

REVERB

Chapter One

He held the mud-covered kitten to his chest and paced the water's edge, trying not to cry.

"Get 'em, Ian!"

"No. You get them." Ian stood on the grassy hillside several feet up from the pond. "It's your fault they're in there. I wouldn't have tripped if you hadn't been chasing me." He shrugged his gangly shoulders and held up the empty shoebox.

"I can't swim. Get 'em, Ian, please!"

Two tiny kittens struggled to stay afloat in the center of the fishpond. They clawed at the floating washcloth James had put in the box, their high-pitched squeals like children screaming in the distance.

"I'm not drowning in that scummy water over some feral cats." Ian just stood there, watching. "Get them if you want to, but I'm not. They're probably rabid." He held the shoebox away from him like it was diseased then flung it into the pond.

James paced. He'd been so excited to see his wild, teenage half-brother, but he hated Ian right then. He never should have shown off the lynx kittens he'd found in the marsh behind Miller's farm. He looked back up at the barn. Mr. Miller was away at work all day. It would take too long to go back to his house for help.

He clutched the kitten he'd plucked from the slimy bank and held it against his mounting terror as he stepped into the murky water. His feet sank into the soft, muddy bottom. Cold water rushed through his socks and around his ankles then seeped into his sneakers and weighted him.

"You'd better learn to swim fast because you'll never reach them from there." Ian's rosy, full face was suddenly angular and hard with shadows as clouds hid the morning sun.

James shivered and waded deeper, the water to his knees, then his waist; but he still couldn't reach them. One of the kittens disappeared below the surface, and he lunged for it—and was suddenly kicking water searching for ground. Sharp pain pierced his shoulder from the kitten's needle claws as it scrambled onto his shoulder. He screamed, but it was garbled by mouthfuls of thick, grimy water.

He couldn't get air, and his lungs felt as if they were bursting. He kicked and grabbed at the surface above him. He saw Ian standing at the edge of the pond, watching him with the exact same blank expression he'd worn watching the kittens drown.

Ian blurred and faded as James sank. Excruciating pain burned in his chest and his vision tunneled, then something burst behind his eyes and everything went white. Then his view was from above his body, maybe six feet up, and James looked down on himself sinking in the pond, watched Ian come in after him. He watched, but didn't feel, his limp body being dragged to the shore. And although he saw Ian kneel beside him, he did not feel his half-brother pounding on his chest.

"Come on, you little shit." Ian yelled as he practically pounced on James. "You die on me, and I'm screwed. Come on! Get up!" He put both his palms on James's ribcage and pounced again.

Blinding pain shot through James's chest and up his throat as the water was forced from his lungs. He was back in his body on the ground, gritty water burning his throat and nostrils as it poured from his nose and mouth.

When he finally stopped choking and sat up, everything was quiet. The kittens were gone. The pond was still.

"You tell, and you'll regret it." Ian stared down at him with a sinister grin plastered on his face. "I'll make it all your fault. It'll be easy. I'll almost tell the truth, and Father will believe me, since I'm his only real son."

Damn you, Ian.

Fast forward twenty years, and now James was the only one left. He stared at the pine casket perched at the edge of the hole in the ground and pictured Ian lying in there with that smirk fixed on his face. The priest was saying something, but he didn't hear and didn't care. He wanted to be someplace else, anyplace else.

Damp, dead air. Then a hint of an icy breeze stung his cheeks. Brown leaves danced across the clipped lawns of the High Halden Church graveyard as he watched them lower Ian into the ground. Mama Cass droning out the classic lyrics to "California Dreamin,'" with its ubiquitous 6-5-6 progression was in his head, and mirrored the scene before him. James would be safe and warm if he was in L.A., producing for The Zone, finishing the remix for Caravan, surfing, arguing with Julia instead of freezing in this graveyard trying to figure out why he'd come at all.

The casket settled in the hole, and he wanted to feel something, but didn't. Memories of his half-brother were mostly of Ian taunting him—stupid shit, like putting razor cuts in his guitar strings so they snapped when he played or threatening to slam the piano cover closed while he was practicing. The first day James came to Castlewood, eight years after the kitten incident back in the States, Ian walked into the music room blasted on something, came within inches and whispered, "Do you ever dream about dead cats?"

James had tried to avoid him, but Ian sought him out at first. After a while, he'd stopped reacting, and a while after that Ian stopped pulling shit.

The priest handed him a shovel filled with dirt. He poured it onto the casket. The noise was surprisingly loud, and hollow. James wondered if Ian was really in there. Perhaps his brother had stolen away, faked his death to escape his ill-fated legacy, given up all those millions for his freedom. And now a young Paul McCartney was in his head singing "Eleanor Rigby." Ian was one of the lonely people, spent his life searching for where he belonged.

James handed the shovel back to the priest and stepped back, kept his eyes downcast, deliberately avoiding his father. Again the question of why he'd come struck him, but he didn't hear an answer.

The priest crossed himself and wiped his hands as he walked from the grave. James listened to McCartney's melodic voice unveil the story of the lost. That was Ian. The man had no center. Maybe he'd felt that and couldn't live with it.

James stood with his hands in the pockets of his overcoat, held it closed against a gust of biting wind, feeling the music resonate in his body and shroud him against the cold.

Everyone started milling about, coming up to him and shaking his hand with the canonical sympathies. What was he supposed to say to these people? Was he sorry Ian was dead? Wouldn't affect much either way, really. It wasn't unexpected. There wasn't a person here who could deny his half-brother was on self-destruct, except maybe his father, who'd spent a lifetime denying it. Or just couldn't be bothered. Ian was screwed from the start.

Gray domed the sky and felt suffocating. James wanted out of there. But how? He felt everyone watching, checking him out.

He hated that.

The limo that had brought him was just across the lawn, not fifty yards away. The driver who'd picked him up at Heathrow stood next to it, smoking a cigarette. He could walk over there, get in and go.

He didn't. Instead, he pulled up an intro he'd been working on for the Zone's lead track and composed it in his head while he shook hands and nodded. Open with all power chords, hard and fast, like a freight train coming: G5, C5, F5, A5. Then back off, G5 sustain, 1-2-3-4, and pick it up, and faster, and faster, and hold the rhythm with the change to Em at the seventeenth measure...

"James Michael Whren." The priest extended his hand. Tall, thin, gray hair, trim beard, simple black suit with a thin white collar. His smile was warm but affected. "How many years has it been? My word, look at you." He clasped James's hand in both of his and shook firmly.

"Welcome home, son."

This is not my home, and I am not your son.

"Hello, Father." James reclaimed his hand and hid it in the pocket of his overcoat. He couldn't remember the priest's name to save his life.

"James, you may remember Father Tenant?" Edward Charles Whren XXI came up behind his son, and it chilled James straight through. "It has been quite some time, Albert."

"Of course, Edward." Then the priest turned back to James. "Father Albert Tenant. It has been a long time, hasn't it?" He stuck his hand out again, and James shook it again. "I know your father is glad you found your path here today. I'm sure Ian would have felt the same."

I'm not here for my father, and Ian wouldn't have cared less.

Again he wondered why he was there.

The priest and his father exchanged glances. Then the priest looked at James.

"How long will you be staying, son?"

"I'm leaving in the morning."

Again the priest looked at his father.

"So, you'll be staying at Castlewood this evening, then?"

James caught his breath and held it a moment.

"Actually, I was going to see some people in London before I go back. My flight's very early, and, well..."

"I'd like you to come to Castlewood this evening, James." Edward's tone masked the command as a request.

"Well, my flight's at, like, five-forty-five in the morning and..."

"Stefan will get you to the airport in ample time for your flight." Edward kept his eyes fixed on his son.

"Yeah. Okay, I guess." What else could he say? His father had just buried his only other child.

The priest nodded approvingly. James felt like flipping him off but managed to refrain.

"Good." Edward gave a quick smile. "I'll see you back at the house, then." His stoic mask was back in place as he turned to Father Tenant. "Albert. Join me."

"It was a pleasure to see you again, James. I'm sorry for the circumstances, and your loss."

The priest stuck his hand out a third time, and James shook it, a third time. Then Father Tenant and Edward crossed the misted lawn to the cobbled road and the waiting limousines.

"Master James," Curtis Weston, one of his brother's strung-out cronies mocked. "It's been a while, man. Too bad about Ian, huh. How you doing?"

"Okay, Curtis. How you doing, man?"

Curtis looked like crap—emaciated, with vacant eyes peering through long greasy hair.

"I'm getting by. You still in L.A. doing the music scene?"

"Yeah. What about you? You still with The Ravens?"

"Na. I don't play much anymore. Hang out mostly. You know..."

No, he didn't. And he didn't ever want to know a life without music. Take away music, and he'd have no life at all. Probably end up like Curtis. What a waste. Curtis used to be a damn good guitarist.

"I've got to go, man. Take care." James turned away, walked slowly towards the limos, watching his father talk to the priest. Edward glanced at him across the lawn then turned away with a sweep of his cloak and got into the first vehicle lining the old road. James watched it drive away, pulled his coat tighter around him and followed his father's path.

Agreeing to go out to Castlewood was a bad idea. Stupid. He didn't have a clue what to say to his father after so much time. They'd never got on. Edward didn't give a damn, and after a while James hadn't either. And he still didn't. He should have said he had a red-eye, or he was staying with friends in London.

He reached the limousines frustrated and freezing.

"Stefan, right?"

"Yes, sir." Maybe twenty, clad in an ill-fitting black suit—a beanpole, with clear blue eyes and white-blond spiked hair peeking from under his black cap. He opened the back passenger door. "I'm sorry for your loss, sir."

"Thank you." James got in. Apparently, Stefan knew where to take him because the kid didn't ask.

The door shut, and he felt entombed. It got harder and harder to breathe. As they traveled through the rolling hills of Kent, the ancient walnuts and aged oaks were black sentries against the gray sky. He tried to focus on his music, but it was impossible to hear anything beyond the war inside his head. Between the cascade of faded memories of living there, aching for home and Julia, he cursed himself all the way to the estate for agreeing to come.

He caught a glimpse of the stone turrets of Castlewood through the endless row of Italian spruce, and his skin started to crawl. Then the gravel drive popped and crunched under the tires, and his heart pounded so hard it reverberated in his throat. He'd walked away the day he turned eighteen, leaving behind his father, Ian and the five years he'd been forced to live with them. That was twelve years ago. And he'd never have come back had Ian's overdose not given him an easy excuse to put a few days between him and Julia.

The limo finally stopped. Stefan opened his door. Dread was so pervasive James was paralyzed. Nothing good could come from this meeting.

Stefan stood shivering in the cold, wet air and waited. James sat in the limo until he couldn't take the absurdity another minute.

"What are you waiting for?"

"You to get out, sir."

"Well, what if I don't?"

"Well, then, I have to wait here, sir, until you do."

"Any chance you'd take me back to Heathrow?"

"None, sir. My instructions were to bring you here."

He'd figured as much. Edward usually got what he wanted. There was no point in arguing.

He got out of the car and even managed, "Thank you, Stefan. That will be all for now," as he crossed the gravel drive to the house. Jesus, he couldn't wait to get back to L.A. where the people were normal. He heard Stefan slam the door to the limousine and stomp away as he entered through the heavy oak doors and into the massive marble foyer.

"Your father would like to see you in the study at six p.m. sharp," Howard said the moment he set foot inside. He said nothing else, not even, "Good to see you after all these years." Nothing. He just turned away with that Ivy League stick up his ass.

"Nice seeing you, too, Harvard." James called after him as he disappeared down a hallway.

Howard had been Edward's personal secretary since their Harvard days together. For the five years James lived on the estate, Howard was if not attentive at least more available than his father ever was. Perhaps James owed him for that alone. It was just, well, why did Howard have to be such a prig?

Turn around. Walk away.

There was no point in staying. He and his father had nothing to say to each other. Edward couldn't stop him from leaving. It was past five, though. Dark. Cold. Wet. And he was 230 acres away from the nearest neighbors. The only way out was to call a taxi. He pulled his cell from the pocket of his slacks, flipped it open to log onto the net for taxi listings nearby but had no signal. James snapped the phone shut and pocketed it, then took a deep breath to thwart his rising panic.

No phone in the foyer... or the adjoining parlor... or in the library. Still searching, he went up to his old room, but the phone that had been on his desk wasn't there anymore. It was cold in that cavernous room, even though a fire blazed in the fireplace. His duffle bag was on the bed. Several plush violet bath towels lay next to it. He was expected to stay.

Damn it.

No phone. No taxi. No way out until morning. A chill ran through him, and he shivered. Then he grabbed the towels, took a hot shower, shaved and dressed. Worn jeans and a sweatshirt. Screw formality. He pulled his iPad from the duffle bag and sat on the bed with it, turned it on and input the chord progressions he'd created earlier. It was close to six-thirty by the time he finally got to Edward's study.

His father sat at the mahogany desk, focused on his laptop. He had his glasses on, but took them off and stood as James came in, though he did not extend his hand. He looked exactly the same, hadn't lost one hair from the mass of thick peppered gray, still cropped short on the sides, but swept across his forehead. Remarkably, he had retained his tall, imposing stature, and even more remarkably, he was still trim and looked fit. Though he was almost eighty, he could easily be mistaken for his early sixties. He hadn't changed one iota in twelve years. Perhaps he'd sold his soul to the devil.

Edward walked over to the bar, pulled a dark-brown bottle from the fifty or more terraced along the smoked mirrored wall.

"Would you care for a whiskey, James?" The puppeteer was still orchestrating the scene.

"No." Back off. Keep it light. "Thank you." He stood a few feet from the desk, caught in one of the many circles created by recessed halogen lights. About the last thing he needed to add to his chemical mix was alcohol. One drink would put him under the table.

James shifted from one hip to the other, edgy to the extreme, his chemistry crashing from all the speed he'd been taking to maintain the crazy hours. Julia was right. He'd been using too much for too long. He was going to have to knock it off even if it meant working less.

His father opened the beveled glass cabinet, selected a crystal tumbler and poured himself a drink. Neither of them spoke, and the silence became the rhino in the room. James stuck his hands in his pockets and wandered over to the walnut bookshelves that lined the walls and randomly scanned titles. Pillars of the Earth. The Principles of Mechanics. The Prince.

Okay. Breathe. Relax. Loosen your shoulders. Say something. Say anything.

"I'm really sorry about Ian," was the best he could come up with.

"It is your loss, too, James. It would serve you to recognize that."

Here we go. "Yes, sir. It is my loss, too. I'm sorry that Ian is dead. It's really a tragic waste."

"Yes, it is." Edward spoke as if to himself. He scrutinized James as he leaned against the bar and took a sip of his whiskey. "A tragic death—a tragic waste of a life. Wouldn't you agree?"

"As you know, Ian and I weren't that close, sir. I'm not in any position to judge how he lived his life."

Edward took another drink. "It's unfortunate you and your brother were never able to cultivate a relationship. Perhaps, by your example, Ian could have developed some focus, some self-discipline."

"I doubt I could have provided any influence that would have saved Ian, sir."

"Of course not." A sardonic laugh. "Ian's issue was not a lack of discipline, but a lack of self."

"What did you want to talk with me about, Father?"

Edward swirled the whiskey in his glass and took a drink. "It is time to discuss your upcoming role in our family's future."

A prickling rush swept through him, like the kind that follows just barely missing the Mac truck.

"Let's not go down that road again. I told you I wasn't interested twelve years ago. I'm still not."

"It has never been a matter of choice, James."

"Maybe not for Ian, but it is for me. I'm just lucky, I guess, that I wasn't your first, or legitimate." Watch out. He was letting the man get to him.

Edward's eyes narrowed. "Your arrogance is only surpassed by your ignorance." He took a gulp of his drink, shook his head, then moved from the bar and began circling James. It was unnerving. "Your brother was a lazy, spoiled, contentious, undisciplined brat. I had no expectations of him managing the family estate, since he could not manage his own behavior." He stopped a few feet in front of James, close enough for him to smell his father's sour breath.

Every part of James tensed. It took considerable effort to relax his balled fists. He flexed his fingers discretely. They were the same height; James was close to fifty years younger, and in good shape. But he still felt afraid.

"Why am I here, Father? What do you want?"

"An easy transition." Edward took another sip of whiskey. "Though that seems unlikely." He drained his glass in one final gulp. "James, did you honestly expect to just walk away and sever all ties to your family? If you did, I'm afraid you were sadly mistaken."

He had to be kidding. "What ties? We have no ties. You had your constituents, your agenda, other commitments—"

"I had two sons," Edward almost shouted. "Now I have one." He went back to the bar and poured himself another drink. After taking a long, slow draw, he continued. "Am I to expect the same childish, petty contempt from you as from your brother?"

"What do you want me to say? What are you looking to hear from me, Edward?" Then it suddenly struck him what his father wanted. James had to laugh. "I can't give you what you want, Edward. I won't. I'm the last person to grant you absolution."

"Absolution?" Edward laughed, shook his head with a twisted grin. "You are young, and naive, so you are forgiven." He raised his glass to James in a mock toast then brought it to his lips and drained it, went back to the bar and poured a third.

"I don't need your forgiveness." I need to get out of here.

Edward stood at the bar studying him and, then finished his drink and placed the glass down gently. James had never seen his father drink so much. It worried him. He never got on with drunks. This could turn into a very bad scene.

"Please, sit down, James." Edward indicated the steel-and-leather chairs in front of his desk as he went behind it and stood waiting.

James looked at the door, then back at his father.

"Please." The tone was casual, somehow making the command sound like a request, and again Edward motioned to the Van Der Rohe chairs. He did not sit until James did.

He pressed a few keys on his laptop and closed it, arranged some papers then folded his huge hands casually in his lap and looked at his son.

"With Ian's passing, you are the sole heir to the family estate. The estate is valued at more than two billion in assets. Most of it is tied up in real estate holdings, though a good percentage is incorporated into a variety of business ventures, some of which—"

"I can't believe you're insisting on this conversation." James stood and his chair slid back silently over the polished oak floors. He backed away from the desk, moved behind the chair and gripped its steel bar with both hands. "I told you I'm not interested. I don't want any of your money. If this is all you wanted to talk to me about, then we're done, Father."

"This isn't about money, James."

"Well, excuse me for being vulgar, sir, but whatever it's about I'm not interested in any part of your estate. This is absurd. You can't honestly expect me to walk away from everything I've established, worked for my entire life."

"I have not suggested you abandon anything. I am expecting you to absorb these additional obligations and invest the time necessary to become effective at managing them. You have lived the kind of life known only to the privileged few. Do not minimize the role your heritage has played in your accomplishments."

You pompous, self-aggrandizing prick.

"I have devoted my life to music. I worked my ass off, round the clock, well before you came along. Somehow, according to you, I owe all my success to this family. Well, that's bullshit, Edward."

"It's not my intention to minimize your achievements. Your dedication is beyond reproach. But your commitment to this family will be equally fulfilling when you invest in it some of the energy you've given so exclusively to your own endeavors, and redirect it into managing the Trust."

"I have no commitment to you or this family. And you sure as hell have no right to sit there and tell me I'm being self-centered following the path of prodigal musician you not only paved but shoved down my throat." He was almost shouting. His heart raced. It was hard to catch his breath. "I don't want to be part of your world, Edward, and I won't let you pull me away from the one thing I love."

"It is narcissism, at best, that the only thing you know of love is adoration of your own talent."

"That's not what I meant. You're taking what I said out of context."

"Am I?" Edward rose suddenly and spread his hands on his desk. "You have served yourself and no one else all of your adult life. You are almost thirty years old and have no wife, no children to inherit our name." He shook his head and took a few measured steps from his desk then stopped and looked at James. "Serving the family trust will require you to step outside of yourself and your infinitesimally small world. Like it or not, you are a part of this family and inexorably linked to its past, and destined to influence its future and the thousands of lives we affect. The only question is how you will play the hand you have been dealt." He circled to the front of his desk as he spoke and stopped two feet away from his son. His gaze never wavered, and it felt to James as if Edward's eyes were boring a hole right through his head.

He's too close. Run! Escape while you still can.

"There is no such thing as destiny, Father. I choose. And I will not let you manipulate me into taking a position for which I have no passion or interest. It's my life. Everything is transitory, Edward, even this family. I am not the answer to your desire for immortality. I can't save you. This conversation is over. I'm leaving."

"Sit down, James."

"Fuck you, Edward," came out of his mouth, and he felt strangely vindicated...until his father backhanded him.

His right eye exploded, and he buried his face in his hands, pressing hard to counter the throbbing. The entire right side of his face felt on fire. He stumbled back out of his father's reach, wiped the tears from his eyes on his shirtsleeve and held his cheek.

James couldn't believe it. As far as he knew, until that moment Edward had never raised a hand to either son. He was always so contained, controlled. James stared at his father, trying to gauge his state of mind. Edward didn't look at him. He went over to the bar and poured himself another whiskey, and in one swift gulp drained the glass.

It was clear to Edward that James was on something. His son was out of control. He would have expected this behavior from Ian but not from James, not anymore, not ever again after that go-round in his teens. James had been far too productive over the years to be ravaged by drugs.

Yet, his behavior was fundamentally disturbing. Tracking James's progress overall did not provide an intimate view, and it was quite possible he could have succumbed to a drug problem again, especially considering the tendency towards drug abuse in his industry.

Edward had just buried his firstborn. He was not prepared to lose his only remaining son. James held his cheek, staring at him as if he were Satan. There were tears in his eyes, and Edward remembered the grief stricken boy on the day he'd arrived at Castlewood directly after his mother and stepfather were killed. He had been unable to talk to his son then. It was unfortunate they'd never moved off that mark.

"Please, sit down, James."

James stood his ground. He had his mother's striking beauty, his mass of fine chestnut hair worn wild, just as she had. His deep green eyes were fixed on Edward's.

"I'm leaving, Edward. I'm going to find someone to take me to the airport. I'm sorry for you. You've lost one son by playing God, and you are about to lose the other."

Edward scowled at him. It took considerable restraint not to slap him again.

"I'm humbled by God. What humbles you, James?"

"Watch out, Father." He shot an insolent grin. "You're not in control." James turned away, and Edward watched him shut the door and did nothing to stop his son.

Death entered the study through the closed walnut doors and sat in Edward's chair, mocking him. Images of Ian came to the fore, stoned out of his mind, slumped in that chair, spinning it round and round. He'd sung television jingles, trying to shut out what he considered his father's diatribe on responsible behavior. The chair twirled faster, and the face became a grinning mask, and Edward started to feel faint as it flashed by.

Then the chair stopped, but now it was James who sat there, Death behind him holding the chair still.

The room became stifling. He had to get out.

He kept his pace measured, and somehow made it outside to the rose garden without faltering. He drew in the misted air with great gasps, sat down on the marble bench near the Rodin and watched the condensation as it collected and dripped from the Madonna's carved breasts. The chill of age ran through him, and he shuddered in an effort to shake it off, but the cold did not pass. It clung to his bones, and Death sat down with a groan beside him and refused to leave. To his horror, he was crying, the urgency of the present shadowing the past; frustration and fear consumed him.

James was going to leave, and he could not stop him. It was quite likely this would be the last time he would see his son. He recalled his last encounter with Ian, four months earlier when he'd entered the Chelsea flat and found his son lying on the white Foust couch. It was marked with bloodstains from careless injections and burn holes from fallen ash. The stench revealed Ian had been there quite some time.

It had never occurred to him when he threw his son out that rainy afternoon last spring it would be the last time he would see him alive.

If he let James fly back to the States and the lifestyle he had adopted there, it could lead to the boy's undoing. By all acceptable measures, his son was very successful, but Edward had to question if he were truly thriving, since he found it necessary to use drugs. If James continued to indulge in this illicit behavior, his reputation could become damaged and interfere with his ability to manage the Trust. If Edward let his son continue to abuse his body and mind, quite likely he would soon be attending James's funeral.

He stood, and the creaks and pops of his bones seemed amplified in the quiet garden. He walked slowly back inside. Death did not accompany him. It stayed out in the damp night, filling the air with plumes of steamy laughter, and gave him a sly wink just before he entered the portrait-lined hall.

This time, he wasn't going to turn a blind eye to family and do nothing. He was going to use everything in his power to stop his remaining son from destroying himself, and the family name.

He went back to the study, sat down in front of the laptop and pulled up Home Secretary Douglas Perkins's profile. Five hundred thousand in donations to his Reform Referendum should be more than enough to call in one small favor.

ENTROPY

Chapter Two

Late afternoon, but it was almost dark out with the approaching storm. Headlights flashed across the concrete building as a car pulled into the rest stop.

Please don't be a cop.

Kate sat in her car, held her breath and said a silent prayer. She covered the dog dish on her lap with the map and pretended to be reading.

The car pulled up and parked a few spaces to her left. It was an old silver Porsche, like James Dean got killed in, only this one had a hard top. She tossed the map on the passenger seat and went back to rolling the joint, eyeing the Porsche, waiting for someone to get out. They were sure taking their sweet time.

She gathered the loose weed scattered in her dead dog's food dish and filled the small, thin paper, rolled it then bent over and licked the joint closed. A car door slammed, and she looked up.

He was on the pathway that led to the restrooms. God, what a great ass. Tall and slender, he wore blue jeans that hung loose on his hips just right and a dark fleece shirt half-tucked into the jeans in the back. Soft brown hair with fine gold highlights hung to his shoulders. His stride was smooth, like he was comfortable in his body.

Turn around. Look this way. Over here. Come on. Turn around, guy.

He didn't. He disappeared into the concrete building. Oh, well. At least he wasn't a cop. Kate put the empty dish on the passenger seat, retrieved the joint, found a lighter and lit it. Then she got the map and spread it across the wheel in front of her.

"Where to go...What to do..." Another road trip to the middle of nowhere. She always came out looking for something different, but the road never took her far enough from herself.

She took another hit. Blue-white smoke filled the car. She cracked the window and blew out a thin stream. Heavy, frigid air rushed in. Snow was coming. She could feel it. A smile crept across her face as the first few flakes began to fall. Tall thin pines swayed in the cold wind against the cobalt sky. Fat white dots fluttered all around. It was beautiful.

Kate stared out the passenger window. Her ghosted image stared back at her. An image of her mother in her early thirties blended with her reflection, same long red hair and wide, freckled face overlaid in the reflection a moment.

Then it was just her mother's skeletal face staring at her. She really was alone now.

She took another hit and studied the map. Where to go... She still had three more days to kill...but right then she wondered why. It had been a lame idea to come up to Tahoe to visit Chris. She must be really desperate for company. She didn't even like Chris, or her unemployed alcoholic husband, Rick. Dick. God, what some women will tolerate. She was glad to be out of there. But now what?

The wind picked up, and the snow fell harder. It blew in snake-like serpents across the sidewalk and gathered at the edges of the lawns. The rest stop was deserted except for the Porsche guy, but he hadn't come back out yet. It looked cold and lonely out there.

Kate took another hit. What to do...

With the money from her inheritance, she could stay screwing around for another month if she wanted to. But she didn't want to. Road-tripping wasn't killing lonely anymore. But going back to no one wouldn't, either.

She heard a car door open and looked up. He was back, about to get in his car, and he looked straight at her. The floodlight lit him up. God, he was striking, like he'd just stepped off the cover of GQ. She only got a snapshot impression, but the image of his young face framed by his wild mass of dark hair seared into her brain.

Then he got in his car, started his loud engine and pulled back near her. She heard grinding as he dropped into gear. Then he took off. His taillights flashed red as he stopped before he got on Highway 80, heading south.

Kate was alone again, and suddenly felt the familiar rush of fear. Could be the next car to pull up would be full of drunk guys. She reached behind her and touched the cold metal of the tire iron she kept on the floor in the back. She missed her Pepper-dog. He used to scare people because he was a shepherd, even though he was really a big wuss. Looks can be deceiving. She started her car, backed out of the parking space and got on I-80 South, toward home.

She took another hit off the joint and pushed a CD of acoustic tunes into the changer. Snow reflected in the headlights, adding that extra dimension to driving. The Porsche driver's face flashed in her mind. Every pair of taillights she pulled up on she hoped would be his, but she never spotted him on the highway. She passed a Shell station and saw a silver sports car at a pump, but it was snowing so hard it was impossible to be sure if it were his.

The snow fell harder and began to blanket everything. Every time she hit the brakes she felt the tires slip a little. Four-wheel drive, my ass. Her Civic never had this problem. That car was glued to the road.

She tapped the brake lightly as she came up on the blazingly bright Mobil station. Nothing. Her car didn't slow down. And she was on a collision course with a Mac truck pulling out of the station.

She pumped the brake and cranked the wheel, and her Blazer went spinning. Kate gripped the wheel, watching in what felt like slow motion as several cars swerved to avoid her. She heard a horn honk, loud and drawn, and finally came to a stop in the Mini Mart parking lot, quite some distance from the truck.

Kate forced herself to breathe. It seemed impossible she'd avoided hitting anything, and no one had hit her. She sat in her car, trying to control her shaking and pry her fingers loose from the death grip she had on the wheel. Finally, she took a deep breath, crossed herself and laughed, then said a quick, silent prayer of thanks.

She gunned the engine to check if her car was still running then pulled alongside the truck to get back on the highway. She was sure she was clear as she turned back onto the road.

Brakes screeched, and she caught a glimpse of a gold medallion on the hood of the silver car an instant before it smashed into her. Pain shot through her neck and shoulder as the seatbelt wrenched her back against the seat. She watched the hood of the other car crumple with that same slow-motion effect. There was a loud, muffled thud, the high-pitched bending of metal, then floating almost, sliding together to the snowy embankment on the side of the icy road.

Then everything was still, and silent. All she could hear was her heart beating. She couldn't move. She could hardly breathe.

The snow fell in thick, sparkling flakes and glittered and danced in the headlights. The grinding gears of the Mac truck as it pulled onto the highway brought her back to the horrifying moment.

She swallowed hard, unhooked her seatbelt and looked over her hood. The front of the other car was smashed like an accordion against her left fender. The windshield was shattered,

shiny ribbons webbed across the glass. The top of the silver sports car sat crooked on the bent frame. She stared at the twisted wreck. It was the Porsche.

He stumbled from his car holding his ribs, slightly doubled over, turned to examine his car and said, "Christ," then kicked his crumpled door shut and said, "Fuck." Then he looked at Kate, cocked his head and mouthed, Are you okay?

She stared back at him, shaking.

Then his car blew up. Well, not exactly blew up, but caught fire underneath. He stumbled back, and the interior of the Porsche burst into flames. She thought she saw him laugh. Then he looked at her again.

"Move your car!" he yelled.

She tried to start the engine, but it didn't respond. His car was sunk into hers. If his blew up, hers blew up.

She started screaming. "Oh, God! Start! Come on! Start!"

"It's okay. You're okay!" he yelled over her as he opened her door. "Calm down. You're fine. Your car's fine. Move over."

She did. He got into the driver's seat, put the gear in neutral and turned the key. The engine started. Then he lifted his body off the seat as if he'd just been stung, grabbed something under his right thigh and quickly brushed embers off his jeans, then off the seat. He stuck the still-lit joint between his index and middle finger and smiled. It looked like he was flipping her off with it.

"Here." He handed Kate the joint, drove to the far end of the large parking lot of the Mobil station, put the car in park and looked at her. "You okay?"

She sat, trying to comprehend if what just happened was real or imagined. She nodded.

"Yeah, I think."

"Good." He nodded in response and looked at the joint in her hand. "You'd better put that away if you're planning on sticking around to talk to the cops."

"You're not?"

"Nope."

"You're not going to report this?"

"No."

She stared at him. My god, he's beautiful. Almost cleanshaven, with deep-green eyes, thick lips—the lower one especially—and a square jaw with just a hint of a cleft. He must have been in his early twenties, though it was hard to tell because he had a baby face.

He cocked his head and studied her. "You sure you're okay?"

Kate just nodded. She couldn't take her eyes off him.

He put his hand on the door to open it. Oncoming headlights swept across his face, and she saw blood trickling down the side of his forehead.

"Your forehead is bleeding."

"It's nothing." He wiped it on his shirtsleeve. Agony crossed his face. He drew a sharp breath and pressed his right hand to his ribs. Then he opened the door with his left hand.

"Wait a minute. You're obviously hurt. Where are you going?"

"Away from here." He stared at his burning car. His accent was English, or maybe Australian.

"How? Your car is on fire."

"I'll work it out. Don't worry about it." Definitely English. "Your car is fine. You can take off. I won't tell if you don't." He flashed an adorable grin and winked, then pushed the door open

as headlights from the opposite direction lit him up again. "Shit," he whispered, then crouched slightly behind the wheel and watched the vehicle approach as he gently pulled the car door closed.

Kate noticed the rack of lights on top of the car just as the CHP turned them on. She only caught a glimpse of the cop's beefy jarhead as he passed on the other side of the road. He was checking out the burning Porsche. She saw him try and make a U, but he spun out and got stuck in the snowdrift in the center of the road.

She pinched the joint out and stuck it in her black iPod pouch. She was carrying better than half an ounce of weed and had been the cause of an accident while under the influence. That cop would be out of there in two minutes. She could be in so much trouble if he came after her.

She looked at the Porsche driver. He sat huddled in the driver's seat, attention glued on the rearview mirror. He obviously wasn't crazy about seeing the cop, either.

"Could we just get out of here?" she whispered. "Would you please drive?"

He didn't hesitate. He hit the gas slowly, only rotating the tires once before they gripped, and they were on their way. Just another SUV leaving the station. She put the pouch in the cubby in the dash and watched the CHP spin his back wheels. They rounded the corner and lost him from view, but Kate kept looking back anyway, waiting to see him coming after them.

"Where are we going?" His left hand gripped the top of the wheel. He still held his ribs with his right. His skin tone was almost white, his lips very red. Too red.

"Oh, God. This is bad. Your mouth is bleeding, too."

He wiped away the blood, withdrew his hand and stared at the bloody mess in his palm. His hands were huge, with very long, slender fingers.

"Shit. This is all I need." He started laughing, then choking, and finally swallowed it back.

"I think maybe you should go to a hospital."

"No. Thanks. No hospitals. Thanks, though. I'm okay. Soon as we get to the next town I'll take off." He looked in the rearview mirror.

Kate turned back to look. No flashing red and blue. But how long would that last? The station attendant could have seen the accident and reported her car to the cop. He probably didn't get her plates, though, being so far away. She was one of five hundred other white Chevy Blazers up in Tahoe right then.

The Porsche was another story. "What are you going to do about your car?"

"Leave it. It's junk now anyway."

"You can't just leave it. The police will report it as abandoned and come after you about it." Ten-to-one, the guy wasn't afraid of hospitals because of the doctors.

"The car isn't registered to me. It's not mine."

"Did you steal it?"

"No. A friend gave it to me."

"They won't care their car got totaled?"

"No. It was awarded through a divorce settlement, and she was looking to get rid of it." He glanced over at her, raised an eyebrow and gave her another quick smile. He'd wiped his face clean of blood. He looked almost normal. Drop-dead-gorgeous kind of normal.

"God, I'm really sorry." Tears started to flow uncontrolled down Kate's cheeks. "I never saw you. The truck must have blocked my view. I never saw your car."

"Entropy in motion." He spoke softly, as if to himself.

"What?"

"Shit happens." He laughed, but it looked like it hurt. "It was an accident." He drew a quick breath, started choking again and couldn't stop, got off the highway, pulled the car over, opened the door, leaned out and spat. "Fuck," he whispered, wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve again then leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes. His breathing wasn't right.

"You okay?" Kate suddenly felt afraid for him.

He didn't answer. He didn't move. They sat in the warm car at the bottom of the empty off-ramp. Snow twinkled in the headlights. Nothing around, not even streetlights, only dense forest covered in snow. It was hushed except for his labored breathing.

"I think I better drive," she murmured.

He half-laughed but didn't open his eyes. "Good idea."

Kate got out, slipped and slid on the icy road around the front of the car to the driver's side. By the time she opened the door, he was in the passenger side. His head was back against the seat. His eyes were closed. He looked like he was sleeping.

Chapter Three

She was scared he was going to die right there in her car. His face was white, the blood against it black. His chest heaved with every breath. Want to go to the hospital or not, that was precisely where she'd decided to take him.

He didn't want to get involved with the police. That was a concern. He could be dangerous. He could be a psycho killer, for all she knew. He didn't look like a psycho killer. She could probably take him with one swift kick to the groin, the condition he was in. She was being paranoid. Stoned did that to her.

The Blazer slid on black ice. and Kate had to focus all her attention on driving just to keep the car on the winding road. Snow gathered on the blacktop, making it hard to keep track of the center divide.

He startled her by breaking the silence.

"Where are we?" He stared out the windshield, his eyes barely open. His head was still back against the headrest, sort of rolling around with the curves. "Where are we going?"

She didn't want to tell him the truth, and she didn't want to lie. *Distract him.*

"What's your name?"

He smiled, like he knew her game. "James."

"Okay, James, here's the thing. The accident was my fault. You're bleeding, from your mouth, from your head. You could be seriously hurt. I could be responsible if you died, for manslaughter or something."

He laughed, and winced.

"Look, I really appreciate the concern..." He left an opening for her to say her name.

"Kate."

"Kate, I smacked my head on the windshield when we hit. That's all. I'm good. I'm fine..." His voice trailed off, and he closed his eyes.

By his labored breathing, she knew he wasn't fine. Her father had pulled the same crap on her a year ago, insisting the pain in his chest was only gas, right before his heart attack.

"Don't you get it? You could be seriously messed up inside. You need to be checked out by a doctor."

"I'm not that messed up." A wide grin swept across his face. "It only hurts when I breathe."

"Great."

"I'm joking."

"You're not. That's the thing."

"Seriously, I'll be fine. I just need someplace to relax for a while, get some rest. I'll be good to go in the morning."

The headlights reflected road signs: Truckee 10 miles. It had all those little icons for gas, food, motels.

"If you could drop me...in Truckee, at the nearest motel.. that'd be good." He slouched, kind of melded with the seat and closed his eyes. "No hospitals. Promise me—no clinics, no doctors, no hospitals. You'll crucify me if you put me in a public position."

"What's that mean?"

He didn't respond.

"James?"

Still no response.

Kate felt a passing rush of fear.

"What are you doing up here, in a car like that, in the middle of winter? Where were you going?"

"I was on my way to Tiburon."

"You live in the Bay?"

"No." He opened his eyes, stared straight ahead.

"Where are you from?"

"I was coming from Boston."

"Where do you live?"

"Nowhere." He closed his eyes again and was out.

The silence was weighted. He was putting her between a rock and a hard place. He refused to go to a hospital, but if he was really hurt, had internal bleeding or something, he could die. And she would be responsible. *Oh, God...*

She started to feel edgy, and then the urge to get high. Just a few hits to relax, help her think. *Very bad idea.* If she had any brains, she'd just get rid of the stuff. But she didn't.

Okay, what to do next?

She glanced at him. His body was slack. His right arm lay over his stomach, and he held his ribs on his left side. His breathing was still loud and labored. Hospital or not, he needed a doctor.

The only doctor she knew was her primary care physician back in the Bay, who'd spent their entire last visit trying to convince her to exchange pot for Prozac to handle her "depression problem."

James shifted and started coughing and couldn't stop.

"Oh God, I am so sorry." Guilt consumed her.

"It was an accident." He managed to stop choking. "I'm okay." He sucked in air in great wheezing gasps.

"You're not okay. You need help."

"I don't. Just give me a minute." He started coughing again but swallowed it back.

"Damn it."

Oncoming headlights flashed across his face. His skin was so white. His eyes and cheeks were sunk into shadows. He had the same skeletal look her mother had the night she passed.

Panic rushed up like the thick flakes that smashed against the windshield. The reality of what was happening suddenly hit her. This man could die!

The headlights lit up the green road sign: Truckee Exit 5 miles. A second later, her high beams caught the blue hospital sign. "You need to be seen by a doctor, or nurse, or someone."

"No."

"Then tell me how to help you—the name of a friend to call or something—because I'm not just dropping you at a motel. I'll take you to a hospital before I do that."

"No!" He tried to straighten and recoiled, held his hand tightly against his ribs and rocked back and forth gently. "I said no hospitals."

"Then tell me what to do, James."

He stared out the front windshield. "Okay." He released a heavy, quivering breath. "I know someone. He's a doctor. He has a vineyard near Auburn."

"You have his number?"

"No. And he wouldn't be listed."

"Do you know where he lives? How to get there?"

He still stared out the front windshield. "I guess."

He continued to hack intermittently. Auburn was at least an hour away. The snow was falling at a steady clip and piling up on the road. It would surely slow her down. She glanced at him.

"It's extraordinary, isn't it?" He spoke in a throaty whisper. "It's like moving through a star field, gliding, weightless..." He closed his eyes again.

"James?" Something about his odd choice of words, or the spaced-out way he said them made Kate afraid of him going to sleep right then. "James! Stay awake. Open your eyes."

He didn't.

"James!"

His eyes shot open, and he bolted upright, drew in an audible breath and started coughing again. He finally stopped and sank back, holding his side as he sat panting.

"I can get us to Auburn from here, but you're going to have to tell me how to get to your friend's house once we're close."

He didn't respond.

"James. Stay with me. Talk to me." She caught a glimpse of a tired smile, and he opened his eyes but didn't say anything. "How ya doing? You okay?"

"Yeah." Headlights lit him up again, and she saw sweat trickle down the side of his face and onto his neck. His eyelashes were thick and long, and shrouded his eyes almost completely. His skin was still china-white, his thick lips virtually black against it. He looked like a haunted child.

"You gonna to make it all the way to Auburn?"

"Yeah." He gasped and coughed again, stopped and cleared his throat. "No problem. But he's more like near Placerville, I think..."

Kate wasn't convinced. "Is this doctor friend of yours near Placerville an actual doctor who works on real people?"

"Yeah." He smiled and winced. "He's a pediatrician, but I think that still qualifies him as a doctor."

"And he also makes wine."

"I don't know." He seemed to space out again, then half-laughed at some thought in his head. "I've known the man for fifteen years, and I don't really know much about him."

"So, you've known him since you were, like, five."

"Not exactly."

"How old are you?"

"Almost thirty."

"Wow. I never would have guessed. You have a baby face. You look a lot younger."

He shrugged and yawned.

"Hey. Stay awake, okay? I'm going to need directions."

"It'll take you at least an hour just to get to Auburn."

"How do you know that?"

"I used to come up here to ski."

"From where, Boston?"

He smiled again. "L.A. I used to live near L.A." He closed his eyes and seemed to drop out.

Kate tried to keep him talking.

"And what did you do in LA.?"

"I used to be a musician."

"I could have guessed that." She glanced at his huge hands. One lay casually over his hip, the other rested against his flat belly. "Are you famous? You look famous."

He rolled his head toward her, opened his eyes and narrowed them on her but didn't say anything.

She felt herself blush and fixed her eyes back on the road. "I mean, should I know you?"

"No. I'm in the background, in the studio mostly."

"What instrument do you play?"

He flashed a smile. "Most all of them."

"Have you been playing all your life?"

"My stepfather taught me to play the guitar when I was five." He spoke just above a whisper, as if telling a tale. "He was a violinist with the Boston Pops. My mom could pick the harmony out of a vacuum." He seemed to drift, like he was hearing her sing. "She had the most amazing ear, and perfect pitch. I mean *perfect*."

"Where are your parents now?"

"Dead." And he was back in the car with Kate.

"Mine, too. My dad died of a heart attack about a year ago. My mom, of cancer, November twenty-third, almost three months now." She shut her mouth and held her breath and swallowed back the lump in her throat.

"I lost my parents when I was thirteen." He stared out the windshield then continued softly. "Everyone told me it would hurt less with time. But the longing is still intolerable."

It *was* intolerable. It hurt *all the time*. Several times a day she thought of calling her mom. The impulse was always followed by that horrible empty realization no one was there to pick up the phone.

James drew in a wheezing breath. "'It's better to have loved and lost' my ass. It's best not to lose what you love. I'm sorry for your loss."

Kate crumbled. Tears spilled down her face, and she couldn't stop them. She felt him watching her and was too ashamed to even glance at him. She stared out the windshield at the ribbons of snow drift across the highway.

She managed to stop the tears, wiped her eyes on Stuart's old flannel shirt and glanced at James. His eyes were closed, and his body was still. Too still.

"James!"

He jerked awake, opened his eyes and narrowed them to focus on her. "Kate, I need to sleep now. Just for a while..." He blinked several times until his eyes stayed closed. "I'm okay. Really. The lights are so bright. I need to rest my eyes. Okay?"

"Okay." But it didn't feel okay. Kate was scared. Plan B was to take him to a hospital any time she felt it warranted. She looked at him. His breathing seemed quieter, though she could still hear it. As long as she could hear him breathing she figured it was okay to let him sleep, for a little while at least.

She focused on keeping the Blazer on the snowy highway. She stared straight ahead at the white dots streaking towards the car. It *was* like moving through a star field. She smiled.

But then flashes of James's car popped in her head. She saw the gold medallion on the hood of his Porsche crumple as it smashed into her left fender. She watched it burst into flames. And she saw his piercing green eyes narrow as he handed her the burning joint, like he was flipping her off with it.

You're such a jerk, Katie.

Tears filled her eyes and blurred her vision as she came up on the bright lights of Truckee. She tapped the brakes to slow through the congested area, and after a breathless instant the Blazer slowed. The tires crunched the wet snow on the highway through town, and then the noise dissipated as the snowpack became even again.

Shortly after passing through town it stopped snowing. Indigo light silhouetted the pines into black forest covered in whipped cream. Kate was swept up in its iridescent beauty. Then, coming round a curve just past Donner Summit, the snow-covered road hid a layer of black ice, and the Blazer went skidding across the highway out of her control.

"Don't hit the brake."

She had her foot on top of it but stopped when James spoke.

"Keep your hands on the wheel, but let it move into the slide."

She did.

"Hit the brake slow."

She did. The Blazer gripped, and Kate slowed to ten miles an hour six feet from the mountain wall on her right. She crawled along in the slow lane, and only when she felt in complete control did she look at James.

His eyes were closed. He looked like he was still sleeping.

"Surprisingly, you need to concentrate on the road when driving." He kept his eyes closed but flashed a cocky grin. "Don't look at me. I'm okay. We're okay. Just keep going."

She blushed, looked back out at the darkening highway and sped up a little. The car shuddered, battered by the strong wind. It resonated through the poorly sealed windows. James opened his eyes and sat up, but it seemed to take a lot of effort. He coughed for a moment then folded his arms across his chest and tucked his hands under them.

"Where are we? How long was I out?"

"Thirty minutes. We're about halfway to Auburn."

"Another forty-five or so, I think." He spoke softly.

The darkness outside crept inside Kate, and she touched the black of lonely. The wind had calmed. The highway was wet but no longer icy. Her ears began to plug, and pressure built

up between her eyes as they came down the mountain. James didn't seem to notice. He slept until they got off the highway at High Street in Auburn.

"What's happening?" He was groggy, shifted with a painful wince, tried to straighten but failed. He slouched back against the seat and sat there holding himself, dripping with sweat and trembling. "What's going on? Where are we?"

"We're at the Highway 49 junction in Auburn." She cracked open her window and idled at the bottom of the off-ramp. The smell of wet pine-soaked earth flooded into the car. "I need you to stay awake now. You have to tell me where to go from here. Highway 49 goes to Placerville, which is only about twenty minutes away."

James looked at her and nodded. "Okay." He ran his fingers through his hair and winced again, then held his huge hand back up against his side. "Take a left, go back under the freeway."

She did. She cruised slowly through town past the brightly lit gas stations and colorful fast food chains. Beyond the lights of Auburn it was almost night. The road was narrow and winding and spooky. Leaves and small branches blew across the pockmarked blacktop and seemed to strobe as they danced in the headlights.

"Is this vineyard before or after Placerville?"

He didn't respond. His eyes were closed again.

"James!"

"What?" He opened his eyes.

"Where am I going?"

He laughed. "Good question." She waited for him to continue but he didn't. He just stared straight ahead.

"I mean, how do we get to your friend's vineyard?"

He looked at her. "You want to go to Martin Risner's?" Then he looked back outside. "Man, I haven't been up to Paradise in ages."

She looked at him. He stared out the front windshield. He seemed a million miles away. His hair hung in his eyes and clung to his dark lashes. What she could see of his eyeball was literally black.

The idea she might never find his friend dawned on her, and with it came panic. He might not be a psycho killer, but he could be delusional, crazy.

"Gold-something road. Gold Dust...or...I don't remember." He closed his eyes and laid his head back. "I'm so damn tired. I just want to sleep..."

She passed a yellow highway sign showing a crossroad coming up on the right. Moments later, she slowed to read the small metal street sign that marked Gold Hill Road. Lightning flashed several times and lit up the small valley. She turned onto the two-lane.

The last bit of twilight revealed sweeping estate homes nestled in groves of oak and pine amidst rolling hills covered with grapevines. Lights sparkled through their windows in the distance and beckoned with warmth. Stone pillars and marble-columns graced the entrances of winding gravel drives.

A one-by-two-foot brass plaque was mounted on the stone wall of the third estate on the on the eastern slope of the small valley. The plaque was attached to the left pillar supporting a classic geometric art deco gate. Kate had to pull up the gravel drive and focus her headlights on the engraved six-inch letters to make out the word: *Paradise*. Thunder rumbled far off. Just under the brass plaque was a carved wooden sign that read: *Private Residence*.

Chapter Four

Martin Risner watched the towering redwoods sway against the matte grey sky outside. He counted seconds between the lightning flash and the sound of the thunder. Martin loved storms—the power, the drama, the rain. Had John shared his enthusiasm, they would be enjoying the storm together. Christ, they'd grown so old and boring. He looked through the telescope at some lightning cells dancing along the southern ridge.

The front gate buzzer sounded.

It couldn't be anyone for John's clinic—everyone in the area knew to use Muir in Auburn if there was an emergency after three. It had to be some idiots looking for wine-tasting who didn't bother to read the sign on the stone wall that said "Private Residence."

He ignored the first three rings, but after the fourth he went down the hall and pressed the intercom button.

"What is it?" He couldn't see who it was. The gate camera was still out. John had promised to look at it about a hundred times already. *Promises. Promises.*

"Martin, is that you? It's James Whren. Could you open the gate?"

His heart skipped a beat. *My Adonis? No. Couldn't be.*

The voice sounded strange—strained, far off. Besides, James hadn't used his father's last name since he'd left England.

"Who is this?"

"Martin, it's James...Logan. Could you please open the gate?"

"James?" He still couldn't believe it. "Is that really you?"

"Yes! Open the gate, Martin."

He pressed the release. It had to be some sort of joke. James had never just shown up. But he wasn't too concerned with letting whoever it was in—the cameras at the front of the house still worked. He could see who it was without ever having to open the front door. It would be wild if it *were* James. *My beautiful James.* The last time Martin had seen him was at Ian's funeral, almost two years ago. There had been some weird rumor going around about him after that. What was it?

He turned on the floodlights and lit up the front of the house like daylight. He had heard James was on a DreamWorks project at Apple in London. No. It was something else. Something stupid, and he'd dismissed it. Oh, well. He'd think of it later. He turned on the lights on the fountain in the center of the drive.

He stood in the foyer and watched a white Chevy Blazer approach on the security monitor. The windows were up and tinted so he couldn't see who was inside. He expected the car to stop when it came to the center circle, but it didn't. It kept coming, very slowly, and sideswiped the fountain. He heard metal creak and saw the left fender crumple. Martin stared at the screen in shock.

The car finally stopped. Then the horn started blaring.

He couldn't believe it. And that's when it hit him he wasn't watching TV.

Move. Move. Move.

He ran from the house and out to the car, and hesitated only a second until he noticed the form of a woman in the driver's seat then pulled the driver's door open.

A young woman sat behind the wheel. She had one hand on the horn, and the other cradled the face of a young man seemingly asleep in her lap. Upon closer examination, Martin saw the man was James.

She took her hand off the horn as Martin knelt beside to her.

"Are you Martin Risner?"

"Yes."

"Your friend needs help. I'm not sure he's breathing." She looked at him. Tears streaked her freckled cheeks. Flaming red hair tumbled over her shoulders and framed her chiseled, delicate face.

James opened his eyes suddenly and he gasped for air while he struggled to sit up, and would have fallen back onto her had she not helped him. He slouched in the passenger seat holding his left side, choking and struggling to breathe. He was very pale. His lips were purple, bordering on blue.

He stared at Martin blankly then looked back at the woman driving—glared at her, actually.

"Fuck! Why are we here, Kate? I can't stay here. We shouldn't be here. I thought you were going to drop me at a motel." Then he took a deep breath and started coughing again.

"I never said that. Look, I'm trying to help you—"

"You're not. You're making it complicated." His face contorted in pain as he started to get out of the car, but he kept moving with only a moment's hesitation. He got his legs out and onto the gravel drive...

And he just sat there.

Martin circled the car to get to him and saw John coming from the clinic toward them, his white lab coat whipping around his lanky frame.

"It's James Logan." Martin yelled as John approached. "Something happened to him."

James pulled himself out of the car, stood, and almost fell. Martin moved to help but James pushed him off. He leaned against the car, panting icy fog, holding one hand out to keep them at a distance while with the other he clutched his left side, all his attention focused on the simple act of breathing. He looked at Martin as if to speak. Then his eyes rolled back, and he slid against the car onto the ground, unconscious.

John ran over and knelt next to James as the woman came around the car and stood beside Martin. The instant John touched him, James woke and went ballistic.

"No! Get away!" He punched John in the chest with the base of his palm then slugged him in the jaw with a closed fist as he scrambled to get up.

Martin gasped as John's head snapped back, but in one fluid motion John pinned James against the front fender, grabbed his wrists and held them to the car on either side of his head.

"James! Calm down. It's me, John. Look at me."

James froze under John's vice-like grip. He trembled violently. His eyes were black, wide, and vacant.

"Get the fuck off me, or I'll fucking kill you." He spoke in a harsh whisper, but Martin heard him and was stunned. James had never been violent, possessed the soul of a pacifist, Martin was sure of it.

"James, *look at me!* I'm John. *You know me.* Relax." John released him, held his hands up in surrender. "I'm trying to help you out. Okay?"

James didn't respond. He sat with his back against the car, trembling and struggling to breathe, his hands still fisted at either side of his head. He stared at John, but not really *at* him.

More like through him, locked in some terrible place. His eyes rolled back in his head again, and when he blinked, tears fell.

"Hey! Stay with me, James. Look at me." John knelt in front of him. "Hey. Hey! Focus on me."

James looked at him then. Connected. His gaze darted to Martin, then the woman he'd called Kate, then back to John. He brought his arms to his sides and spread his fingers wide on the gravel drive.

"John? What are you doing here?"

John studied him. "Can you stand?"

James stared back at him blankly.

"James, listen to me. Focus on me."

He did.

"Martin and I are going to help you over to the house." John looked up at Martin. "There's no place for him to lie down in the clinic. We're going to have to take him to the guestroom. Get his left side, I'll get his right." He looked back at James as Martin took position. "Okay. I'm going to take your arm and put it around my neck. And Martin is going to do the same with your other arm. Ready?"

"Hey, Martin." James looked at Martin as he knelt down beside him. His stunning green eyes were now black marbles, and his cheeks were drawn, exaggerating the hollows and accentuating his square jaw. He looked older, more man than boy.

"Okay. Here we go. Ready?" John took James's hand and drew his arm around his shoulder then nodded at Martin to do the same.

James sucked in a gasping breath just this side of a scream as they helped him stand.

John stared at Kate as he guided them forward.

"What happened to him?"

James took a few small, drunken steps, but for the most part Martin and John had to carry him.

"We were in a car accident up near Tahoe." Kate moved out of their path and followed them. "He wouldn't go to a hospital. He wanted me to just drop him off at a motel, but I wouldn't so he told me to bring him here."

"Was he unconscious most of the time, or was he in and out?"

"In and out, but more out after a while."

"What was his longest period unconscious?"

"The half-hour before we got here."

James flannel shirt rippled in the fierce wind. He felt absolutely gaunt, easy to carry—surprisingly light, especially for dead weight. James was close to six feet, and had been an avid runner and surfer, a beautifully built athlete. What happened to him?

"It's going to be okay, James. You're going to be fine." It soothed Martin to repeat it endlessly as they headed for the house. The cold wind whistled through the trees, and before they made it to the front doors an icy rain started to fall. Martin felt James shivering.

"Did he vomit at all? Spit up blood." John continued the third-degree.

"He didn't throw up, but he spit up something, and it may have been blood. I couldn't see." Kate paced John and practically yelled her responses over the noise of the wind and rumbling thunder.

"We're almost there. You're going to be fine, James," Martin chanted as they dragged James through the doorway into the warm house.

They made their way through the foyer to the guestroom. John tossed aside the quilted maroon comforter, and they released James onto the double bed. His eyes were still open, but he looked dead, like he'd been dead for quite a while.

"You're okay now, James. John's going to fix you up."

James gave Martin a weak smile and closed his eyes.

John pulled the blanket over him.

"I need some things from the clinic. I'll be back in three minutes." He looked at Kate, then at Martin and left the room.

Kate stood by the massive art deco dresser with the huge round mirror in the middle, and it seemed as if she was part of that time, a figure in a Mucha print with her long, lean body and wild red hair gathering around her shoulders and cascading down her back. Martin knew she knew he was watching her. He stood near the foot of bed and waited for her to acknowledge him but she didn't. She just stared down at James.

"He is extraordinary-looking, isn't he?" he mocked. He knew it was a catty opening, but he found it irritating the way women reacted to James.

She finally responded. Her face was flushed, and Martin was sure she was blushing.

"I'm sorry about your friend. I didn't see his car. The accident was my fault. There's no way he could have stopped." She started crying, tears spilled down her cheeks. "I'm really so sorry." She went back to staring at James.

"Hang on a minute, girl. Kate, right?"

She nodded.

"Hey. That's why they call it an accident," Martin assured her. "And accidents happen all the time."

She looked at him with glassy chestnut eyes.

"I was high, Mr. Risner. I was smoking a joint."

Rage, compassion and regret consumed him, and Martin couldn't think of what to say. The only sound in the room was James's labored breathing. Martin flashed back to the memory of the cyclist flying over the hood of his BMW on his way home from yet another drunken Halloween in the Castro and shame encased him.

"It was an accident," he assured her again.

John came back right then and set a small black case and the iPad under his arm on the mission-style end table. James didn't stir as he sat on the bed, opened the case and pulled out a filled syringe. He set it on the table then turned to James, pulled the blanket down to his hips, unbuttoned his shirtsleeve and pushed it up his forearm.

"Son of a bitch."

He had Martin's attention instantly. John rarely cursed.

James's wrist was red and callused, the skin striped, as if by restraints. Even more disturbing was the long vertical cut on the inside of his forearm. The fat, jagged red scar ran from the base of his wrist halfway to his elbow and was just beginning to heal. John unbuttoned the other shirtsleeve and pushed it back. His other arm was equally disfigured.

Martin felt lunch rise in his throat, and he swallowed it back. Kate gasped and covered her mouth, staring wide-eyed down at James.

"These wounds are fairly recent, maybe a couple of weeks old. And they're not defensive wounds." John glared at Kate. "You know anything about this?"

Kate stared back at him and shook her head.

"I met him two hours ago, when he smashed into me."

The cuts were ugly, and fleshy. Martin was sure he was going to be sick.

"Why would James do something like that?"

"I don't know, Martin, but it looks like he was serious. I think your friend is in trouble."

It annoyed Martin how John phrased that. *Your friend*—like he hadn't known James for the last fifteen years, too.

John retrieved the syringe from the end table, took James's hand in his lap, found a vein then jabbed the needle in. Martin cringed. James didn't seem to notice. He was dead out.

Martin felt that familiar twinge of desire as he watched John unbutton James's shirt. He looked at Kate with a guilty grin. She glanced up at him and gave him a soft smile. She was really quite attractive in that homegrown sort of way. Maybe late twenties, early thirties. She wore a black woolen sweater that offset her copper-red hair, and tight jeans with holes in the knees. They were tucked into brown furry boots. Irish ancestry would be an easy guess.

Her expression returned to horror, and all the color drained from her face as she watched John open James's shirt. Martin turned his attention back to James knowing it was going to be bad.

A three-inch, curved gash along his left side was still oozing blood but had started to clot. Areas across his stomach were bruised, purple and swollen. Every muscle was still well defined, but he was very thin, dropped a good fifteen to twenty pounds since Martin had last seen him. His skin was taught over his stacked ribs but a lump protruded from under his flesh at the base of his ribcage. It was disgusting.

"Oh, my God. He's a mess," Kate whispered. She drew in a quick breath, her soft mouth quivered; she blinked and tears slid down her cheeks.

"I can wrap his ribs, and that'll take the pressure off his lungs." John examined James as he spoke, lifting his patient's eyelid and shining a small penlight into his eye. James stared ahead blankly. "It's the concussion I'm concerned about." He lifted the other eyelid. "Concussions are tricky. Bleeding in or around the brain can cause seizures, coma." The penlight lit up a thin ring of green around the enlarged pupil. John released the lid, and it closed.

"Martin?" James blinked heavy-lidded. "Am I dreaming?"

"No." Martin moved closer, took his hand. "I'm here, James."

"James, do you know where you are?" John sounded concerned, and that concerned Martin.

James looked at him, confused, like a child on waking from a nightmare.

"John?" His eyes opened wide. "What is this place? Where am I? What's happening?"

"You're at Paradise, in our guestroom. Do you remember coming here with your friend tonight?" John glanced at Kate. She gave James a quick smile as he looked at her.

"Kate? Shit. What are you doing here? You shouldn't be here." He pulled his hand from Martin's and tried to sit up, started choking and collapsed back against the pile of pillows.

"It's okay, James, just relax." John pressed his shoulder to the bed. "You need to be still, flat on your back. You've got a broken rib, which is why you're having trouble breathing, and what looks like a pretty serious concussion. We're going to get you over to Muir, get you stabilized."

"No. I can't go to a hospital." He stared at Kate. "That must be why I told you to bring me here..."

"I can't do a CT here. There could be swelling—"

"I don't care. No hospitals. *Please*." He focused on John a minute then fixed his half-lidded gaze on Martin. "And no one knows I'm here. You get it, Martin? No gossip. No bullshit."

"I get it, James. I won't tell anyone you're here."

James narrowed his eyes on Kate again. "You can't stay here. You have to leave."

Tears streaked her face. John glanced at her, then shot Martin a quick look before turning back to his black case on the nightstand.

"I'm giving you Fentanyl for the pain, but keeping the dose low because of the head injury." John retrieved a small vial, stuck a syringe in and filled it. He turned back to James with the filled needle in hand.

"OD me." James whispered it, but Martin was sure of what he heard and it chilled him.

John hesitated only a moment then pulled James's hand into his lap, located a vein in his forearm and inserted the needle.

"This should help you relax." John pressed the plunger then retracted the syringe.

James's hand slide from John's lap on to the bed. He lay slouched against the pillows, casually observing. Then he closed his eyes and laughed at some private joke. His body went slack, and his breathing became smooth and even for the first time that evening.

John pulled his iPad from the endtable and began filling in the fields of a new chart.

Martin stared down at James. He looked almost normal, like he was just sleeping. Sort of. His face was too white, lips too purple. He hadn't looked like that at Ian's funeral. He'd been built—tan, gorgeous as always. They didn't really talk then, just that quick handshake in the chapel. James had been across from him at the gravesite, rocking out to some tune in his head. The man was possessed. He was the silent center of attention. Martin wondered if anyone else had caught him fingering.

"My uncle Calvin killed himself." Kate hadn't moved. She stood against the deco dresser and spoke just above a whisper. "I was the first one in the bathroom. I was seven. I remember because it was right after my birthday party. I was going to show everyone what a big kid I was taking a bath all by myself."

She didn't take her eyes off James. John stayed engrossed in his work. He did not acknowledge her. Martin hated that. John did it to him all the time.

"I'm sorry," was all Martin could think of to say.

John set the iPad down, took James's elegant hand, felt his chafed wrist for a pulse and counted. He checked James's eyes again with his penlight, then picked up his iPad and made notations. Martin stood there feeling useless and stupid and in the way.

Then he remembered the rumor. It was a few days after the funeral. Who was it that told him James was busted for speed at Heathrow on his way back to L.A.? Martin hadn't given it a lot of thought at the time. It seemed absurd. Gossip abounds in the music industry. He figured James was just totally immersed in the studio. It was easy to lose James. It happened often.

"Well, that's about all I can do right now." John pulled the blankets up and stroked the hair from James's face gently. Martin caved. He loved the softer side of John.

"Is he going to be okay?" Kate asked in a small voice.

"I have no idea. I don't know the extent of his injuries. We'll give it till morning, monitor his vitals. If he doesn't respond the way he should, then he goes to Muir. He's probably better off here right now. It'd take an hour or more to get to Auburn in this rain, and the winding roads wouldn't help him any. He needs to be still. Warm, dry, and still."

John stood, gathered his empty syringes off the end table, capped and pocketed them then picked up his iPad and tucked it under his arm.

"I have to find the power pack for the heart monitor, and the portable defib, and look up the right seizure medications. I may be a while. Call me if you notice anything weird."

"What do you mean, 'weird?'"

"If he stops breathing, Martin. Call me if he stops breathing."

Jerk. Forget it. "What's the likelihood he'll stop breathing?"

"I don't know. I'm a doctor, not God. He just needs to be still, flat on his back and he'll probably be fine. Don't worry about it." John looked at Kate. "I'd be more worried about his friend here. Kate, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"You alright? Were you hurt in the accident?"

"No."

"Well then, Martin will look after you. He can fix you a strong cup of green tea." He glanced at Martin. "James should be in and out, but if he does wake he's likely to be disoriented, like he was earlier, maybe worse. Don't let him leave here."

Martin stared at him dumbfounded. "And exactly how am I supposed to stop him if he insists on leaving?"

John waved toward Kate. "*She* could probably stop him in the condition he's in. For Christ sake, Martin, figure it out." He glared at Martin and shook his head.

How condescending could he possibly get? Martin hated when John talked to him like he was an idiot. And he fought the urge to flip him off as John left the room.

Chapter Five

Kate knew Martin was staring at her. She felt stupid, small. If she looked at him he'd see what she was. So she kept her attention on James.

He looked angelic, his thick dark hair tousled around his white face. He really was extraordinary, just as Martin had said. Maybe that's why she wanted to stay, why it was so important for her to make sure he was taken care of.

And maybe it was because she'd caused the accident while indulging and would burn in hell for eternity if he died. She shivered at the thought and would have crossed herself except for Martin Risner. *What is his problem?* He just kept staring at her.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" Martin spoke softly, his delivery gentle, as if she were fragile.

She didn't look up. "No. Thank you."

"He's going to be fine, Kate. John will take good care of him."

She nodded.

"You didn't have to bring him here. You could have dropped him at a motel and driven away. But you didn't. You've done all you can to help him. Your conscience should be clear."

"Right. He'd be in Tiburon, safe and sound, with his very expensive sports car, by now if it weren't for me."

"Maybe." Martin flashed the faintest smile. "But a mile down the road he might have hit a jackknifed truck and died."

Kate looked at him then and smiled. "Are you always this philosophical, or are you just trying to make me feel better?"

"A bit of both." The smile that had swept across his face was gone. He studied her. "How do you know he was going to Tiburon?"

"He told me in the car on the way here. He said he was coming from Boston on his way to Tiburon, and that he didn't live anywhere. But I really doubt he's homeless."

"He lives in Zuma Beach, near LA. At least he did. What else did he say to you?"

"Not much. He was pretty out of it. His car got totaled. Instantly." She flashed again on the silver hood of his Porsche crumpling as it smashed into her. "Then it blew up. *God...*"

"What kind of car was he driving?"

"A little sports car, a Porsche Spyder, I think. Why?"

Martin sat on the low center of the dressing table, two feet from where she stood.

"James had a hybrid Jeep of some sort. He never owned a Porsche, not that I know of, anyway."

"He told me it wasn't his. He said it was a friend's, and she'd got it from a divorce settlement so she wouldn't care that it got wrecked. But I care." She took a quivering breath, released it slowly and suddenly felt exhausted, completely spent. She moved away from Martin to an armchair near the bay window and dropped into it, sinking deep into the soft cushions.

"I'm going to make us both some tea." Martin spoke softly. "Don't give me an argument. Sit and rest. It'll take me five minutes."

She nodded. "Thank you."

"I'm just down the hall. I'll be right back."

She sat in the big bulky chair and watched James sleep, listened to him breathe. His body was draped over the pillows, his head sunk into them. His arms were slack, his huge hands lay open on the bed at his sides.

He was exquisite.

She wondered what it would be like to be with him, to have every woman want to be her. She wondered what it would be like to *be* him, to look like that, to be noticed and desired, to have everyone want her.

Kate leaned her head back and stared up at the thick redwood beams that supported the wood paneled ceiling. Common Katie Conner. Just Kate. Too tall. Too thin. Too flat. Only a hint of the wild in her was revealed by her long red hair. She closed her eyes, listened to the rain, to James breathing. Why couldn't she be beautiful? God, she wished she were beautiful.

Kate opened her eyes and watched John clip closed the elastic bandage he'd wrapped around James's ribs. He ran his hand over the bandage, checking and smoothing it.

She straightened and stretched then perched on the edge of the overstuffed chair. She noticed steam on the mirror before she saw the extra-large Mickey Mouse mug sitting in the center of the dressing table.

John sat on the edge of the bed timing James's pulse then checked his eyes again, and then took his iPad off the nightstand and made notations. He didn't seem to care, or even notice, that Kate was in the room. She was afraid to say anything for fear he'd kick her out.

He glanced at her over the top of the tablet as he typed. A moment later, he shut it off and spoke to her.

"It's raining. It's getting late. You're tired, which makes for dangerous driving. Martin and I talked it over. You're welcome to spend the night, get some rest and you can leave in the morning."

Anxiety gave way to exhaustion. She gave him a grateful smile.

"Thank you." It took all her will to rise as John tucked the iPad under his arm and escorted her out of the guestroom.

Fatigue possessed her as John led her through the immaculate modern French music room with the grand piano, white Queen Anne couches and sleek ebony tables, then through the marble bathroom, the linen closet, and eventually, into a cozy study. Windows extended floor-to-ceiling between huge squared beams of redwood every foot or so along the two exterior walls. Bookshelves lined the interior walls. The shelved books were tightly aligned, but many others were stuffed haphazardly on top of the compact rows. Someone had brought her dufflebag from her Blazer and set it on the couch.

"Martin moved your car to the clinic's parking and saw your bag, thought you'd like a change of clothes." John seemed embarrassed as he nodded toward Kate's stomach then looked away.

She glanced down at her black knit sweater and noticed the sticky mess in the center where James's head had been, remembered his bloody forehead and thought she might throw up.

"This couch is great." John nodded at the tan leather sectional that combined a three-cushion divan with an attached chaise. "Very comfortable for sleeping. Trust me. I should know." He gave her a droll grin. "You can use the throw on the back of the couch, or there are blankets in the cedar chest over there if you need them. Feel free to take a shower. If you get hungry, the kitchen is through the living room to your left, just past the dining room."

"Thank you. I really appreciate this. I am very tired." Kate spoke softly, as if not to disturb the quiet of the room. "I think I'll just shower and go to sleep."

"I'm in my office, in the clinic across the drive, but Martin's around. We'll be upstairs later if you need us." He paused. "I'll be keeping an eye on James. He'll be fine. Get some rest. Goodnight." He dipped his head slightly and left.

"Goodnight."

Kate took off her sweater and shivered, suddenly chilled. She balled the soiled knit and shoved it deep in her dufflebag, then went to the windows and looked out. The rain had stopped. The storm was breaking up. Grey clouds were giving way to a black sky and the rising moon. It was almost full, and lit up the small valley and the rows and rows of grapevines in shades of blue. Though it was beautiful, it felt remote, lonely, with so few people living so far apart.

The moon played hide-and-seek with the clouds. It started to rain again then stopped, then poured for about a minute and stopped again. Flashes of James popped into her head—when he'd looked at her that first time at the rest stop; in her car after he'd pulled it to safety in the Mobil lot, angelic, asleep in bed a few rooms away.

God, she needed sex, or at least contact. Stuart was a year ago. She never even thought about him anymore. Why was it that so many of the men she'd dated turned out to be self-absorbed egomaniacs looking for a mother who could double as their toy? She wondered if James fit that mold and felt angry as the idea took hold. He was probably just like every other guy.

He sure didn't seem like every other guy.

Grab me, kiss me, save me.

She just couldn't picture it. *You're such a jerk, Katie.*

She wanted to stop thinking. She longed to sleep the sleep of the dead but felt a need to shower more than anything right then.

A mirrored wall reflected the stylish Grecian bathroom—and her thin, shapeless form. She turned away, then got a towel from the linen closet and threw it over the tinted shower door before she turned on the water. She stripped and stood naked on the cold marble floor, kept her eyes from the mirrored wall as she waited for the water to get hot, then stepped under the blazing stream and tried to sear off the layers of her most recent sins.

Chapter Six

Martin got his favorite Goofy mug from the cupboard, put it on the granite countertop and waited for the coffee to brew. He stood by the sink and stared across the brightly lit kitchen through the glass-domed breakfast nook. It was completely dark outside, exaggerating the warmth within, and he reveled in it for a moment.

Muffled voices and spontaneous bursts of laughter surrounded him while he watched the coffee drip into the carafe. The rich bitter/sweet aroma took him back to that café in the Village, all those years ago. He'd sat on a splintered bench, banging on the piano. James perched on a rickety stool strumming his acoustic so fast Martin could hardly keep up. They worked together a lot back then. James was more of a fixture in their lives back in the glory days, the days before sickness.

He leaned back against the hard stone counter and recalled John teasing that, together, Martin and James reminded him of Donald Duck and *Peanuts'* Schroeder. Those were the days when John would be jealous.

He filled his cup and leaned against the counter again, cradled the warm mug next to his soft belly. Those were the days...

Martin heard screaming. It took him a moment to realize it was in the present. James was screaming. He spilled his coffee and nearly fractured the mug as he set it on the hard counter then ran down the hall and into the guestroom to find James thrashing around in bed.

"No! No! Stop!" were the only intelligible words Martin could hear through the screaming.

"James!" He sat on the bed and tried to wake him. *"James, wake up!"*

James slugged at him, throwing wild punches in the air. *"No! Get off me! Get away!"*

He clambered off the bed, fell onto the floor and scrambled on hands and knees to press himself up against the wall by the bay window. He huddled in the corner, his hands braced wide on the floor, trembling to the point of convulsing. His eyes were open, but it was clear he wasn't seeing Martin.

Martin slowly moved around the bed toward him.

"Stay away!" James ordered in a panicked whisper. *"Don't touch me."* He was breathless, wide-eyed and clearly terrified. *"Why are you doing this? Why are you torturing me?!"*

"James! It's Martin. I'm not hurting you. James, wake up!"

He knelt in front of him. James recoiled, like he was about to strike him but froze. So did Martin.

James's eyes were black glassy holes, riveted on Martin. Then, suddenly he connected. Martin felt a tangible pulse of recognition between them. James unclenched his shaking fist and lowered his hand to his side.

"Sorry. Sorry. You okay? Sorry." He gave a quick laugh. He rubbed his cheeks and chin, ran his hand through his hair and looked around the room, shivering uncontrollably.

Martin stood, pulled the comforter from the bed and gave it to him. James wrapped it around him and pushed up against the wall until he was standing.

"I know how this looks." He flashed a grin that bordered on mad. "But I'm not crazy." His eyes drifted past Martin to where John and Kate now stood near the doorway. "I'm not. It was just a bad dream. I'm not crazy."

He looked crazy. He stood plastered against the wall, clutching the comforter around him like a shroud. His eyes were still wide, black, and he hardly blinked.

He stared at Kate. She was dripping wet, her delicate nipples protruding under a sheer deep-red camisole that was minimally tucked into her jeans.

John stepped past her, took his black case from under his arm and put it on the dressing table.

"You need to lie down, James."

James stayed glued to the wall.

"You don't get it, do you?" John spoke gently but precisely. "You have at least one broken rib. If you dislodge it again, it could puncture your lung. You have a type-three concussion. If you have swelling around your brain and you traumatize it again, even slightly—maybe move your head around too fast—you will die instantly." John studied him. "Anything but rest is likely to kill you. You get the picture? Do you care?"

Ohh. Watch out. Martin's tension mounted. John was very edgy.

James and John were fixed on each other, exchanging some hidden dialog. Martin tried to decipher what was going on, exactly. He had a nagging suspicion it wasn't good.

"You don't get it." James narrowed his eyes to black slits. "Three weeks ago, I left a maximum security state hospital in Scotland—without permission. I'm wanted back there, and in the States now, too." He gave a quick, disdainful laugh. "But I'm never going back there. Not ever again. No one can make me go back there. I'll meet them in hell before I ever let them take me back there. Get the picture?"

Rain drummed the windows. It was the only sound in the room. Martin was speechless. What James had just said was incomprehensible

James laughed, low and hollow, filled with irony and anger. Then he ran his fingers through his hair and looked around the room.

"I shouldn't be here. I have to get out of here."

"You've got nowhere to go tonight, James." John kept his tone gentle but clinically commanding. "You need to rest."

James stayed against the wall, staring wide-eyed at John, and shook his head.

"Who knows where you are right now but us?"

James glanced at Martin, then Kate, then back at John. "No one."

"And what are the odds of someone—anyone—figuring it out overnight?"

A conceding smile spread across James's face. He looked down.

"You need to rest, James. You're safe here."

James glared at him with disdainful amusement.

"Safe. Right." He gave another quick laugh and spoke to himself. "I'm fucked. In a world this wired, how far is gone? They're going to find me. It doesn't matter where I go." He looked Martin in the eyes. "They're going to find me. And then I'm fucked."

He shuddered, looked away and laughed again, and kept laughing. He sounded out of control, maniacal. Finally, he stopped to catch his breath; his knees gave way, and he slid to the

floor, buried his face in his hands and cried, his long fingers gripping his hair and digging into his head.

Martin stood three feet from him, uncertain of what to say or do. He'd never seen James break down before. He'd never seen any man come apart like that. He shot John a glance, but his partner's entire attention was fixed on James.-

Martin went to within arm's reach and knelt in front of him slowly.

"It's okay, buddy..." He touched James's shoulder, but was shoved way—hard. Martin fell back and landed on his butt. He sat, stunned and feeling stupid.

"Sorry. You okay?" Again James's grin touched insanity. "I'm okay. Really. Don't worry about me." He laughed again. "Sorry. I'm not crazy. I'm not." His breathing came in quick quivers. His face was tear-streaked and chalk-white. His eyes darted to John and then to Kate and stayed on her for a moment. Then he looked back down. "Please, go. Leave me alone." He drew his knees to his chest.

Martin looked up at John, and John nodded. Kate was still fixed on James.

James stared at the floor. "*Get out!*"

John gripped Kate's arm lightly and guided her towards the door. Martin got up and followed them down the hall toward the kitchen as he tried to control his breathing and slow his pounding heart.

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