the best spot, because the kids took great joy in bombing the pool water closest to him every five minutes, dousing him with coolant. Yasmine had seen to it that his injured leg was out of the way, by strategically placing one big wrestler at the foot of it, all of them rotating the duty like good women-nagged drones. Not that it mattered much, most of the men had congregated about him anyway, and those that weren't, were in earshot, flirting with the unattached, and hooting as the score for the game came through at regular intervals.

"I like it," Paul Heard grunted, in response to Culley's informal pitch that he had spent the last ten minutes explaining. "In terms of PR it's a winner, and if it means keeping you about," he pointed at Culley, "I'll take what I can get."

Culley had proposed that the PWL become involved with the *Reach For A Dream Foundation*, and Paul Heard had been impressed. Culley had been worried that the other man wouldn't be receptive to the idea, but he had gone ahead with the pitch anyway. It touched on a lot of his and

Yasmine's mutual interests, and it would give him a future with the PWL. He couldn't keep wrestling, and now he had Yasmine to think about as well, but he hadn't wanted to give up all the friends that he had made over the past few years. The idea had made perfect sense, but he would have been understanding if his boss had thought that it sucked.

"Of course it will mean putting together the proposal, and doing all the work... Think you're up to it?"

"More than ready," Culley told the other man. "I know that I'm stuck in this chair but I'm going slightly nuts from the boredom. I can't teach, I can't wrestle, and the cops are getting sick of me bugging them about the standoff at the Brotherhood."

"Two months and counting," Rory shook his head, and took a sip of his lite beer. "They should have bombed that place out of existence by now!"

"Amen to that," seconded their boss.

"Well the thinking is that they want them to surrender. Don't need any martyrs to rally around," Orrin informed them. "Old sourpuss MacAllister said they had a lot of support."

"That, Orrin old buddy, is pretty scary," Paul commented seriously. "Just once though, I'd like to get one of those cowards in a ring, and pound some sense into them."

"Hey there's no cure for stupidity," Culley soothed, "so the only thing you'd be doing would be getting all aggravated, and you'd have nothing to show for it, save some sore knuckles."

"You mean you wouldn't like to have some private time with those wing nuts?" His father asked sceptically.

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I would love to get my hands about the throat of that shit Judd Pierson and squeeze until I heard a crack, but right now that chance is so remote that I can't dwell on it, and besides I have so much more to enjoy." A huge grin crept over his face as he spotted Yasmine coming out of the house carrying a fresh tray of cut up veggies for all her guests to snack on whilst they waited for the coals to heat up.

"Now that is one fine lady you've landed yourself there, fella," Paul teased, following his protégé's eyes, and his own twinkling in tandem.

"Don't I know it," Culley sighed sappily. "I was thinking of asking her to marry me-"

"So why don't you?" asked his father.

"I don't know if she'll have me." There was a trace of worry in his tone.

"Of course she will," his father reassured. "You love her don't you?"

"Absolutely," Culley answered.

"Then that's all you need," added Paul. "Take it from us, both veterans in this marriage game - if you love one another then everything else just seems to fall in place."

"That's what the phrase 'for better or for worse' is for bud," said Rory, who had no experience in this matter of marriage, but who firmly believed that one day his turn would come.

Culley knew the men about him were right, he even knew that he was sure of his feelings for the petite woman who had taken up every one of his nights since they had first met one another, even when they were with family; what he wasn't sure of was her feelings.

Yasmine was deliciously demonstrative, if not downright creative in showing her love physically, but he had a yen for her to actually say the words. In a way, that too was his fault because he had never said them aloud either, but then he had been caught up in this old fashioned notion that women were supposed to confess first, and there lay his impasse.

"Fine," he resolved. "I'm going to ask her next week Friday. I'm going to do it all fancy, at a restaurant with fine crystal and china, expensive wine and food, and you guys are all invited."

"I should think that you would want to be discreet with Yasmine son," his father warned him.

"No I'll ask her quietly, and privately, but when she says yes then I want everyone to celebrate

with us. I'll arrange for a private dining room for all you geezers, give a signal once she has given me her consent and then party."

"What if she says no?" his father threw cold water on his hot idea.

"If she says no, I'll ask her - guaranteed to drive her into Culley's arms," Rory offered.

"If she says no next week I'll badger her until she says yes," Culley disputed with a laugh. "I mean she can't keep on having her way with me, I have my reputation to protect," he finished, making the men laugh heartily at his coyness.

Yasmine looked up and out of the window as the deep laughter of gathered men reverberated in between the canyons of human flesh that stood between her and the group across the pool.

"Oh dear," Violet Taffinder warned, as she too took a gander at the human wall hiding Culley.

"That can't be good."

"Oh they are up to something all right," echoed Yasmine mother.

"Who is?" Fenella asked, as she stacked some empty dishes into the sink, and turning her head to see what the women in her family were looking at.

"That bunch of Hulks by the beer cooler," Yasmine replied.

"Oh yeah, I agree with Mom, they are up to something," Fenella added as another eruption of laughter came from that quarter.

"I'd send Julian, but I'm afraid that he'll be corrupted."

That made Yasmine smile.

Casey came in tagged by a bunch of kids, who had discovered his ability to twist balloons into magical shapes. "Okay, okay," he groaned as ten little voices nagged him, "just one more and then that's it. And to think Roger wants us to have one of these," he griped at the women standing at the counter. "This family gets any bigger and the next function will have to be at a hall."

"They are not all ours Casey," Amy laughed.

"If Violet had her way they would be," he panted because he had blown up one of the long sculptural balloons whilst Amy had pointed out the logical. "Plus which, Yasmine and Josette haven't had any kids yet, and judging by Fenella's fecundity they could add another soccer team!"

"Hey I only have three!" Fenella protested, although she wasn't upset at his teasing.

"Ha! Ha! You said a dirty word!" The children took up the chant, not realising that Casey had been praising Fenella.

"Uh-Uh!" Josette had come in on the end of the conversation. "Don't look at me. I don't plan on having any of these rugrats!"

She tweaked the nose of one of the little girls, before adding more dishes to the slowly growing pile.

"Oh no Josette don't say that," admonished Violet.

"You don't *plan* on having them," interrupted Fenella. "They usually catch you by surprise," she had to speak loudly over the increasingly vocal children. "Okay kids that's enough! Uncle Casey needs to catch his breath. Let's all go get our cozzies on and try to have a swim before lunch."

Some protested, but Fenella was having none of it as she herded them out of the kitchen.

"Oh sweetheart never is a long time." Amy and Violet were still working on Josette, who shook a fist at Casey for bringing the subject up, and then tried to make a clean escape by heading out to the pool, only to have her mother and a well meaning adopted aunty follow her out.

"Whew, I wasn't wrong about the size of this family." Casey flopped down on to a kitchen chair. He looked at Yasmine speculatively. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"I have my days," she answered honestly. "Culley helps."

"I know, he is a love bug. He never judged us," he said, referring to his relationship with Roger, "and I'm glad to see that he picked a woman with the same qualities."

"Thank you," Yasmine smiled shyly at the compliment.

"I mean it. You and your whole family have just been so ... embracing."

Yasmine was glad that Casey had been so accepted. She had been fearful that her father would not be understanding, but he had taken to Casey from the first, and he saw the other man as a person first before he saw his sexual orientation.

"I think that something, like the kidnapping that happened to me and Culley, has that ability to make people realise that all our views are so petty, that family is so very important, and I know you are part of this family, the same as the Heards, Rory and Buzz."

"Violet has that ability to absorb the most disparate elements and make them her own," Casey agreed. "If Denny had lived, she probably would have adopted him."

Yasmine felt a pain the mention of the boy who had sacrificed so much, and she knew Casey was right about Violet. Culley's mother had sobbed, heart broken at the pointless loss of life, at Denny's funeral. There was no doubt that the simple boy would have been included into Culley's family, even it had meant danger.

"I didn't mean to touch on a sore point," Casey apologised after witnessing the slight wince that Yasmine had made at the mention of Denny.

"It's not that," Yasmine soothed. "It's just that, we owe so much to him, and I have no way of paying him back. I couldn't even keep him alive, and you should have seen the understanding in his face in the final moments..."

Casey leapt from the chair at Yasmine's sad face, and hurriedly embraced her. "It's not your fault Yasmine. We could play 'if' until I became straight, but that would never make what happened right."

"I know that here," Yasmine tapped her head, "but you can't tell here," she pressed a hand over her heart.

"You know Roger and I have lost one or two good friends to AIDS, and there is always anger afterwards, some at the medical establishment, quite a bit at the person who died because of the stupidity that they had come down with HIV when they ought to have known better, and the grief counsellors always have one trite phrase that always helps - put yourself in the other person's shoes. That always takes the wind right out of my angry sails. If I am angry at the person for being so careless, I can imagine how angry they must have been and they had more right than I did. I think it's the same with Denny - if he could understand that what had happened was not your fault, then how can you not do the same?"

"Thank you Casey," she sniffed, drawing some strength from his words. She had been half afraid over the past two months that she would let down one of her patients the way she felt she had let Denny down, and although that hadn't happened, she now knew that she could no longer be afraid. Even up to the last, Denny hadn't been afraid, hadn't been resentful, so what right did she have to feel that way?

"So, Yasmine honey, are you going to say yes when Culley asks you to marry him?"

"What?" Yasmine was surprised by his words.

"Well sweetie that's what those big lugs are planning over there right now."

"Oh Casey, how could you know that? You've had nothing but kids around you for the last hour-"

Putting on his best drag queen accent, he said: "Ohh, you've got a lot to learn about men sweetie!" And he turned and flounced out making Yasmine laugh.

And a lot to think about, decided Yasmine privately, moments after.

## CHAPTER 23

"Shh! Sh! Here she comes!"

There were a lot of interested eyes peeping through the crack of the door to the private dining room where the combined families of Culley and Yasmine were gathered to either celebrate with or console Culley as the case may be.

"Oh Lord, for a microphone now," Amy said nervously.

"Don't worry honey," her husband put his arm about her shoulders. "This takes me back to when Julian asked Fenella-

"When was that Dad? Back in the fifties?" joked Josette.

"Hey!" chided her sister.

"Don't worry Amy," Casey reassured her. "Those two are so in love, he'll ask, she'll say yes, and then they'll abandon us to be by themselves."

"They'd better not," grumbled Orrin. "Craig and I gave up game tickets for this shindig."

"Tough!" Violet said unsympathetically.

"Oh I just wish I knew what they were saying," said Roger from the door, which made Fenella's oldest daughter laugh, as she stood under his arm, but she wished the same as they watched Yasmine sit down and accept a menu.

"Do you want some wine?" Culley asked politely as the sommelier hovered near by.

"I shouldn't," Yasmine replied, distracted by all the sumptuous food stuffs that were written all over the leather bound menu. "I'm on call tonight."

Culley nearly gave up then, but the thought that all his family was nearby made him persevere. That plus the fact that this was going to be worth it, he believed internally.

"Just two sodas," he bade the man, regretfully. "Have you decided what you want?" He wanted to use the space between their order and the actual arrival of their food to ask her, so that they could spend the rest of the time with their anxious family. But that made him slightly impatient, and he had to caution himself to keep from giving the game away.

"I'm going to have the spinach stuffed fillet," she ordered distractedly. Her day had been dull and she was looking forward to a little action. The only patient she had seen was an obese woman who had torn the tendon in her thumb because she had lifted an over full plate between two fingers. There were days like these.

"I'll have the fish."

Culley was nervous she observed, and she wondered if his day had been as dull as hers had. He had told her of his plans with the PWL and she had been fully supportive. Not only would he be able to continue to work with children, but he could continue to work with friends, and he wouldn't be in the ring so much. It had also

ended his boredom, and despite his limited mobility had given him his job back.

"Uh," he cleared his throat, "Yas... There's something I've been meaning to tell you for some time now - I love you!" He was breathless. "I love you very much, and I was wondering if you would do me the great honour of marrying me."

Yasmine was speechless for a moment, and that added to Culley's vulnerability.

"I would have waited until I was healed, and asked you on bended knee, but I love you so much,

I can't keep it in anymore. I want everybody to know," he produced a simple diamond solitaire, "and- for God's sake say something!" Excitement and nerves overwhelmed reason.

"Culley," Yasmine gave him her sweet smile, and reached over the table to cup his big hand whilst it cradled the ring, that was one proof of his love.

"Shh, Culley," she soothed when he sputtered for a few moments more.

"It's just that-

"Yes, Culley, yes."

"Yes?" he looked at her blankly, before meaning rushed in. "Yes?" he repeated, a big goofy grin spreading across his face as she nodded her consent.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" he whooped ecstatically.

"Sir please!" the waiter begged for restraint, as the patrons around them began to clap as Culley told the whole world the good news.

Yasmine stood and went around to him, bending so she could seal their union with a kiss.

"I love you too," she whispered into his ear. "But I have one question as well, why didn't you ask me in private so that I could tear off your clothes and prove it?" He was hugging her so close that no one could hear her provocative question.

"Are you kidding?" Culley burst out, happiness making him loud. "Our entire family is waiting for us just over there!" He reached behind her and pointed to the door, to where at least five faces were poking out, and where champagne corks were popping.

"Nuts!" Yasmine grumbled, and then kissed him again, this time with feeling. He had to know what he was missing.

"Geez! I'm a chump," he laughed when they came up for air. "But I'll take a rain check. Wahoo!" he cried out again, and then manoeuvred the wheelchair back so that they could greet their family.

Yasmine followed, delightedly accepting congratulations from total strangers, and the good wishes from scattered staff.

"Oh honey I'm so happy for you!" her mother greeted her, and pressed a glass of orange juice into her hand. She had noticed Culley order the sodas, so she knew her happy daughter was on call.

After that it was one big whirl of congratulations and hugs, questions and demands, at least until sanity came back with a thud.

Her beeper went off with a loud *'beep beep beep'* startling everyone and bringing the party to a semi-halt, and making Culley cry out: "Ah no, Yas not now!"

"Use curtain area three, and put these two guys in there. This one's dead, send him on down. This one needs x-rays, and will somebody please find Yasmine-

"I'm here Bob, what happened?" The ER looked like a bomb had hit it. There were cops and reporters everywhere, along with a lot of injured people.

"I'm sorry to have to do this to you Yas, but you are the only one available." Bob sounded very reluctant to let her do her job.

"They stormed the Brotherhood this evening. These are all the casualties. There were three wounded policeman, one of them for you, and there are two others from the Brotherhood. Yas," he grabbed her arm as she was about to swing into action, "one of them is Judd Pierson. We are trying to raise somebody else due to conflict of interest, but you might have to take him. Start with the policeman first."

"Is he the most serious?" Yasmine was nothing if not professional. Seriousness had to override her feelings.

"Yes," Bob answered as he pushed the door open to where they were busy working on the muscled man lying on the table. "It looks like he may have fractured his skull."

With that Yasmine swung into action, although ten minutes later she and the others around her were forced to give up as his heart stopped beating. Here was another victim in a bastard's need for power. More families ruined, more pointless actions.

"Who's next?" she enquired at the nurses station.

"This fellow here," said Tonia leading her off toward where the next patient was. Her eyes were big, and they followed her with concern, as did several other pairs.

"What have we got?" she asked, as she came and stood next to the young female intern who was carefully pulling some glass from a nasty looking laceration.

"Just a simple fracture," she acknowledged. "It's okay Dr Knittel I got this one."

"You sure?" Yasmine ran a practised eye over the lit up x-rays, noting that there truly was little to keep this man from a jail cell.

"Yes," the intern smiled, although she couldn't know the consternation she had caused. Only Pierson was left, and Yasmine didn't know if she had it in her to be that professional.

"Suck it up Yas," she murmured to herself, as she followed Tonia back to where she knew her nemesis was waiting.

She wished Culley was there, but she carried his love with her, and she used that to armour herself. She had always believed that love was the most powerful force in the universe, and now she was going to draw on that power to face down the most evil person she had ever come across.

"Get the fuck away from me!" Judd was cursing the nurses who were trying to keep him still, to keep him from hurting himself any further. Somehow a huge splinter of wood, had made its way through the top left hand corner of his chest, lifting up his shoulder blade so that it too, was sticking out the other side. Perversely the very thing that was a danger to his life, had probably also saved it. The wood had stopped him bleeding out into his chest, but that situation would not last long if he carried on writhing about the way he was.

"That is enough Mr Pierson!" Every word dripped disdain. She couldn't help that.

"Well if it isn't the bitch that killed my brother!" He hawked and spat at her, only she was too far for him to reach her with his spittle.

Yasmine could feel a coldness coming over her as he mentioned Denny. A numbing coldness that gave her purpose. She would save this bastard's life, if nothing but to see him scorned and mocked like he had scorned and mocked his brother's pure heart.

"I don't want you as my doctor bitch! I think you'll fuck me over, and murder me whilst I'm under the knife."

"You should be so lucky," Yasmine informed him, ice for her tone.

"Your not going to die by my hand Mr Pierson. If I have my way you're going to live a very long time."

"Sure!" Judd scoffed, before grimacing and rolling slightly so that he could flip her the finger.

"Nice, very nice," murmured Tonia who was standing next to her.

"You sure you want to save his life?" asked a policeman, who was standing to one side, alert but casual at the same time. His attitude betrayed him though. He would have no qualms about blowing this scum bag away, and the hand on his gun was certainly telling Judd that.

"I'll save it," Yasmine assured the policeman. "It will be okay officer, we want this man to live. We want the whole world to see how twisted and ugly he is, to remember that this is what intolerance looks like."

Yasmine's words were quiet, but once again they had an electric effect on Judd, who bared his

teeth at her perceived impudence.

"You mean what the world is *supposed* to look like!" Judd ground out. "With pure ethnic white women, not whores like you who would marry into families with impure genes-

"As opposed to families with clear signs of mental imbalance!" Tonia interrupted without thinking.

"Tonia," Yasmine admonished calmly, and knew her nurse was sorry when she looked back with a gulp, guilt that she had forgotten about Denny all over her face.

"At least I won't have any homos in my family," Judd sneered, looking like the demon that he was.

"No but you'll have them in your group!" Now Yasmine was incensed. "Oh I forgot," she carried on, "that's right, you're so busy trying to rid the world of sickos and perverts that you've collected them around you!"

"What the fuck do you mean? My people are hand picked from the purest stock and they follow the one true Christian God, who is white and normal!"

"Normal," Yasmine nodded her head, now truly sad that Denny had been so abandoned whilst he had been alive. "One of your normal peers was so normal that he was just like one of us - defective, choose any racial slur of your choice - but know that he was-

"Aw, bull shit!" Judd cut her down.

"So normal that he was a paedophile and a sodomiser." Yasmine's voice never rose, it was the same tone she used everyday, but she may as well have shouted them there was so much rage in her.

Judd made a rude noise, and Yasmine had to jump for the policeman, gently grasping his arm before he did something he might have regretted.

"All you have are words, no proof, just lies-

"I have proof. Scientific proof. It's all in your brother's autopsy, all the years of abuse and sodomy. I know about the broken bones and I know you helped kill him, but tell me, was that part of your relationship too?"

It was the first time she had ever allowed herself to have a dig at the man, and a part of her relished it, and a part of her was ashamed of herself that she had stooped so low.

That made Judd so angry that he flailed about for a full minute, and Yasmine instructed Tonia to prepare a sedative in case.

"You lying-

"Don't say it," hissed the policeman, now thoroughly sick of Judd and his vitriol.

Just being in his presence made them all feel dirty, and it showed on all their faces.

"Screw the lot of you!" Judd pretended to be in denial, but he had a good idea of what they were talking about. All that familial concern on Wilson's part had just been a scam to get into Denny's pants, and the really ironic thing was now all his hopes rested in the hands of a pervert. Well, that could be an advantage to him, and he knew just how to capitalise on it.

"I want my lawyer," he told them.

"When I'm done," Yasmine informed him, and she snapped on a pair of gloves.

"No now," Judd insisted, looking at the cop whose trigger finger was still far too itchy. "I won't go under the knife until I've spoken to him."

"Sorry Doc," he put a warm hand on Yasmine's shoulder. "He's got rights - unfortunately," he glared at Judd, "and one of them is to have a lawyer whenever he wants one."

Tonia shrugged, and Yasmine echoed the motion. At least this way, she wouldn't have anything to do with the bastard. And the universe took another odd turn in her life, and the one she was going to have with Culley. But she didn't know that, as she left the room and told Tonia the

good news.

And she couldn't know about the peculiar deal that was struck whilst she went home to Culley and bade him to hold her and make love to her. And even if she had, it wouldn't have made one wit of difference to her. She was into sparing lives anyway, and enjoying hers with Culley was more pleasurable, and better time spent than risking her sanity for someone who had lost theirs a long time ago.

## CHAPTER 24

"Okay so we'll add an extra buttress here, and set some plywood special effects furniture here."

The foreman was actually a good guy, Wilson thought to himself, as he made the pencil marks on the blue prints. It was a pity that he was going to suffer the same fate as all the others that were going to come into this dome over the next few weeks. Actually he and the other janitorial staff were going to suffer the most, but that couldn't be helped. He owed Denny a sacrifice and he was going to see that his departed friend was going to get it.

He knew that Judd had fingered him, and that there were police looking for him, and his cargo, but they were basically stupid, and besides that, they thought that what he had was harmless now. Judd had told them plenty, but he obviously hadn't told them about Wilson's electronic genius, or else they would be putting a lot more effort into finding him.

He managed to keep a smile from his face, as he remembered a recent TV broadcast in which a so called expert speculated that he was probably already dead or dying, having suffered the same radiation poisoning that had killed Denny. Wilson might have been a bugger but that didn't mean that his brains were in that region. He had seen what had happened to Denny and he wasn't going to die that way.

Even more they thought that the blue board that Denny had taken was one of a kind, and that without it the slow leak they were aiming for wouldn't work. In a way they had been right, but what

they didn't know was that it was Wilson who had manufactured the board, and who had come up with the schematic for their weapon.

They might have had the first board, but he had created another, and that combined with the Cobalt that Judd had instructed to remove before they had laid seige to their compound, was going to make this plan fly.

Typical Judd, he was still playing both sides. If Wilson succeeded, then he could point to a victory, show his followers that he was to be believed. If the police captured Wilson, then he could lay the whole crime on Wilson, explain his loss due to the incompetence of his underlings. Nobody need ever know that it was Judd who had sold out his followers, and he could become the living martyr, which was much better than being a dead one.

Wilson was going to see at least one aspect through, and he was going to make those, who had taken Denny from him, pay with their futures and lives and loves.

"Uh, I have a question," he interrupted the foreman who had been droning on, unaware of the plots and schemes in Wilson's mind.

"Shoot," said the other man, unintentionally making Wilson smile. It was the word they had used in the x-ray department that day, when this whole stupid mess had started.

"What's with this flimsy plywood stuff?"

"Oh, the wrestlers in the PWL use it for show. They break up furniture, and the fans love it, and

they are going to love it tonight as well. So get cracking on checking the stands for faults, we've got 50 000 screaming devotees coming over tonight and we don't want to disappoint them!"

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"I can't believe they cut a deal with that bastard!" Rory put extra emphasis into his stretch, just so that he could work out some of his frustration at the authorities.

"I can." Josette was positively drooling over his beautiful form, as she watched him go through motions that made his muscles and skin ripple.

"Really?" Rory stopped and looked at her.

"So can I," echoed Culley, as he made some more notes in the margins of the sheaf of papers he was holding. "They just want that x-ray stuff back. For now."

The last two words made Josette and Rory look at him curiously, before a wicked smile formed on his friend's face.

"I get it, this is just a temporary situation right?"

"No, he got amnesty all right," Culley answered, and looked up from his work. "It's just that his lawyer is one of his boys and his vision is as narrow as his politics-

"So?" Josette prodded, impatient now.

"So, the idiot got that sod amnesty for kidnapping and threatening to kill us, but he forgot that there were about eleven or twelve other charges that were still being prepared or investigated, and Pierson is not immune from prosecution for them."

"Oh God," laughed Josette, "so he still gets to go to jail!"

"For a long time," Culley affirmed.

"He needs to get the death penalty," Rory grunted, as he went back to warming up his limbs for his practice.

"He might still, if they can pin Denny's death on him," Culley told him.

"I hear he didn't even blink when they told him about the other," Rory looked at Josette, still old-fashioned enough not to want to discuss such an upsetting subject in front of a woman.

"Rory I know about that," she told him gently. "You don't have to protect me from that you know."

"It's okay Josette, I can't even talk about it in front of Yasmine, and she's a doctor." Culley sort of shared his friend's chivalrous notion. They would protect their women where necessary, even if they were liberated and smarter than them.

"Talk about what?" Yasmine came in on Culley's last comment, and she moved over to where he was, and planted a big kiss on his mouth.

"Denny," Josette supplied, looking at them enviously.

"Let's not talk about him tonight," Yasmine smiled softly at her sister. "I'd rather talk about Rory and how he's going to do tonight."

"I'm going to kick butt!" he exclaimed, and gave her the thumbs up, slipping easily into his wrestling persona.

"Is it packed out there?" Culley asked Yasmine about the dome, and all the fans that they could hear chanting above them.

"50 000 people and counting," she said with excitement. This was the first time that she had ever been to a PWL event, and it was spectacular.

"Just wait until we get ringside, then you'll get an earful."

"Are you going to miss it?" She didn't want him to give it up, if he didn't want to. He had to do something he loved, or else a better part of him would die.

"A little," he admitted. "But I miss dealing with kids a lot more, and sooner or later I'm going to

be too old to carry on in the ring."

"You're right about that old timer," Rory teased, even though he was a few months younger than his friend.

"Ah bite me," Culley shot back, making them all laugh. "Are you ready?" he asked his friend, concern coming into his blue eyes.

"It's cool," Rory clapped him on the shoulder. "We got this worked out to the finest detail, and barring anything unforeseen, it should go down like clock work."

"Five minutes!" an official bellowed through the door.

"We'll get to our seats then," Yasmine reached up, and gave Rory a kiss on the cheek for good luck.

"I'll follow you," Josette murmured, giving her sister a subtle sign that she had something planned that she needed privacy for.

When they left the dressing room there were officials everywhere, and a television crew whose bright lights hurt their eyes. Someone shouted a couple of questions to Culley who was wheeling himself in front of her, but he ignored them, steadfastly making a gap for them to pass through.

Yasmine caught a glimpse of someone she knew out of the corner of her eye, but she didn't dare turn her head that way, in case she looked straight into the lights that the crew were holding up and blinded herself temporarily. This minor celebrity was something she couldn't quite bring herself to get used to, especially since it carried a sort of notoriety with it. She and Culley were like a coveted prize amongst the wingnut brigade that Judd and the brotherhood belonged to - like the fish that had got away from the anal retentive, relentless fisherman - and anybody who caught them was going to be the winner of only the Devil knew what.

A part of her wanted her old life back, but her heart knew that things had changed, and she could never go back. And anyway, she had a prize of her own because of them. She had Culley and she would never have traded that just to stay safe, even though she *would* trade her own life just to see *him* safe.

*'What an odd feeling to have,'* she thought to herself, and then felt the dread that she had thought gone become bigger as a shiver ran up her spine. She wondered what had brought this feeling on, and suddenly realised that she was instinctively reacting to the person she had only glimpsed. It was as if somehow she knew that was one of Judd's henchman, but there was no way she could prove it with the hundreds of people around, and

even worse she didn't want to start looking paranoid. She wasn't about to cry wolf just yet, not if her hunch was right. Instead she sped up, drawing closer to Culley in case she had to protect him. The crowd swelled, and the number of shadowed, faceless people grew, and for a moment she felt as if they were going to swamp her, before she drew on the courage that had kept her and Culley together despite the threats that Judd and his lackeys had posed, and were still posing.

"It's this way, Dr Knittel," an official directed her, and she smiled at a camera man, as he stepped aside for her. Once in the arena, the number of people really became overwhelming, and the noise was nearly deafening. She started for a moment as a thirty foot picture of her face came into view, before the camera swung back to Culley, who was calm in the face of the roar that went up when the crowd recognised him.

"Yas!" he yelled, and held a large hand out behind him, which she gratefully accepted, allowing him to pull her forward, and then guide her into the plastic chair, on the aisle, right in front, that had been reserved for her.

"Scared?" Culley asked solicitously.

"A little," she admitted, but not of the crowd around them.

"Don't be," he threaded his fingers through hers, mistaking her fear as one of the crowd. "I'm here, and all those guys will gladly tear the skin off anyone who tries to hurt you!" He pointed to some of the big ushers who were solely focused on crowd control, not even paying attention to the refs and officials who seemed to be conspiring in the raised ring, under the bright lights, at the centre of the dome.

"What are they doing?" Yasmine asked into Culley's ear, surreptitiously pointing to the men who were now nodding and dispersing.

"Why, getting ready for the show of course," he smiled at her. "Despite the odd accident like mine, this stuff is planned and executed like a Broadway show, nothing is left to chance, even the refs, umpires and match officials have practised so that they know where each fall is supposed to take place, how they are supposed to call it, and what to do if something goes wrong."

"I'm impressed," Yasmine told him, looking about as the crowd seemed die down a bit, and the pitch of anticipation was turned up in its place.

A loud bang destroyed the lull, and metal music made a discordant accompaniment to the frenzy that the audience seemed to whip up amongst themselves. Paul Heard senior walked calmly, purposefully to the centre, and then athletically climbed between the ropes, a microphone clutched in his hand.

A call for quiet buzzed through the excited throng, and individual grunts of "shut up," and "quiet" could now be heard rippling through the mass.

A disembodied voice broke through on the speakers, announcing the venue and city where this PWL fixture was being held, and civic pride dictated that the crowd respond with claps, chants and whistles.

After a full minute, Paul raised his empty hand and the structure died down.

"You know why you're here," he began without preamble, and then methodically set about exciting his audience so that they were fully participant by the time the first bout came about.

"These are all the up and comers," Culley told her, shooting a glance her way. He didn't know if she would like the wrestling, and the showmanship that was part and parcel of the PWL, but there was no disgust in her face, and she was looking at the ring with interest. She cringed a little as one of the youngsters picked his opponent up and executed a move which if done incorrectly would cause permanent damage to his spinal cord, however she seemed relieved when he stood and moved about as if nothing had happened.

"Oh God!" she blasphemed, as the guy in black pants climbed to the third rope, and prepared to launch himself on top of his competitor.

"I can't watch this," she shut her eyes tightly, hoping that the silly man would make it, but not really wanting to witness his foolishness.

"Hey Buddy!"

The angry sound of Culley's voice made her open them again, as she sought to see what was upsetting him.

A stranger, all in black had planted himself right in front of Culley, who, being stuck in the wheelchair, with his leg in front of him, couldn't get up to see the action. That didn't stop him though, from leaning forward and tugging at the man's loose T-shirt.

Wilson turned, and Yasmine could feel every muscle in her gut clamp down in an instinctive fight response. That was the man who had been with Denny that day they had been kidnapped, the one who had torn through the steel casing of the x-ray machine, knowing exactly what to look for... The one they were looking for! The one with the Cobalt 60!

"It's him! It's him!" she cried out, frantically. She stood, and awkwardly tried to shove Culley back so that she could get at the other man, to prevent him from doing the damage she could see planned in his eyes.

## CHAPTER 25

"It's him! It's him!" she repeated, making fists in Culley's shirt as she recklessly tried to protect him. She kept on saying the phrase over and over in the vain hope that someone would understand, and hear her over the din of the other spectators. Others did hear her, but instead of taking the threat seriously, they thought that she was trying to set up a chant, and so they began to sing-song the words, causing them to reverberate across the stadium, totally missing the point.

"What do you mean?" Culley asked, not quite sure where he had seen this face before, but knowing deeply, that the association hadn't been good.

"This is Denny's killer!"

Wilson blanched at the words, and then snarled and reached across Culley's impeding form to pull Yasmine closer to his twisted face.

"I did not kill Denny, I loved him!"

With a sickening realization, Yasmine knew that this was the man who had made Denny's life so miserable with his perverse need.

"Loved him!" Culley spat, grappling with him, suddenly recognizing the man as the one who had helped the Brotherhood drag them off. "You wouldn't know what love is!"

Culley bunched his fist, and then planted it squarely in Wilson's stomach. Several people around them crowed with delight. For them this was all part of the show.

"Love is about wanting to spend all your time with a person! Love is about respect, and trust! Not manipulation and pain! Love is being willing to give up your life so that the other person can live!" Culley was so incensed his face was livid, as he bent forward to define Wilson's weak points, clear enough to be heard ten seats down.

Wilson started to laugh, hoarse and breathless because of his gut punch.

"It's just as well," he told a bewildered Culley, "that this bitch is here with you then!" And with that he rose surprisingly to his knees, and then hunkered down, and overturned Culley's wheelchair so that he fell heavily on his nicely healing leg.

"You bastard!" Yasmine cursed, and she bent down to see if Culley was seriously injured, completely missing Wilson scrabbling through his pockets as he searched for something.

"You two took Denny away from me. You destroyed the only family I've ever belonged to, and now you're going to pay!" His parting shot was just another mistake in a long chain of many, as was his next action. He aimed a long black, remote control type of object at an angle away from them, and pushed down on a button.

Yasmine kicked her left foot into the chassis of the wheelchair, bringing herself closer to the man who had ruined so many lives, and lunged for him. At the same time Culley rolled so that both his arms were free, and he hooked both of them around Wilson's scrawny calves. Years of practice in falling and making other people fall, had taught him how to land softly, and how to make his opponents fall hard. The first part had been easy, making Wilson fall cleanly, however, was more difficult with a wheelchair in the way.

Culley heard a muffled exclamation of pain, and then Wilson was trampling on him, as a scuffle broke out above his head.

Instead of grabbing his shoulders, as she had intended to, Culley's move had made Wilson off balance, and her grappling hand had connected with his mouth, causing him to cut his top lip on his teeth.

Wilson had meant to make clean escape, but things weren't turning out that way. His mouth was bloody, even now he could feel the poison seeping into his bones, and there were filthy mud people all around him.

"Let go of me!" he screeched, and tried to shove Yasmine, who now had a good grip on him, away.

The spectator next to her snapped out of his stupor, anger replacing shock as he realised who had been sitting next to him. He reached past Yasmine's shoulder, and latched on to Wilson's arm, pulling him in toward where he and Yasmine were standing, resolve to subdue Wilson clear on his big broad face.

"No! Let me go!" Wilson was desperate now, sure that he could feel the blisters, that had signalled Denny's illness, forming on his body.

Yasmine frowned at the note of hysteria in Wilson's demand, and she wondered what he was so panicked about.

"No way pal!" her co-captor growled.

"Exactly!" she echoed. "You've got a grade A poisonous substance stashed away, and you will be giving it up shortly!"

"No!" Wilson moaned, and then he started laugh inanely. "It's too late-"

"What?" Yasmine asked blankly.

Wilson raised his clawed hand, and waggled the black instrument in Yasmine's face.

"You're too late!" he hissed. "All these people are going to suffer the same fate as Denny! A fair fate for people who were made of mud!"

"Oh my God Culley! We've got to get all these people out!"

"Don't freak sweetheart!" Culley grunted. "Let go," he ordered, once, twice, three times, although none of the other three protagonists in this very real wrestling match knew to whom he was talking. "Yasmine!" he demanded, but no one was listening to him.

He let Wilson go. and then struck out at his vulnerable leg with his own brawny forearm. He needed to make a space, so that he could get out. They needed to stop the bout, and get the audience out of there, but they needed to do it in a controlled and safe manner.

Culley wriggled and slithered up, and then out from under Wilson's confining legs, adding new bruises in the process. Some of the people across from him, the only ones he could truly see, were glancing at him curiously, but then they would turn back to the ring, and they became lost again. Culley couldn't blame them. They had payed good money for this outing, and the reluctance to get involved had become a norm in modern society.

Culley rolled on to his stomach, and then as if he was doing push ups, he lifted his chest up, and then slowly bent his good leg, keeping the injured one straight - for he could nothing else with it bound the way it was; he raised himself to his full height, and then staggered to a nearby, handy seat.

By this time one of the burly aisle attendants was attracted by the commotion, and he was headed directly toward them.

*'Help at last!'* Culley thanked the creator. He turned to see what was happening with Yasmine, and felt nothing but rage when he saw his beloved in a life and death tussle with a zealot, who thought he knew love but was instead devoured by spite, and another emotion that Culley didn't

even want to touch on. He just knew that it was nothing like that which he felt for Yasmine. If he could have moved fast enough, he would have pounded the difference into Wilson's stupid brain.

"Hey Culley, you okay?" enquired a guy, whose face Culley knew, but whose name, he couldn't remember.

"I'm good," he said, "help her!" Culley pointed to where, Yasmine was slowly beginning to get the upper hand.

He had wanted to say that they had to evacuate the arena, but he just couldn't stand by and watch that loony maul his Yas.

He hopped around, and then headed down the two steps that separated him from the ring, fully intending to get there to make the ref call a halt to the night's proceedings. At the barrier that separated the crowd from officialdom, he stopped and gathered himself. A good fifteen metres kept him from the bouncing boards, where the two beginners were still slamming each other down, trying to see who would tire first. And then he noticed something relevant in the corner of his eye...

Meanwhile, Yasmine and the man who had aided her, had a pretty good grip on Wilson, who had in his own heart surrendered to the inevitability that he was going to sacrifice his life, the way Denny had, and that terrible knowledge came with a price Wilson knew he didn't want to pay.

"What the hell is going on here?" the man, whom Culley had sent over, asked, his big neck corded in anger.

"This lunatic is the guy the police are looking for," Yasmine managed to pant out, as Wilson put extra effort into his moves to extricate himself.

"No shit?" the big bruiser questioned, as he shifted in behind Wilson. In the blink in of an eye, he forced his arms under Wilson's armpits, and easily began to subdue the other man. Until Wilson lifted his arms, and slipped out of his jacket, and out from under the man's folded, restraining arms.

"Oh no you don't!" Yasmine growled, and pounced on Wilson's belt, as he turned to strike out at the most obvious threat, namely the bouncer, who in turn was quite used to squishing men who were smaller than he was.

Wilson swung back, and caught Yasmine full in the face, splitting *her* lip, and making her stumble back against the chivalrous bystander who had come to her aid.

"That does it!" snarled the bouncer. "You've now officially pissed me off!"

He clenched a meaty fist, and squarely boxed Wilson ear, whilst at the same time his other arm came around Wilson's throat, and yoked him, just like they had taught him at the training sessions.

Only Wilson wasn't about to give up so easily. He leaned back into the man behind him, letting him take his full weight and then tried to kick out from under the harnessing arm, damaging his foot and Culley's up-ended wheelchair at the same time. That just made his pacifier tighten his hold, and soon he began to choke, going very red in the face.

Yasmine, who was being comforted by those around her, looked up at the two struggling combatants, and noticed Wilson's puce coloured face.

"Let him go," she bade the security bloke, as she heard Wilson begin to splutter.

He looked at her as if she was mad, and she gave him a soothing look.

"If you kill him, then you'll be prosecuted. You will go to jail for someone who doesn't deserve it-"

"None of them deserve it!" the man agreed, and then flung Wilson away from him, making the

other man pitch forward, and then cartwheel over the barrier where he lay, breathless and in pain, as he slowly began to bleed into his lung cavity from a broken rib.

At right angles to where Culley had hesitated, and in the direction that Wilson had pointed his remote control doohickey, there was a bank of television sets, specifically installed so that those who wanted a close up of the action could get a taste of the grit that the PWL contestants were famous for. One of those sets was blank, and something clicked in Culley's brain, as he remembered what the experts had said about the Cobalt and what the Brotherhood had intended to do with it.

It was obvious that Wilson held him and Yasmine responsible for Denny's death, and what better way to get revenge, than to irradiate Culley's place of work. It made hideous sense to Culley, and he knew the professionalism of the janitorial staff from personal experience. No way would they allow something so trivial to go unnoticed. That blank screen was the pervert's doing.

Spectators recognised him, and began vocalizing his name, as he began hopping past them to get to that bank. He didn't know what he was going to do once he was there, but he had one of two choices - either he tried to attract the attention of the ref, who might just think that this was part of the show, although the ref shouldn't; or he could go over to the TV and see if he couldn't neutralise the threat somehow, although Culley knew that *he* shouldn't.

One of the guys in the ring, who was lying face down, slowly being squished by his opponent, called out to him, as he hopped past: "Hey Culley what's up?"

The camera man who was filming close-ups for viewers at home, swung when he heard the question, looking to see what was going on. The cyclops eye of his camera caught Culley hopping very quickly toward his target, and then if it too had received some insight, the man and his techno-eye began to follow.

Culley didn't have any breath to answer, neither did he have any motivation to stop and have a conversation with a friend. He needed to protect that friend and all those were around him, and he was bent on doing so to the maximum of his energy.

If he had bothered to look around, he would have seen that the bout had been stopped, and the two big men who had been antagonising each other just a few moments ago were now hanging over the rope side by side, curious as to why a colleague would attempt to injure himself again to get to a place that would have been easily accessible with some help.

Culley ignored the prying "What's going on?" and the helpful "What can I do?" that seemed to be coming at him from all angles, and concentrated on getting to his destination. Once he reached the bank, he noticed that the twenty sets seemed to be housed in a black box-like frame with the back ends of the sets exposed, all the required wires sticking out in a neo-cubist tapestry of electrical insulation. The blank set was at the bottom right hand corner, which had Culley cursing because it was low, and he was required to bend, which with his leg still strapped straight was a mission.

"Hey Culley," the two wrestlers had vaulted out of the ring, and one had tapped him on the shoulder, bewilderment clear on his face.

"What's going on?" the other asked, and Culley gestured them closer. He didn't want to start a stampede, although a calculated evacuation would have been prudent.

"That last bad guy, the one that was missing," he gasped, breathless, "he was here tonight. He said that he had a plan for that radioactive stuff-"

"What here?" the question was sharp, but not quite loud enough to carry through the slowly hushing auditorium.

"I think it's in these TV's," Culley swallowed loudly, trying to produce saliva to take away his

dry, fear filled mouth.

"Shit!" the questioner swore quietly. "What do we do?"

"We need to clear out the dome, quickly and safely."

"You got it," came the reply, and the one of them loped off, to consult with the ref, whilst the other stayed behind.

"You should get out of here whilst you still can, man," Culley urged, actually silently proud that their organization had such upstanding wrestlers.

"What about you?" the young-old face asked, sweat still shining his brow.

The emergency doors around the stadium popped open, and chorus of jeering and catcalls erupted drowning out the attempts made by the ref and other officials to call for order.

"I think I better pull the pug on this mother," Culley indicated to the wires that were wound around one another like weed vines.

"Help me down," he bade his new found associate, and held out his forearm, so that the other man could steady him. There were more eyes on him, than there were on the ref, and Culley swore at the camera man who was still hanging about, trying to get him to turn around and help get the crowd under control.

Like an unsteady, but solid male ballerina, Culley held his injured leg out in front of him as he bent his other knee, and slowly lowered himself to the ground.

"You okay?" the other wrestler bent low, and said the words softly.

"Yeah, thanks," Culley replied. "Now get the hell outta here!" he gave the order as he reached forward to grab a handful of wiring, and began sorting.

"Which one is it?" the other man asked, completely ignoring Culley's directive, and instead staying and bending over to see what Culley was doing.

"I don't know." Culley was grateful for all the help he could get. "I just think that if I can stop the electrical current from coming in here, then maybe we'll be able to kind of stop this thing from doing any more damage."

The youngster could see what Culley was driving at, and he loped off to the other side of the bank to see what he could do from there.

"The logical thing to do here, Taffinder," Culley began talking to himself, "is to find the source, and track it from there." He abandoned sorting through the knot of wire, and began investigating the plastic back of the very TV he was supposed to avoid. He only hoped that he wouldn't suffer the same fate as Denny, that he would be able to spend many long, loving years with his precious Yasmine.

From what he could remember about the lay out of the back of a television set, there were a few wires that could come out, and only one that wasn't supposed to. That one, he knew from experience, was the power supply. If he could find that one, and the power source that was feeding it, then maybe he could stop the chain reaction that he knew must be occurring in the belly of the 72cm tube that was supposed to bring joy, but was now programmed for death.

A thick grey wire resisted his yanking, and he knew he was on to the right one, although he could barely follow it after that, as it lay jumbled between the other brightly coloured morass. However he persevered, firmly hanging on, often only with his thumb and forefinger, and all the while he prayed that he hadn't lost it, or confused it with another grey cable.

As before lady luck blessed him, as she cursed him, because he came across all the power cables taped together, so that they could run up to the source.

"Here!" Culley shouted, but he doubted his new friend could hear him, because a din had started as the fans began an ordered exodus.

Culley began crawling up toward the power outlet, hauling himself along the wad of cables, the

way an astronaut would do along his umbilicus to the space shuttle.

He thought about trying to attract attention one more time, but then discarded the idea, as he came across one of those multiple outlet adaptors, only this one was bigger than anything he had at home. He began ripping out each plug, simply glad that he had found the source.

He felt rather than saw his compatriot race past him, a splash of coloured latex in the corner of his eye, as the healthy wrestler began chasing the cream coloured single cable that nourished Culley's adaptor with electricity, hunting for the circuit breaker that would stop the poisons emanating from the Cobalt, the poisons from the Brotherhood and their fanatics.

Not even the slight pop of the earth fuse at the base of the adaptor could deter Culley, and he didn't stop until his new found friend gently, but firmly removed the apparatus from his hands.

"Come on Culley," he said, "I think we stopped it. Let's leave it for the G-men," he finished as Culley looked at him blankly for a moment.

"Yeah okay," Culley answered tiredly, but he perked right up as he remembered Yasmine, and then he began to silently berate himself for leaving her alone, even though he knew that she hadn't quite been in that state.

"Help me up - uh - what's your name?" he asked sheepishly, now ashamed that he hadn't paid attention.

"Tom," he offered Culley his big hand, pulling him up slightly, and then hooking his neck in under Culley's arm, so that he could use him as a crutch.

"Thanks a lot Tom," Culley huffed, as they began shuffling to the nearest exit.

"Sure. No problem. Glad to be of help," Tom added his own smile. "I got to respect my elders," he teased.

"Hey watch it pipsqueak, I still know a few things, and I have a doctor whom I can persuade to give me a clean bill health to kick your butt!"

"If you are referring to Yasmine I wouldn't bet on it," Rory had caught his words as they came out of the door.

"Hey Rory, sorry to ruin your evening-"

"It's okay bud," Rory took his other arm. "I'm getting used to it. Heck I don't think you'll ever be able to get to another meet without stealing the show."

"Hey you've got me figured out," Culley laughed. "By the way have you met Tom?" he angled his head to his other aid.

"Not yet, but I'm sure he'll be an up and comer," Rory complimented.

"Thank you," Tom managed a blush. He knew that when he reached his peak these guys would finally be finishing off their own distinguished careers in wrestling. They probably wouldn't wrestle against one another, but there were tricks that could be passed on, knowledge that could be shared, and a mutual respect built that could make the PWL soar.

"Speaking of my favourite doctor, where is she?" Culley noticed that they were simply a strand in a long queue of people who were quickly, and sensibly moving toward the outside parking lots. There were officials at the door to assure everybody that those who wanted a refund could get one, and those who wanted a rain check for the following evening could get one too.

"She's outside tending to some bloke who fell and broke his rib. What happened Culley?" There was worry in Rory's eyes.

"That last guy from the Brotherhood, the one who escaped with the radioactive stuff, he was here tonight," Culley wished the crowd would hurry up. He needed to see Yasmine, and he very much wanted to catch his breath. Tonight's events had been draining.

"No shit?" Rory was taken aback by their enemy's boldness.

"Yeah, I think he also activated it-"

"What? That stuff that killed Denny?"

Culley hissed at him to be quiet. They were still in a crowd, and a stampede would have been easy to start.

"You're joking right?"

"No, what's more Tom and I were exposed." It was the stark truth, and that was only just hitting him now.

"Jesus, we have to find Yasmine," Rory sped up, and began elbowing fans aside. "She has to check you two out."

That was just what Culley wanted.

"Excuse us please! Move! Mind! Coming through!" Rory alternately begged and ordered so that they got to the front. There was some grumbling, but Culley's bound leg was obvious, and maybe everybody thought he was seriously injured so they got out of his way.

The air was sweet outside, brisk from the rain that Culley and the others hadn't even known had fallen. The spot lights in the parking lot were sharp, even if they had to compete with the whirl of red and white which was coming from the nearby ambulance.

Policemen were keeping the ghouls away, as paramedics stood within and without the body of the mini hospital, frantically trying to save some unknown body. The nearest copper waived them through, past the barricade, when he saw Culley hopping.

"Hey can we get some help here?" Rory entreated as they got closer.

"Sure," one of the blokes hanging on the door stepped back to see what he could do, allowing Culley and his cohorts a view into the van.

Yasmine was leaning over Wilson, a stethoscope pressed against his bare chest, which had a tube sticking out of it from between two ribs, blood filling the tube and running into a bottle which was at her feet.

Culley knew better than to distract her, even as she looked him over with a practised eye.

He had to turn his back to her, as his friends lowered him on to the tail of the van, his injured leg straight in front of him. The paramedic pulled on a pair of gloves, and then proceeded to cut a hole in Culley's pants leg, where it was sticking out of the black brace that Yasmine had so carefully strapped up for him that morning.

"Is it tender?" the professional asked, gently peeling away the material, and looking into see if his joint was swollen.

"No," Culley answered. "I did fall on my side, but I didn't feel any jarring."

"That's good. There's no blood, and it doesn't look like there's any obvious bruising. Maybe you should get it checked out anyway?" He didn't sound sure, but Culley was.

If he needed checking out for anything it would be for radioactive exposure, and he sure wouldn't let anybody but Yasmine check him over for that.

"He's stable doc," he heard a voice from behind him say. "Don't you want to check out the other patient?"

Culley heard a movement behind him, and he then he felt Yasmine slide her arms about him, and she kissed his temple. He gave the paramedic a smug smile, before he turned his own head and planted a wet one in under her chin.

"I don't know if you should be sitting so close," he murmured. "I think I'm glowing in the dark." Yasmine gripped his chin in her surgeon's fingers, and turned his head so that she could look in his eyes.

"Why? What happened?"

"Uh Yas, I'm getting a crick in my neck," he rolled his shoulders once she had let go. "That Cobalt stuff, I'm sure that stupid-" Yasmine stopped him from swearing by putting her small

hand over his mouth.

Culley pulled it down, and continued: "I'm sure he stuck it in one of the TV sets in the North West corner. Me and Tom here," he pointed to the virtually unclothed man standing next to them, "we were right next to it!"

"I'll get on to the Hazmed team," the paramedic keyed a switch on the radio set that he was wearing, and spoke rapidly into it.

"North West?" he asked Culley to re-verify.

"Yeah, bottom right hand corner, screen side. We pulled the plug though. Tom found the outlet, and he yanked that sucker right out of there."

"Well done Tom!" Rory slapped his bare shoulder, and Yasmine winced on his behalf, even if he didn't. That had to sting.

"But I'm afraid that I'm going to need a thorough going over doctor," Culley said, lasciviously, making her blush prettily.

"If I were you I wouldn't ask too loudly. To get rid of radioactive material on your body requires the use of a brillo pad and a steel brush-"

"Really?!" Culley practically screeched. "Run Tom," he made a shoving motion with his hand.

"Go! Save yourself!"

"Relax," Yasmine laughed softly, still mindful that there was a dying man behind them. "You probably only got a small dose, the same amount that you would get from an MRI."

"Then why did he do it?"

"He probably saw the two of you, and realised what he was missing..." Rory interrupted them, simply speaking from experience. He knew what it was like to feel envious of the two of them, only he didn't know why Wilson wanted to destroy when he should have been trying to emulate. Yasmine and Culley had found each other in the midst of terror, and it was like they had been blessed because it had made them rise above the evil that had intended to subsume them. Wilson wasn't like that - and it was his curse.

"Thank you," Yasmine whispered, and held out her hand, so Rory could take it. They were surrounded by friends, and they were rich for it. Yasmine felt for the first time that something could be contagious and that it could be good. Their love was infectious, and it was powerful, and it had blown away Judd and his Brotherhood. Their futures were sealed. They had love and that was all that mattered, they had each other to live for, and to pass on what they had to others around them.

And in the back, quietly listening, and comprehending, Wilson came to know that he had nothing left to live for, nothing in his life that would ever match what those around him had, and so, he gave up, his life slipping away quietly, and nearly unnoticed. His last thought was that he hoped that he would know something of Denny in the next life.

## CHAPTER 26

Their relationship had been twisted around from the beginning, so neither of them saw any need to carry on with tradition for their wedding either.

Instead, Yasmine had stood in the groom's place, in all her finery, whilst Culley walked down the aisle toward her. He walked sans cane, unaided in any way, and she had never thought him so handsome.

The congregation had clapped as the Reverend had mentioned that Culley had healed, and that was why they were doing things a little differently, but no one had the heart to point out that they would probably have done things differently anyway. Things had been unconventional ever

since they had met. The universe wanted it that way.

Their time at the Brotherhood, and then their confrontation with Wilson had taught them something about eternity. For the two of them, it wasn't nearly long enough to spend loving one another, and their families. And now they were declaring it for all their loved ones to here.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the Reverend proclaimed, his face beaming as a roar of approval went up from Culley's friends and brother and brother-in-law.

"Kiss her!" Orrin called out, but he needn't have bothered, because Culley was busy doing just that.

"I do love you Mrs Taffinder," Culley whispered, before he gave her a reverential smile. "And I'm glad you made an honest man of me," he teased. "People were beginning to talk, saying things like our babies were going to be here before we actually made it legal."

Yasmine laughed. "I wouldn't have minded," she whispered back.

"Great now you tell me. We still have a party to get through, and here you are already dropping hints that you want to get me alone."

They both waved at a person here and there as they walked down the aisle, having personally vouched for every person who was attending.

Orrin had been so overprotective that Culley had threatened to elope, but Yasmine had rightly pointed out that his father was simply voicing something that all their family had been acting out ever since they had come back.

They had all thought it was over when Judd and the Brotherhood had been captured, but Wilson had blind-sided them, and Orrin wasn't going to take anymore chances. He had seen them throw Denny away like he was nothing, and he had seen those bastards punish his children because they had dared to lift Denny out of the hell that he had been dumped into. That was too many times as far as Orrin was concerned, and he was going to protect the love that extended throughout his unique and growing family.

"Well be brave a little longer and I'll see if we can't sneak away early," she promised.

Their wedding was being held on the grounds of a local hotel. They left the chapel, and were whisked away by the photographer that Josette had hired specifically to satisfy Violet and Amy. They had wanted tons and tons of photos, but Yasmine would have been satisfied even if there were none. She carried everything about Culley in her mind. She knew she always would.

"I'm surprised you were invited," Pickering remarked to MacAllister as they came across each other at the bar.

"So was I," the other man admitted, as he accepted a beer.

"I was treated like a total pariah at the retard's funeral, so this was a nice surprise."

"Well if Yasmine hears you calling Denny a retard again she'll probably have you escorted out."

"Very likely," MacAllister was apologetic.

"It was nice of the local Jewish community to spring for Denny's coffin."

"Oh yeah," MacAllister agreed. "Lead coffins probably cost a pretty penny, not that the Knittels didn't offer to cover that. They could probably afford that considering that Yasmine is a doctor and all. Uh, no offense," he hedged when he remembered Pickering was of the same profession.

"None taken," Pickering accepted. "The hospital was going to cover that anyway, but the Rabbi really insisted."

"Yeah, I know. They really took Denny Pierson's cause to heart you know."

Pickering nodded. Their entire community had embraced Denny as a symbol, the cry being that if he could do something and he was of limited faculty, then what was stopping Mr and Mrs Average from contributing to the rooting out of hate and destruction in their neighbourhood? The answer was clearly nothing, and many people had become more involved in solving issues

of discrimination.

"Well, take care Detective," Pickering wished him well, offering him his hand.

"You too, doc," MacAllister saluted him with his beer, before hurrying to take his place for the entrance of the bride and groom, as well as the traditional toasts.

The pair were really blessed with much laughter by their fathers, brothers, and friends. There was some sadness as someone observed that Denny would have been absolutely gleeful if he had been there, but that same someone had also pointed out that wherever he was, he would have been smiling and probably doing a dance at how great things had turned out.

"I hope he is," Yasmine murmured, as she linked her fingers with her new husband's.

"I know he is," he lifted her chin, and gave her a soft, comforting kiss.

"Hey you two! Save that for later!" Buzz bellowed from across the room, and everybody laughed as Violet rose and bade everyone to enjoy their meal.

"Hey Culley," one of his new nieces came and whispered in his ear, once they started clearing away some of the main course dishes. "When are you and Yas going to dance?"

"After dessert sweetie," he reassured her, "but don't tell Yas just yet. She'll say my leg hasn't healed, and then she'll stop me."

As dessert was placed before them, Orrin stood and tapped his glass for attention.

"You know we've been speaking, and speaking, but I think it's time for my son to do a little explaining as to why he deserves this beautiful, intelligent woman next to him-

"Uh, Dad," Culley rose to his feet, and cut him off, pausing as clapping drowned out any attempts to speak.

"I think that since actions were always my strong point, I think that I'll show you why."

He turned and raised Yasmine's hand to his lips, before drawing her to her feet, and signalling the DJ that he had to play a particular song.

"Aw!" several ladies chorused as Celine Dion's song *'I Love You'* began playing, and Culley swept Yasmine into his arms.

"I love you," Yasmine echoed the song's words.

"And I love you too, Yasmine my heart. I love you bone deep."