

Sisterhood

Deleyna Marr



Heart Ally Books
Camano Island, Washington

Sisterhood
Second Edition

Copyright © 2014, 2012 by Deleyna Marr
www.deleyna.com

Quotes from *Undisturbed by Reality* used with permission from
Annalise Phenix.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book
or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. Any resemblance to
actual persons living or dead is accidental.

Cover created by the brilliant artist Eithne' O'Hanlon.

Published by:
Heart Ally Books
26910 92nd Ave NW C5-406, Stanwood, WA 98292
Published on Camano Island, WA, USA
www.heartallybooks.com

ISBN-13: (epub) 978-0-9853740-0-6
ISBN-13: (paperback) 978-1-63107-004-4
Library of Congress Control Number: 2012942100

for Dreamer

Chapter 1

Listen, my children, I've a tale to tell
Of wishing on pennies in deep wishing wells,
Of sticks and stones and ice cream cones
And tolling Cathedral bells.
— From An Ode to Childhood, Annalise Phenix

[Koishikawa Korakuen Garden, Tokyo, Japan — Marie]

Marie knew the willow-green dress was wrong the moment she saw the blood-red bridge. She stepped to her left, off the path, and vanished into the overhanging willow branches. Thomas was an idiot if he thought that bridge was a good location for a swap.

Too open. She'd make an easy target.

Fear would get her killed.

Opening a mental closet, she shoved the terror beast inside and slammed the door, bolting the lock. She went through the steps for cleaning and loading her gun, allowing the familiar rite to calm her. She repeated the exercise until her psionic abilities were under control.

She searched the surrounding area psionically. Lots of people. That could be good.

When the contact changed the meeting place from the Full Moon Bridge to the Tsutenkyo she hadn't realized how utterly void of cover she would be. Short of diving head-first into the rocks below, the only way on or off that bridge was exposed.

A bullet-proof vest would be good right about now. Wouldn't draw much more attention. Oceans of green in this garden, and the contact picks a red bridge.

So much for being invisible.

A couple strolled the path only a foot from her, their minds too full of each other to notice anything. A woman crossed the bridge pushing a baby carriage and Marie smelled the faint scent of jasmine that always reminded her of Dana. A group of school children explored the distant rice paddy. Her contact was just entering the garden.

There was a threat, but she couldn't get the direction. Perhaps it was just her own fear echoing back at her. She didn't want to get in a shoot-out around this many people.

Time to move. She had to be in place before the contact arrived.

Standing on the bridge, feeding the fish in the pond far below, she sensed the focused attention of those nearby. Their minds echoed with images of how picturesque she looked. She resisted the urge to hunch over the rail to make a smaller target.

Despite the tingling along her left temple, she couldn't find the threat. Of course, if the shooter were a psi-nil, he'd be imperceptible.

She followed her contact's movements through the traditional Japanese garden, could see him in her mind as clearly as the swarming koi below. She sprinkled the last grains from a small paper sack onto the silent sea of hungry mouths just as the well-dressed man moved to stand at her shoulder. He was a hyped-up ball of nerves, his head springing from side to side, watching for any sign of attack.

Amateur.

He spoke the right code phrase, an inconsequential greeting in Japanese. His voice was low, soft, his tone even and respectful, but his thoughts were clouded, paranoid.

Concerning.

She crumpled her empty sack.

The contact bowed and traded his full bag for hers before dashing away down the steep slope.

Stupid amateur.

She pocketed the bag and strolled down the opposite side of the bridge. Her right hand slipped into the false pocket she'd sewn in her skirt. Her fingertips brushed the textured grip of the gun she wore strapped to her thigh.

She tasted the moist air in an attempt to expand her range, locate whoever was targeting her. Jasmine again, and to her right, a psionic emptiness.

Marie!

Marie heard someone scream her name inside her head. She knew the voice, knew the terror.

And she knew Dana's scream came from the other side of the planet.

Time slowed. With a practiced motion, she whirled, ducked and came up, gun in hand, her eyes locating the attacker's weapon just as the blinding flash exploded.



[Los Gatos, CA, USA — Dana]

Marie!

I woke, heart leaping after the fading vision. She wasn't dead. She couldn't be dead. I'd know if Marie was dead.

Donald grumbled awake. "Dana, go back to sleep."

The nightmare wove an inescapable spell, the images too real, too vivid. I sat on the edge of the bed, fingers clawing the mattress.

Breathe. My breaths came in tiny sniffs like a fish thrown onto land. I stared into the dark searching for another glimpse of Marie. I had to get under control, calm down, focus my abilities, then maybe I could reach Marie. Help her.

My husband switched on the lamp. He put on his glasses and squinted at me with his clinical microscopic gaze. "Did you take your medication tonight?"

I winced at the light. "Apollina gives it to me every night."

I'd sketched Donald once, early in our marriage, enjoying his clean form of toned muscle. I'd played with his light Germanic coloring, captured the marble in his hazel eyes. The picture disappeared from my studio during one of his affairs.

He placed his hand on my upper arm and drew me into the emotional icebox of his embrace. "You should be sleeping. I'll order another blood workup. If the dosage is too low...."

I pulled away. "No need. It was just a nightmare. I'll make some hot cocoa and read for a few minutes."

Cheerful, smile cheerfully. My lips twitched. Traitors.

Donald studied my expression until he seemed convinced and lay back down. "Wake me if you need me."

"Don't worry. I'll be fine."

I went down to my studio. Safe inside, I leaned on the closed door and fought to catch my breath. I didn't want him to check my blood levels. He'd see I didn't have any drugs in my system. He would realize I'd caught on that they weren't anti-depressants, but anti-psychotics.

My husband thinks I'm crazy.

Either that or he's using meds to keep me from discovering his latest affair.

Two days of ditching the pills and the fog in my mind was on the edge of lifting. Clarity ebbed and flowed like the tide, wafting through my world playing hide-and-seek with reality. How many days before I could think?

Desperate to capture the vision's images on canvas before they slipped away, I paced my sanctuary and tried to control my breathing. The room was an artistic space complete with high ceilings, dark paneling, and rich red leather furniture: an elegant cage.

Marie. I sensed her, smelled the familiar scent of roses. Distant. Guarded.

She wasn't dead, but she wasn't sharing, either. My heart rate returned to normal.

Setting aside the sketch I'd been working on earlier, I put a tall canvas on the easel and adjusted the track lighting to center me in an illuminated pool, banishing the darkness to the edges of the room and the night outside floor-to-ceiling windows.

Glass. Broken glass was the first image to capture, like a shot had pierced the psychic wall separating us.

Marie, Lara and I had been able to experience each other's emotions since we met in college, but life pulled us apart, and I'd respected their privacy. I hadn't noticed when Donald's medication dulled my gift, but now that wall was shattering.

Using a pencil, I drew the breaking point in the upper right hand corner of the canvas, separating the remaining portions into shards, a technique I'd learned glancing through Marie's comic books.

I sketched for hours. Just after dawn, I heard Donald wake. I locked the door, moved the easel away from the windows, lay down on the sofa, and pulled a blanket over me.

The wood floors creaked, then stopped. He paused outside my door. The handle rattled. I waited. Listening. Barely breathing. He stepped away and I heard the sounds of him leaving the house. I watched him come to the window. Let him think I'd fallen asleep in the comfort of my studio. That wasn't unusual.

The car pulled away, and I heard Apollina getting breakfast.

I returned to my drawing.

In one section, I'd drawn a mass of hungry koi, their all-consuming mouths open, snapping at nothing. Another held my best friend's face, frozen in the act of turning toward her assailant. Still another held the gun.

Had I known anything about guns, the level of detail would have made sense. Instead, the realism of that gun heightened my feeling of having been possessed.

The black sketch that filled the canvas was alien to me. Had she seen him? I desperately wanted to put hope into the picture, but felt little. The threat remained. My friend was in danger, and somehow this vision held a key, otherwise, why had our connection chosen this instant to return?

Apollina knocked, and I opened the door so she could bring in my breakfast. "Good morning, Dana." Her voice was a gloss of cheer that did little to hide her concern.

There is not a bit of plump on our housekeeper. I've never seen her work out, but she must. I'm surprised Donald has never hit on her. He goes for red-heads, but then Apollina is a little older than his usual. He also tends to like women he can control. Her teal eyes hold too much intelligence for Donald, no matter how sultry her French accent.

"Interesting drawing." She held the tray balanced on one lean hip while she examined my work.

"Just leave that on the coffee-table."

"Dr. Rosenthal made me promise I'd watch you take your medicine. He said you had a nightmare again last night." Her expression was tight, as if my husband's name was bitter.

"It was nothing." I put the pill in my mouth, followed by a long drink of orange juice.

Her head angled towards the easel. "That doesn't look like nothing."

I stuck out my tongue. "There, happy?"

She narrowed her eyes. "No. I'd be happy if you'd go out and breathe fresh air."

"Not today."

She left and I spat the pill into the sink, watching it vanish down the drain before returning to my drawing.

A tranquil Japanese garden filled one shard of the drawing. It reminded me of a place I'd visited often with Marie and Lara, only this area was more wild, the chasm beneath the bridge was deep.

The drugs were still in my blood, urging me to set the picture aside, lulling me with the promise of sleep.

My nerves ached for the remembered harmonic link with my friends that had been both beauty and nightmare before I married Donald. Before Marie joined SciTech. Before Lara became a witch.

Before Kevin vanished.

Kevin would have believed me. He knew I wasn't crazy. Kevin was psi.

Like me.

Kevin never doubted me. But then he'd vanished. SciTech had transferred him overseas. Donald said he'd heard the job was a cover, that Kev had been admitted into a psych ward. Wherever he was, Kevin wasn't coming back and Donald had always been there. Deliberate, solid, philandering Donald.

The koi in my picture should have been iridescent with shades of red, orange, and yellow, but I'd drawn them in black and white — the way Marie processed the world.

Hours later, exhausted from the furious sketching, all the picture lacked was meaning. Had Marie been shot? Why was my best friend a target?

I stepped back and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror: disheveled, hair askew, dressing gown coated in a fine layer of chalk dust.

If I wasn't careful, I'd be locked away like Kevin. The last time I'd tried to divorce Donald, he'd threatened to have me committed. Even through the drug-induced haze, I'd known I was trapped unless I had proof. Donald always followed through on his threats.

Swallowing the bile of that thought, I went upstairs and dressed to face the day that was mostly past, and returned to my studio. The mirror showed a sparkle in my eyes, a hint of Marie's spirit. The three of us had shared that fire, and Kevin had sworn to protect us. I wouldn't be able to hide that spark once it flamed.

Some people talk of seeing auras. I don't see auras, I smell them. In my experience, psionics is not a sixth sense. It heightens the first five senses, most of all smell. And the

pine-scented breeze that swirled around me smelled like Kevin, reminding me of an autumn forest shrouded in fog.

The phone rang and I shivered. It might not be logical, but ... think of the devil and he would appear.

"Kev." I choked his name into the phone.

"You haven't lost your touch." His laughter rustled like aspens.

A hundred questions caught in the bottleneck of my throat. I stared at the phone with my mouth opening and closing like a starving koi.

The silence lingered.

I fought to sort through my emotions, distracted by his tentative mental embrace. I glanced at the drawing of a warm forest glade I'd hung over the hearth, the trees so like Kevin's eyes. "I didn't think I'd hear from you again." My voice was a whisper. It should be strong with the force of lost years, but the fear of answers I might not want strangled my words.

No, I didn't want to know where he'd been.

"I'm sorry," he said at last.

I wanted to be angry, should be angry, but the tenderness in his words cut to the lonely part of my heart. I could almost feel him, sense his protectiveness. I missed the safety of having him near, longed to lean on his shoulder and spill out all of my frustration and fear. "Why are you calling me? I'm married."

"I know. I won't offer congratulations."

"No."

"I'm calling because you're in danger."

"Marie is, not me."

"No, both of you — all three of you are in danger."

"From who?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I've got suspicions. I need you to promise me you'll stay with Don for a while longer."

He'd know if I lied. "You know my husband?"

"Don't change the subject. I don't have much time."

"What danger?" I fiddled with a bit of charcoal.

"I can't tell you on the phone. I'll make sure Marie is safe, then go after Lara. If you stay put, I know you'll be protected. You're safe with Don."

"You've decided to go back to being our protector?"

"Hard to believe, but I've never stopped."

Glancing down, I was surprised to find my hand covered in black from the charcoal. I put the phone on my shoulder and washed my hands at the wet bar. "You don't know what my marriage is like. He's had one affair after another. He's been keeping me drugged, Kev. I looked up the meds he's been giving me. It was an anti-psychotic. I'm done. I'm getting out before he figures out I can think again and has me committed."

"Please. Stay."

The warm light of sunset was fading, lending a bloody glow to the finished picture.

Donald was late, if he even was at work.

I let all of my frustration and confusion flow through the link, letting Kevin taste the loneliness of his disappearance, feel how I'd fallen for Donald, believing he could know me in time. Let him see the years I'd spent looking for closeness. All of my pain poured into my friend's open heart.

Kevin accepted the sensations I was projecting, took them and refused to be swayed. "I know this is hard. I know you'll make your own decisions, but I'm begging you to trust me."

"I can't stay here, Kev. I have to get out. I'm free now. Once he realizes, he'll find another way to control me. I may not get another chance."

"Trust me and stay with Don." Kevin's tone was tight. "I have to go."

The line was dead.

I sat, listening to the house creak, holding the phone to my heart until Donald's familiar grip on my shoulder stopped my heartbeat.

Chapter 2

The best known cases of psychic linking are twins. Twins are often capable of echoing each other's thoughts, as if the very fabric of their brains were one.

Mythologically, the strongest psychics occur in threes, usually female. Adding a third seems to create a harmonic resonance, enhancing the abilities of all three members of the triad.

Our study proposed to isolate the genes responsible for linking, and engineer a triad, bringing psychic phenomenon out of the realm of mysticism and into the laboratory. Highlighting this distinction, the term "psionics" was used to refer to the measurable, provable, scientific manifestations of psychic phenomena.

Dr. Petra Michalak, "An Introduction to Psionics"

[Los Gatos, CA, USA — Dana]

I leapt to my feet. How long had Donald been there? Had he heard anything? My pounding heart made up for the beats it had lost when he touched me. "I didn't hear you come in."

"You were on the phone." He was using his work voice, the one he used to talk to clients, the one he used to make it clear to crazy people that he didn't think they were insane.

I tried to remember what I had said to Kevin. Too much. Donald had heard too much. I walked across my studio, putting the phone on the charger and space between us. The

easel formed a flimsy barrier. He had never hurt me physically, but I knew his response would be unpleasant.

He stood still, hands at his side, almost ignoring me as he examined the details of my drawing. "That is good. There's so much action, a real feeling of menace."

While I couldn't sense his emotions, I could sometimes pick out clues by his body language. Right now he wasn't giving anything away. That made me even more frightened.

Donald moved closer to my drawing and stared at the attacker. "You've got a lot of detail."

Was it possible he hadn't heard anything? I forced myself to breathe steadily.

He squinted to make out the details.

"Is that a Beretta with a can? It looks like a Mini Cougar F Series. When did you learn about guns?"

"Can?" The end of the gun did seem unusual.

"Silencer. You put a silencer on the end of the gun, Dana."

"Oh. I didn't know." When had Donald learned about guns? It wasn't standard training for a psychiatrist, was it? I glanced up into the black abyss of his gaze. Why couldn't I read his soul?

He looked back at the picture. "Has something happened to Marie?"

"I think so. I haven't heard from her in a month." The trembling had almost stopped. Maybe he hadn't heard anything, or hadn't understood what he had heard.

"That's not so long."

"She's in trouble."

He walked across the room and picked up one of my usual drawings, examining the way the sunset paled behind a dark ridge of mountains. A bright swath of water split the foreground. The deep blue sky was the color of Marie's eyes. "You know her job is sensitive. She's been skirting rules to stay in contact with you. Companies like SciTech sometimes need their people to disappear."

"I'm cleared to know where she is."

"She's probably working." His voice was calm, reasonable. His logic was as smooth as the porcelain sink my hand rested on.

"I've had nightmares. I know something is wrong."

He dropped the painting, cracking the frame. I flinched. How much damage would he do this time? Too late to try and move the conversation out of my haven.

"You...know." The way he said "know" with a sneer made me wish I could force a link to his mind. Donald hated to be reminded of psionics. It didn't fit into his belief of how the human brain worked.

He stalked back to stand in front of the picture of Marie. "You think something like this has actually happened? Because you had a dream." It was infuriating having him looking down his clinical nose at me as if I were some sort of misshapen bug he'd been asked to study. No, not a bug. To him, I was a mouse.

"Yes," my voice squeaked, the anger slipping out like air from an over-filled balloon. I didn't need to provoke him.

"You don't know where she is. How can you be sure this is real? You've been under a lot of strain. Nightmares would be a normal...."

My chest tightened and I could feel the emotion about to burst out of my over-filled lungs. I clenched my teeth to hold in the shriek. "Don't mention the baby."

I took a deep breath. Arguing with him was pointless. I could not remember ever winning. "I know, Okay? Besides, I know she's in Europe."

"How long have you been off the meds?"

I blinked at the sudden change in topic. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play games, Dana. Your anti-depressants. When did you stop taking them?"

"You can ask Apollina...."

He gripped my jaw and turned my face so our noses almost touched.

"I don't need to ask her, I could see the madness in your eyes from across the room."

"They weren't anti-depressants." I wrenched my face out of his grasp and took a small step back from him. "You weren't trying to help me get over the trauma of the miscarriages."

His laughter was more of a spasm. "No. I was trying to prevent this sort of episode." He pointed at the painting. "Dana, you're sick."

He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. His eyes closed, and then opened. He seemed to beseech the ceiling for guidance. After a slow, lung-cleansing breath, he brought his carefully calibrated gaze back to my face. "Who was on the phone?"

"An old friend."

"Old guy friend?"

I tried to shrug. "You don't have to worry. It was just Kevin."

The color drained from his cheeks, making him as dichromatic as my drawing. "The Kevin you knew in college?"

"Yes."

"I thought he was...." Whatever he intended to say, he changed his tactic. "He was into some weird stuff. I don't want my wife hanging around a maniac like that." He walked past me and picked up the phone.

"Listen, this may not be real." He hit the code to call the last number back. After a pause, he hung it up. "The last call on this line was from a political party."

"Then he blocked the number somehow. I am not imagining this, and I am not hallucinating." I tried to keep my temper in check. Screaming would not make me seem more rational. "I want to spend Christmas in Paris with Marie."

"Dana, you need those medications." He leaned one hand against the wall. "Don't trust intuition. Try to think logically. If you haven't heard from her, how do you know she's going to be where you can find her?"

"Marie will be there." I couldn't explain how I knew, but she would meet me if she was alive.

"You can't go half way around the world on a hunch." He pointed at my drawing. "It could be dangerous." He paused. "I want you back on your meds, at least."

"No." I stared at him, willing him to understand, reaching out with my mind even though I'd learned years ago he had no psionic receptors. It was time to fight. I could feel my adrenalin surging, anger solidifying, but was interrupted when the phone in his hand rang.

He glanced at the number and answered while glaring at me. "What?"

The argument was not over. The dam of Donald's control was near breaking. Could I get past him? I stepped back, calculating the distance to the door. His hand clamped my arm like a canvas while he listened to whoever was on the phone.

"I can still...."

The tension flowed out of him like water through a turbine. His smile released a flash of joy so strong, I could almost smell the ozone. "Of course." His eyes went to where his hand was still bruising my arm and released me. He mouthed, "Sorry."

I rubbed blood back into my arm, but didn't try to run. The sense of impending violence was gone, replaced by a surging wave of relief. "I'll take care of things on this end. Thank you for letting me know." He hung up the phone and picked me up, spinning me around, knocking the easel over and sending chalk skittering to the corners of the room.

My feet hit the ground. He smiled into my eyes, eager to share his joy.

"I have the most amazing news. One of my patients has had a miraculous recovery. If you want, I could go to Paris with you."

I caught my breath and my balance. I tried to wend my way through the trap closing around me. Tried and failed.

The change was too abrupt, my emotions too tightly wound for subtlety. "No. I want to go alone."

"If that is what you want, my dear, then that is how it will be."

I blinked. My brain was screaming a warning. Donald could not be going along with my wishes. Whoever had been on the phone, it hadn't been a patient.

"No argument? You're letting me do what I want?"

"I have been a pain, haven't I?" He shook his head. "I'm sorry. Work is so intense, sometimes I bring it home with me. Maybe I'm projecting my patients' maladies onto you. I'm sorry."

He was lying, but if it meant I could get away, I didn't care, and yet I was nervous. There was a trap here still, I just couldn't see it. "I have too much time to think, here alone all day." I gestured at the beautiful room, encompassing all of the elegance bequeathed to him by his parents. "You've got me in a gilded cage, Donald, but I need space."

"Of course you do, and there's no reason you should be cooped up in this house." He took my hand and stroked the palm with one long finger.

I stifled the shiver of loathing his touch sent up my spine.

"I'll stop trying to keep you home. Paris at Christmas-time is supposed to be lovely. A change of view would give you more fodder for your art, right?" Who had called that he now saw my being out of town as a blessing?

Time alone with Marie was what I needed. I had loved Donald once, and bless his soul, there were still times when it seemed he read my mind like a textbook case in a psychiatric journal. I'd given up on the hope that he could understand me, and now I very much needed to be understood. Donald had the psi potential of a rock.

I no longer had a taste of Marie's presence, but I couldn't believe that she was dead. Something had made her shut down the link. Was she trying to protect me or herself?

I sent her an email suggesting we meet in Paris. If she didn't show up, I'd find her, somehow. There had to be a way to break through her shield.



The wheel on my favorite suitcase was broken and my passport wasn't in the safety deposit box. My initial preparation for the trip was not going well. Apollina bustled around my bedroom, trying to help.

"You're going to love Paris at Christmas." She shook her head at a sweater I held up. "Too heavy. The snow won't stick, but it'll be slushy." Her eyes grew dreamy. "Your feet get wet and cold and then you drink the Vin Chaud and nothing matters anymore." She sighed with longing. "You are meeting your friend?"

"Yes. We'll be in art galleries most of the time. I don't think it will be slushy in there."

She frowned and glanced towards Donald's closet before lowering her voice. "This friend, is not a handsome man?"

I was shocked. "No, I'll leave the handsome men to you."

She pouted. "You could use a little romance. He wouldn't notice." Her pinched nose left no doubt as to which "he" she was referring to.

"I'm married."

She sniffed. "Well, so is he." She gathered up the sweaters to be taken to the dry cleaner and hustled out, her petite flounce showing her disdain for Donald. Great. Even the maid was giving me marital advice.

Passport. Needed to find my passport. The last time I'd had it was on that trip to Victoria for the convention Donald had needed to attend. I'd given it to him to put away...so, like everything else he forgot, it was probably in his desk.

His office was the opposite of my studio. Where I loved giant windows with lots of light, he surrounded himself with dark, hard lines. Papers from various cases covered his desk. I had no idea how he could function in the mess. I sat in his

executive chair and began digging through the drawers. Finding the passport in the bottom drawer, banded together with his and a handful of receipts, I snatched it from the bundle and bits of paper flew all over the floor. I got down on my hands and knees to gather them up. When I sat up to stuff them back in the drawer, I slammed my head onto a protrusion in the chair well.

Ow. Rubbing the bump, I turned to see what I'd hit my head on. A pistol grip protruded from a snapped leather holster attached to the underside of his desk. I stared, not breathing, my brain trying to make sense of the thing. It was like one of those tests I took too many of in school: one of these things does not belong. I leaned back against the side of the desk and fingered the ebony textured handle of the gun. It was big, like something a movie action-hero would wave at a nunchuck throwing native. Not round, it was flat like the kind cops used. It would take both hands for me to lift it, should I want to.

There had been a few break-ins in the area of late. Maybe he hadn't wanted to worry me?

I climbed back into the chair and noticed the corner of a paper sticking out from under Donald's blotter. I glanced at my watch. No chance of his coming home for a couple of hours. I knew better than to be curious, but pulled it out anyway.

A love letter.

I slipped out of the over-stuffed chair and found myself sitting under the desk again. The old familiar nausea foamed up in my gut as anger and defeat mixed. I'd been here so many times before, it was almost routine.

The letter was in my hand. I struggled to read it through the blurred tears of frustration. Whoever Caprice was, he was excited to tell her he'd be coming for Christmas.

They could start planning their wedding.

Stress was bad for my blood pressure. It was always the same. If I asked him about it, there'd be the usual flurry of

angry accusations, the apologies, the flowers...and then it would start all over. One thing about Donald: he was predictable.

I shivered thinking of the arguments and battles we'd had last time, before I'd given in and stayed after finding myself pregnant. I pulled myself back up into the chair. That formidable gun was pointed right at the doorway. Tempting, but not tempting enough. After all the cheating, I couldn't even get decently angry.

Years of marriage to Donald had left me numb. This time, I'd be smart. I'd get proof, and I'd get away.

I ran a copy of the love letter before putting the original back. I'd given up on his giving me a peaceful divorce after his last escapade. Caprice might believe he'd leave me, but I knew he wouldn't. For whatever reason, Donald wanted to stay married. I would add this to the other bits of evidence I had collected. When I got back from Paris I'd get a lawyer.

Again.



Donald came home to find me glaring at an over-sized suitcase and muttering.

"Honey, what are you doing taking that one?"

"The wheel on the other one is broken. I don't want to buy new luggage."

"I'm cursed with the one woman on the planet who hates shopping."

"Maybe you should trade me in for a better model."

He laughed. "How about I get you a new suitcase? I know you hate checking luggage and that monstrosity will not fit in the overhead bin."

"Fine." I continued sorting my underwear, folding the new thermals Marie had sent me after her last trip to Switzerland. These were soft as silk, but warm as flannel. Perfect for Paris.

Donald admired the lacy clothing. "Mmmmm. Wish I was going with you. Paris is such a romantic city."

I glared. "You've got plans."

"I know. I hate that I have to work. You'll enjoy seeing Marie, though."

"And you'll have a good time with Caprice."

The silence bounced off the vaulted ceiling and crashed back down around us. "Caprice?"

"Yes, your fiancée? Did you forget her already?"

"Dana, I don't know what you're...." He looked pathetic, struggling to come up with an answer, a light wash of sweat forming on his forehead.

"Oh, Donald, stop." I tossed a deep blue skirt on the pile. "I don't even care any longer. Be honest. You're having another fling and when you're done, you'll be glad I'm still here."

"With losing the baby, you've been so distant...."

"Don't you dare blame this on me." Nausea was dancing in my gut. If only my body could get used to dealing with stress.

"There are two sides to every situation."

"Of course there are. The problem is, I no longer care about yours." My blood was a rushing crimson wave in my head. I massaged my temples. "Just go finish your letter, will you?"

"Dana...."

"Are you sleeping in the guest room or am I?" I asked, forcing my voice to be cold.

He exhaled loudly. "I will."

I went into the bathroom and fumbled for the prescription pain killer I kept on hand for dealing with Donald.

He stood in the doorway. I washed my face and brushed my hair, letting him stare as long as he wanted. I forced my reactions deep inside my disintegrating digestive system.

At last, he coughed. "I'll have a new suitcase delivered in the morning."

As soon as he left, I turned and leaned my head on the wall. I looked around the room at the fine furniture, every-

thing tastefully designed by his chosen interior decorator. It was a nice home, but I would be happier living in a tent.



I woke up in my foam-soft bed, disoriented, my stomach churning, unable to go back to sleep. This would never do. I was scheduled to leave for Paris in two days. I didn't want to be exhausted and jet lagged when I saw Marie. I went down into the kitchen and made a mug of peppermint tea. The door to my studio was open. I slipped in and pulled the door shut before turning on a light.

I flipped through my latest landscapes, picking out a few to send to the gallery. Maybe I could sell something while I was gone.

The echo of quiet voices surprised me and I stood still, glancing at the overhead vent. What was Donald doing in his office at this time of night?

"You were not supposed to leave her alone."

"She asked me to take the dry cleaning...."

"Since when do you work for Dana?"

"It isn't me who botched this, Don. What kind of idiot leaves something like that lying around? You couldn't wait a week before setting up your vacation? She's supposed to be kept calm. Remember? She's supposed to be happy."

"I don't know why she isn't. I've given her everything she could ever want!"

The response was an impressive string of French that I couldn't even begin to follow. The door slammed.

I didn't breathe. Apollina stormed down the hall and into her room. In a few minutes, I heard the door to Donald's study open and the stairs creak as he went up to the guest room. I sank into the sofa and tried to think. My head was throbbing again, making clarity impossible. At some point I fell asleep and dreamed of the Christmas lights in Paris being buried under a blizzard.



The sun streamed through the window in an early-morning fog of pale colors. Sweat matted my hair and my neck ached. What was I doing in my studio? The previous night's events came flooding back along with the seeds of another headache. I went upstairs to shower and noticed the new suitcase on the landing outside my door with a vase of red roses sitting next to it. The roses could rot in the hallway, but I took the suitcase into my room and packed the laid-out clothing.

The birds outside were chirping, and I stood by the window to watch a pair of starlings chasing a hawk. Marie loved to watch birds. It would be good to see her. My head was spinning, thoughts coming through a haze in stray wisps. I was so tired, tired of dealing with Donald and his affairs.

I showered and dressed, half-way thinking through my plans for the day. Had I dreamed the conversation between Apollina and Donald last night? Was she supposed to be watching me? I came out of the bathroom to find the vase of roses placed in the center of my dresser. I looked at the flowers and felt the last remnant of my sanity unraveling. The threads slipped through my fingers like corn silk. My neat orderly life was a trap. Donald was a control freak.

How long had it been since I'd been dancing? How long since I'd been to a movie I wanted to see? How had I come to sit here in silence, sketching sunsets? This was ridiculous. I was a long way from helpless. I picked up the phone and called for a cab. There was no need for me to spend even one more night here. I could sleep at the Marriott next to the airport. I'd just need to pick up my dry cleaning on the way.

Apollina came in as I was zipping the suitcase shut. "I've got your breakfast ready."

"I'm skipping breakfast today. Can you bring me the receipts for my sweaters? Keep the ones for Donald's shirts, but I'm going to pick up my clothes for the trip and then spend tonight at a hotel."

Her teal eyes grew wide. "I'm not sure which are which. Why don't you let me go and get them for you?" She stood in the doorway, resting her hand on the door post.

"I've already called a cab."

"I'll see if I can find them," she said, turning and dashing down the stairs.

I went to the safe and pulled out the money I'd gotten for the trip. I could get new sweaters at the Christmas markets. I had a couple of outfits, enough to get by. Forget the sweaters. I went to the door to tell Apollina not to worry about it, to see Donald rushing up the stairs two at a time.

"Dana, wait. You can't leave like this."

"You know what? I can. I most certainly can leave just like this."

"At least let me drive you to the hotel." He took the suitcase from my hand.

"You want to drive me to the hotel." It was an odd request.

"So we can talk. I promise, I'll take you wherever you want to go."

"Aren't you supposed to be at work?" That sounded like a stupid question, but I asked it anyway.

"My wife leaves the country tomorrow. I wanted us to have a day together, so I canceled my appointments." He hefted the suitcase. "This is really light."

"Half of my clothes are still at the cleaners."

"Fine. We'll go and get them, then I'll drop you at the hotel."

It was senseless, but I went along with the plan, collecting my purse and coat on the way to the car. "I should call the cab company and cancel."

"Apollina called for you."

Only later did it occur to me to wonder how she'd known which company to call.

Donald was the picture of an attentive husband as he gathered the dry cleaning, sorted it in the trunk and even

put my sweaters in the suitcase for me. We pulled to a stop in front of the Marriott, and he handed me the suitcase.

“Thank you. We’ll talk when I get back from Paris.”

“Don’t make any decisions until then, okay?”

I nodded and watched him drive off, leaving me to check in at the hotel and enjoy the first full night’s sleep I’d had in months.

Chapter 3

The pain of my life builds a shield or a wall,
Made of bandages wrapped 'round my soul.
I could not be callous though a bruise covers all —
The bleeding is making me whole.

I wane through the waxing and wax though I wane.
I live so I love so I hurt so I'm real.
I live with the madness that drives one sane,
And I hope I shall never be healed.

“On the Edge of Laughter and Tears”
—Annalise Phenix

[San Jose, CA — Dana]

San Jose International Airport was hot and full of people. I passed the flight to Dallas with my nose buried in a fantasy novel.

I sat in the window for the over-seas flight. My seat-mate was a young woman with a two-month-old baby. “We’re going to see grandma.” She seemed overly-thin for a new mother. Her dark hair was pulled back in a severe pony-tail, leaving the bones of her face sharply exposed. When I complimented her figure, she laughed. “I do Tai-chi,” she explained.

My daughter would have been about that age. I couldn’t help staring at the pink wrapped bundle and thinking of the children I’d lost over the years.

The baby cried during take off and I smiled at the frazzled young mother. "Do you have a bottle? I've heard that helps."

"In my bag...here, would you mind holding her?" She thrust the child into my arms and began rummaging in the baby bag under the seat. Her English was good despite a French accent.

The baby girl had bright blue eyes, dark wavy hair, and tiny hands that gripped my finger. I yawned at her — easing the pressure on my ears — and she yawned back. Her eyes opened wider and she stopped crying. Mom popped the bottle into her mouth and retrieved the bundle. "She's adorable," I whispered.

The plane seemed stuffy, the air too moist, smelling slightly of kelp. The smell stirred a distant memory, but I let my companion distract me. "My name's Dana. I'll be glad to help you with her for a while. Maybe you can even get some sleep."

"I'm Margaret." Her bright green eyes shone as she returned my smile. "And this is Amy."

Instead of sleeping, Margaret was eager to talk. Amy seemed as comfortable with me as with her mother, the hum of the aircraft lulling her to sleep. After hours of chatting, I stood up to stretch my legs, trying to climb over Margaret without waking the baby. I failed, and Amy let out an ear-piercing screech.

A passenger four rows back on the aisle ripped the earbuds out of his ears and glared towards us in annoyance. Our eyes met before he looked away, stood and walked towards the lavatory at the back of the plane.

I gripped the back of Margaret's seat with both hands, trying to keep myself from falling as my legs grew weak. It couldn't be, and yet he looked so familiar. I hadn't seen Leonard in eight years. The face had been gaunt, pale, with a hint of the resemblance he bore to Kevin. The rapidly retreating form didn't have the sense of Kevin, though. Again, I smelled kelp. Like a child drawn to touch a flickering flame,

I untangled myself from my seat-mate and staggered down the aisle.

He passed a bulkhead before I caught up with him, and when I reached it, he was gone. I stood outside the lavatories, but he was not among those who emerged. I searched the plane as best I could, but he had vanished. When I returned to my spot, I looked back to find a woman in the seat where I thought I'd seen him.

I sat down and tried to calm my breathing. Margaret touched my arm. "You are ill? You seem pale."

Trying to form my lips into something resembling reassurance, I met her eyes. "Thought I saw someone I recognized." I leaned my head back and rested, letting my senses roam over the plane's passengers. Leonard had been psionically injured the last time I'd seen him, so it was unlikely I'd have sensed him. Besides, if it had been Leonard, he would not have run from me. Like the shark he was, he would have attacked.

As we neared the end of our journey, I reached into my handbag for my French phrase book. Margaret saw me practicing and chuckled at my accent. "*Vous apprenez le français?*"

"Um...I'm just hoping to be able to say, '*Ou est l'hôtel?*' without tripping over my tongue."

"I will help you. Where are you staying?"

"The Hotel Suffren."

She nodded and told me to relax. "You've been such a help with Amy, it is the least I can do to help you get a cab."

When we landed in Charles DeGaulle International Airport, I held the baby amidst the swirl of foreign languages and the confusion while we made our way through Customs. Escaping from the terminal, Margaret flagged down a cab and directed the driver to my hotel.

"I can't thank you enough! Perhaps we'll run into each other again." I surrendered the warm bundle of baby with regret.

"One can never tell." Margaret waved and the Mercedes pulled away from the curb.

Throughout the drive, I tried to remember how much to tip. The roads were narrow and the driver whisked through the traffic so fast I had only a brief glimpse of the Seine. I settled on 15 percent, since I had survived the ride. With a minimum of hassle, I managed to pay him what I guessed was far too much by his eager thanks.

The hotel was grand. Even early in the afternoon the lobby was crowded. Most of the patrons seemed to be expensively dressed Japanese businessmen, bowing to each other and speaking in a rushed blend of French and Japanese. I hurried to check in, wanting only to lie down and stop the throbbing of my head.

At my attempt to speak to the clerk in French, he responded in what I guessed was German. The headache escalated, and I felt the creases on my forehead getting deeper. How could I have forgotten my pain meds? "English? Do you speak English?"

"*Oui*, madame, but of course! Your name, please?"

"Dana Rosenthal."

"Ah, here it is. You are on the 9th floor, with a view of the tower." His dark eyes reflected a dire opinion of tourists and their fascination with the Eiffel tower.

I took the key and smiled. "Do you know where I could get something for a headache?"

"A headache, madame?"

"Aspirin?"

"Of course. The pharmacy will have what you desire."

I closed my eyes against the pain. "Where? Where is the pharmacy?"

He launched into a rapid string of directions which would have made sense had my head hurt less. I found myself staring at him in confusion, when a masculine arm slipped around my shoulders.

I jumped in shock and then relaxed. The forest rich sense of Kevin soothed my unsettled nerves. His voice was as reassuring as the solidity of his touch. *"Merci, monsieur, j'aiderai la dame."*

The clerk smiled his gratitude and turned towards the next patron in line.

Kevin had aged in the years since I saw him last. I was staring. I tried to think of something to say. Tried, and then surrendered to staring.

Kevin steered me towards the elevator, taking my suitcase from the confused bellhop. "I have something that'll help that headache. Let's get you settled. You look exhausted."

His presence was comforting if surreal. "Rescuing me?"

A lopsided smile creased his rugged face. "What else would I do with myself?"

"Thank you." I pulled away from the closeness, uncomfortable with the familiarity he exuded. For a moment, I'd felt like I was in college again, struggling to find a class when this beanpole had rescued me.

I'd called him a walking signpost.

"Nay, Lady! I am the Knight of Erring, here to set you on the path to...." He'd glanced at my schedule. "Women's Studies 101."

Throughout my college years, I'd called him whenever I needed muscle. He'd been as comfortable as my purple sweater, but that was then, and it had been years since the day he hadn't answered my call.

"I'm not normally such a bad traveler. I've been sick, though. Maybe Donald was right. Maybe I should have given myself longer to recover."

He rolled his shoulders and leaned against the wall of the elevator giving me a chance to take in his changed appearance. Life had strengthened him. Gone was the thin, lanky creature from college. His face had always reminded me of Abraham Lincoln, but now the angles seemed to have mellowed into someone almost handsome. I shook off the

thought and returned his smile. The link between us was tentative, as if he were unwilling to risk more than the most casual touch.

"It's okay, Dana. It's been a long time. I only want to make sure you get settled safely."

"How did you sneak up on me?" I shifted my weight, unsure of myself around him.

"You were distracted, and I've improved my shielding a bit since the last time I saw you."

He pulled a travel packet of aspirin out of his coat pocket. "Peace offering?"

I laughed and took it from him. "Must be jet lag."

His face darkened. "Maybe." The elevator opened and the bellhop showed us to the room. Kevin placed my suitcase on a tray beside the armoire and handed a tip to the bellhop. We were alone before I'd even glanced around the room. I seemed to be moving in slow motion.

"You didn't have to do that. I can take care of myself. I have been traveling alone for quite a while."

"Don's job doesn't allow him to travel with you?"

"Oh, sometimes he comes, but the practice keeps him at home a lot. I love to go to art shows."

Kevin's dark green eyes met mine and he shook his head. "You never caught on, did you, Dana? You still think you're a housewife. You've been working for SciTech for years."

"What are you talking about?" Now that we were alone, his mental touch had turned into a gentle probing that unsettled me.

He leaned against the wall, his eyes scanning mine. I felt as if I were falling into a twin singularity, and looked away. The black energy around him was strong, not directed towards me, but still...he was angry at someone, dangerously angry.

"You are an excellent courier. Let me see, you delivered a microchip to a contact in Florida, a diskette full of schematics to San Francisco and an entire folder of photos to New York."

There was a clipped cadence in his voice, as if his words were a set of darts he was firing into a bulls-eye.

I knew those trips.

"You're talking about the art shows I went to. Kevin, don't be paranoid. I didn't deliver anything to anyone. Sometimes I worry about your imagination." Donald had said he'd been in a mental institution. What if I was alone with a maniac?

I was alone with a man I hadn't seen in years.

"I can prove it to you. Don wouldn't turn down a chance like this."

He went over to where my suitcase rested. Without hesitation, he flipped it upside down, re-positioned one wheel while pressing one of the support rivets on the bottom of the case. A faint click sounded, and he slid open a small compartment under the wheel. I watched as he removed a chip like the one I used in my cell phone from the hiding place.

I sank down onto the bed.

He held it out to me and I took the tiny thing, moving through the haze of my headache, trying to form words for the chip that had offset my world. Outside this room, the world was spinning, but here, time had stopped.

"Kevin, I didn't know that was there. What's on it?"

He took the chip out of my hand. I fumbled with the packet of aspirin, unable to tear the plastic. This headache was unbearable.

"Something SciTech wanted to get to an agent in Paris."

"Why not just ask me to give it to Marie?"

He laughed. "Because it isn't for her." He tossed it into the air and clamped it in his fist.

"How did you know where and when to meet me? Is that for you?" I bit the corner of the packet, and he took it from me.

"Magic, and no, it isn't for me, either." He tore the packet open and gave me the pills.

"How did you know about the compartment?"

He crumpled the packet. "I've been around. Couldn't pass up the chance to make sure you were okay. When I found out they were using you as a courier, it scared me out of another life. I've only got about six left, you know."

"Why didn't you warn me?"

He frowned as he filled a glass with water from the sink. "I did."

"Donald put that there?"

"You've had a long flight. You're also recovering from some nasty meds." His touch on my shoulder was light, protective. "I promise, I'll explain this all once you've rested and had more time to get your head clear. Right now, just don't worry about the chip." He put the glass in my hand, gesturing for me to swallow the pills. "Here, take those now. They'll help, I promise." He bustled around closing the drapes, plunging the room into darkness.

"Should we put that disk back?"

"Don't you want to know what they're up to?"

"Yes, I suppose so." I swallowed the pills. "But it isn't any of my business. Let's put it back."

"Dana, I'm not talking glamour and games. This disk could get you hurt."

"What'll they do when they find out it's missing?" My voice squeaked. I hated the sound of words forced past the lump forming in my throat.

"It won't be missing when they come for it. Trust me."

"You think that disk has something to do with what's been going on with Marie?"

He frowned. "Now who's mind reading? But since you mention it, yes, I do."

"Who sent you?"

His laughter was sudden and well beyond the border of insane. "Sent me? I came on my own and I'm leaving on my own. I'll put the chip back later this afternoon. They won't check for it until tomorrow morning when the maid cleans your room."

"If you're sure." The problem with Kevin was my natural inclination to trust him. I knew this man — not just the manic persona he showed the world, but on a psychic level where his true nature could not be hidden.

"Yes. In the meantime, don't tell anyone you've seen me. Not even Marie."

I felt my forehead crease as the room caught up with the spinning world. My grasp on reality slid sideways.

"Lie down, Dana. I'll go and let you rest. Don't worry about the chip, I'll take care of it."

He closed the door with exaggerated caution, moving like the cat he had always reminded me of. I didn't even have the energy to undress. I lay on the bed and let the world go where it wanted.



[Paris, France — Kevin]

Hours later, Kevin used the room key he'd pocketed to let himself back in.

The drugs had worked faster than he'd expected. She lay half-way in the bed, sleeping like a child. He listened to the soft breathing and wrestled with anger at what he'd seen on the data disk.

He should stay and keep an eye on her.

The shock of touching her was almost as painful as when he'd linked with her over the phone, but it was healing, too. Steadying himself, he picked her up. He could take her and run away, find a way to keep her safe. But Dana would not understand, nor would she thank him. She wanted to be free, as if freedom was possible. He laid her out on the bed, adjusting the pillow so she wouldn't wake with a crick in her neck. He pulled a blanket over her, providing the comfort she would accept.

The scent of jasmine was intoxicating, even drugged as she was. Let her sleep through the worst of the withdrawal. He could feel the damage that had been done. Nothing

physical, nothing that would show. Her husband thought he had broken her, but she was stronger than Don imagined. Stronger than even she realized. Given a chance, she'd recover.

He took the disk from his pocket and pinched it between his thumb and forefinger. He could crush it. Leave no trace. But someone would come looking for it, and if they didn't find it, they'd suspect Dana. He put it back in the suitcase as he'd promised, his finger lingering on the wheel.

If he left now, Marie would come and Dana should be safe for a while. SciTech wasn't going to risk their valuable investment.

Lara was missing, presumably still with Leonard.

And then there was Don. If he waited, Don would get away. Don Schultz or Rosenthal or whatever he wanted to call himself owed him...what? Satisfaction? Explanations?

Looking back at Dana's unconscious form, he found the word he was searching for.

Restitution.



[Paris, France — Dana]

I hated migraines. I always got them after the miscarriages. Stress, the doctors said.

I'd slept round the clock, my body's time sense confused beyond my ability to compensate. A knock at the door woke me.

"Désolé de vous déranger, madame. J'ai une lettre pour vous," the bellhop said, holding out an envelope. He smiled and I fumbled a tip from my pocket.

"Merci."

With a nod, he was gone. I closed the door and flipped on a light, wincing at the sudden brightness. I tore open the envelope and smiled at the beautiful and familiar script.

Dana,
The d'Orsay, behind the clock, at 3PM.
Have some tea.
My love,
Marie

Chapter 4

Science would love to prove the existence of psychic phenomena. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to test these phenomena in a controlled environment...until now.

— Dr. Petra Michalak, SciTech Research and Development funding presentation

[Paris, France — Dana]

If I was going to make it to the d'Orsay by three, I would need to hurry.

I had to change out of the clothes I'd slept in. I didn't even remember going to sleep. I pulled on a white lace blouse with a tea length blue circle skirt, glancing in the mirror with a twirl. What would Marie think of my hair? I liked the sway of the shoulder length; it made me seem cheerful. The mirror's reflection stopped me. I looked better. My headache was gone. Whatever Kevin had given me, it was effective.

Kevin. He hadn't been a dream.

I'd already decided to divorce Donald, but that didn't mean I was ready for another over-protective male. Especially not one with a history of vanishing.

I plucked the bag of comics out of my suitcase and headed for the lobby. There'd been no need for Marie to pay exorbitant foreign prices for her comic books. Over the years, I'd collected them at the comic book store across the street and forwarded them. When I didn't get a note after the last

package, I'd held onto the new ones. Wouldn't want her to miss an issue of X-Men.

Shaking off my confusion, I hailed a cab. Now that I'd slept, I felt more confident in my ability to get around without help. A few minutes later, I paid my admission to the museum and found a table of pamphlets with maps. Each had a flag on the cover representing the language it was written in. I was frustrated when I didn't find a United States flag. Then I noticed the United Kingdom's flag. That would work.

The museum was in a renovated train station with the Cafe' des Hauteurs upstairs behind the clock. Ignoring the tantalizing exhibits, I followed the map. The soothing hum of Marie's presence grew stronger with each step. The maitre'd directed me to the table where she sat sipping tea from a china cup. Her hair was cut in the same style I wore.

"You cut your hair," I said. Her black skirt surprised me, but her blouse was the same as mine. As usual, we could be twins.

Marie looked up and laughed when she noticed our matching haircuts. Gripping my hand warmly, she pulled me into the seat next to her. "I wanted a different look for a while. Do you like it? I like yours."

I leaned back and let my senses drink her in with the abundant natural light coming through the arched glass ceiling. There were dark circles under her eyes, which seemed almost gray. "Why is it that we always manage to get our hair cut in the same style at the same time?"

"Great minds or some such similarity, I suppose."

Her mind was closed. She was blocking, but it was a gentle, feather-soft wall that met my probing. I leaned forward. "You look tired."

She hunched her shoulders. "Been working too hard. I'll tell you more later. Let's order."

I glanced at the menu, but found the words all blurred together. "Can you order for me? I have no idea what I want."

She waved the waiter over and ordered something exotic sounding in what I suspected was perfect French.

Her examination of me seemed favorable. "You look rested."

I laughed. "I should. I fell asleep after getting to the hotel and slept for 24 hours straight. I'm famished, but I'm not tired."

Something about the restaurant felt like home ... something more than Marie's company. It was the smell. A man a few tables behind Marie was smoking the same kind of cigar that my Dad's best friend had smoked when I was a child. I hadn't smelled that scent in ages. I breathed deeply, tasting the scent. "It never occurred to me that French people would smoke American cigars."

Marie did not turn around. "He's not French." Her tone was flat, as emotionless as her mental barriers.

"Oh, and how do you know that?"

"He's been following me. He's from SciTech. It doesn't matter...he's harmless."

I blinked at her. "Your own company is having you followed?"

"Just a bodyguard." Her gesture included more than the restaurant. "France is known for its intrigue. Great place for spies."

"Uh...huh. So I've heard."

Her laugh was strained. "Don't worry, Dana."

"I don't think I'd want a harmless bodyguard."

This time she did laugh, her smile breaking through the reserve she'd tried to maintain. "Oh, he's not that harmless."

"So why have you dropped out of touch...and why haven't you been sleeping?"

The waiter placed tea and croissants in front of us, saving her from answering immediately. Marie smiled her polite, gracious smile that melted hearts and thanked him. I tried to repeat the words she said, learning them so I could thank the bellhop. Once the waiter was gone, she played with her

bread, pulling the flaky layers apart one at a time. "Sometimes my line of work can give a person nightmares."

She shivered, and seemed to change the subject, but her mental focus did not change. "I want to move you out of the Hotel Suffren. There's another one nearby that you'll like better."

I sipped Earl Grey and nibbled the raspberry and cheese croissant. "Did you know your job has been giving me nightmares?" I asked.

She twisted her napkin, and her eyes met mine in what I took as an apology. "I thought it might. I'd say I was sorry, except I'm not. You may've saved my life when you yelled my name."

"So that was real. I woke up just as he fired, and then I couldn't reach you again. I spent the next day drawing pictures of the man who took a shot at you."

She shook her head. "I hadn't realized we were still linked." She bit into a pastry, delicately dripping raspberry sauce on her white lace blouse.

"Nice to see some things don't change," I giggled.

She dabbed at the sauce. "Did you tell anyone where you would be staying?"

"No. Well, I needed help with the cab."

"Oh." She was staring at a painting over the table.

"Why?"

"I wondered if we should tell Donald about your new hotel."

"I'll tell him later, maybe." I reached out to her with my mind one more time, trying to find the connection I knew should be easy to establish. Her resistance was firm. For now, she was keeping her distance. "I'm divorcing him when I get back to the states."

"You'll go through with it this time?"

"Yes."

"Good. You're different when you're with him. I don't like the way you hide yourself away. It's like you're walking in a minefield."

"Living with Donald is like that sometimes."

"I'm glad you came." She smiled.

"You needed a friend. I needed my best friend."

"I've been busy. There's so much work for a psionic. SciTech is discovering new ways in which I can use my talents."

"It's weird you having a bodyguard."

"I haven't gotten used to him, yet. He's always around somewhere. I don't know why he doesn't ride in the same cab and sit at the same table I do. I know he's there, he knows I know...what's the point?" Her voice had reached a near frantic pitch, and she paused to breathe. When she continued, her voice was calm again, flat. "It's just as well he keeps his distance, though. I hate cigars."

"Someone's been reading your mail."

"I know."

"Oh, speaking of mail...here are your comics."

She looked at the package and her eyes sparkled. "I hoped you'd remember. 'They' read my incoming mail, too. Last shipment arrived...and darn it, 'they' read the comics. There's something not right about comic books that have already been read."

"Wonder what 'they' were looking for?"

"Maybe 'they' were bored."

We laughed. She paid the waiter and left the tip. We took a few minutes to view the Monet paintings before returning to the hotel. Marie waited in the cab while I gathered my belongings.

I stood beside my suitcase, one hand resting on the zipper. What would I do if the data chip was gone? I took a deep breath and held it as I opened the compartment. As good as his word, Kevin had put it back. I breathed out gratitude,

and straightened the wheel. Since I hadn't unpacked, I was checked out and back in the cab in minutes.

I was glad to see the last of the crowded lobby. Maybe I could leave Kevin and his intrigue behind as well.

Marie directed the driver through a shopping district to the Hotel Corneille. It was a small building with a brass plaque by the door to show it was a hotel rather than a private residence. The lobby was dim; the carpet a dark red plush; the walls and front desk were mahogany. The older woman who stood behind the counter welcomed Marie in French and handed her two huge skeleton keys. "This is your friend? Welcome to Paris," she said, her English decorated by a rich accent.

"Thank you." The woodwork in the lobby was exquisite. I felt as if I'd fallen back in time a hundred years.

"This building used to be my grandfather's home. He loved mahogany. It is soothing, no?" She gestured us towards what I thought was a closet. The double door opened to reveal an elevator.

Marie walked into the cramped space with ease. When she turned around and looked at me, she laughed. "Come on in, silly — it's safe." Scrunching myself in next to her, I held the suitcase against my chest as she pushed the button. The door somehow managed to close.

Upstairs, she led me down a shadowy corridor and into a room which she entered using one of the keys. "I got us connecting rooms."

I looked around the tiny space in delight. Two narrow twin beds took up most of the available floor. Between them was a petite table and chair. In a corner was an armoire, its doors open, displaying a few wooden hangers. Marie threw open the window and pushed back the shutters. Below us was a cobblestone courtyard between our building and a line of shops. I smelled cigar smoke and saw Marie's "friend" standing in a corner.

"I don't think this room is bugged," Marie commented, "or at least not yet." She aimed an annoyed glance at her bodyguard and closed the windows with a bang.

She collapsed on one of the beds and pulled a pillow to her stomach.

"What have I gotten myself into?"

I sat on the other bed and crossed my legs up under the folds of my skirt. "Want to tell me about it?"

"I can't...at least not all of it." She let her face rest on her hand. A finger wiped a speck of mascara from her lashes. "What I can tell you — what they expect me to tell you — is that I'm nervous." She inspected the speck as if it held the answer to all of my questions.

"Why have you blocked me out?"

Her hands made a shrugging motion and then she leaned her chin into the pillow. "I'm going through some things right now that you don't have to worry about. It'll be okay, but I don't want you experiencing every twinge of emotion from me."

"Do people shoot at you on a regular basis?"

"No. That made no sense. It was more like someone wanted to scare me."

I remembered my own panic from the dream. "He scared me."

She looked distant. "Yes, I suppose he did."

Shaking her hair back from her forehead, she met my eyes. "Anyway, some people are trying to get information on one of the projects I've worked on before." One neat finger ran along her chin. "I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I love working for SciTech."

What was it Kevin had said? That I'd been working for SciTech for years? And Donald? My mind was spinning. "But these people are fishing for information? Trying to get you to sell out your company?"

"Yes. And they're dangerous. Sometimes it feels like they have psionics on their team."

I tried to follow what she was saying. "You said 'No.'"

She sat up, still clutching the pillow. "Of course. I don't even know what information I'm supposed to have that this group wants. About two months ago, I started feeling strange...as if someone was following me — other than him of course." She tilted her head towards the window, indicating her cigar-smoking bodyguard.

"I thought he only followed you in Paris. Does he have a name?"

"I'm not supposed to even know he's there — officially. I think his name is George."

"So how long has George been with you...no, let me guess — about two months."

"Yes. I stopped writing when I got worried. If these people could find me, maybe they would come looking for you."

I frowned and my stomach interjected a large growl. "Why would they bother me?"

"If this does have something to do with psionics, they might be curious about any attachments I have. You're a good friend. I don't know what is going on, but I don't want you involved."

Marie got up, ending the discussion. "Let's get you some real food."

We kept conversation light during dinner. I told her about my drawings and the stores that had begun to sell my paintings. She regaled me with humorous tidbits from the many places she'd been.

Thinking about her being followed and her worries, I was more uncomfortable than ever about meeting Kevin. It didn't make sense not to tell Marie about him. I tried to keep my tone casual. "You'll never guess who I ran into in the lobby." The tension leaked into my voice.

Her eyes narrowed. "You're half way around the world and you met someone you knew? Someone we both know?"

"Yes. Kevin. He gave me some aspirin for my headache."

"Kevin was here?" She looked around as if expecting him to leap out from behind a potted plant.

"He's still with SciTech, right?"

She fiddled with her fork. "I don't think so." She looked at me, and I felt a tentative probe from her. Her shield slipped a bit before she shifted in her seat, her posture and shielding back in place. "He gave you aspirin?"

"Something like that. It helped my headache."

Marie's forehead furrowed. "Well that's good, I suppose. As long as you're feeling better."

"There's something else I should tell you. He called me the same day I had the dream about you. He said we were in danger. Said he was going to check on you and then Lara. You don't think he's involved in whatever is going on, do you?"

Her eyes widened. "There's an unpleasant thought. Still, I don't think he'd...." Her voice trailed off as she glanced out the window and thought about whatever she was hiding. "No, he wouldn't be involved with these people."

"He didn't seem fond of SciTech."

Marie's sudden snort was amusement and dismissal. "Kevin. SciTech was good to him, but...no, it doesn't surprise me he doesn't like the company."

"You haven't seen him, so maybe he can't find you because you're shut down."

She frowned. "I hope so. I'd mind being linked with Kevin."

"He's not so bad. A little over protective, maybe."

"You were fond of him in college."

I looked at her, trying to sense where she was going with the comment. "He was a friend."

She put her fork down and leaned across the table. "If he had stayed around after college, I think you two would've been more than friends."

I leaned back in my chair. I thought about the last time I'd seen him before he disappeared. I'd thought about that time over and over, looking for some clue I'd missed. "He didn't

stay around. He vanished. Donald said he'd heard Kevin was in a mental institution."

"A mental institution? When did Donald say that?"

"Years ago."

"Dana, I only found out a few months ago what happened. You know Kevin helped me get the job with SciTech, right?"

"Yeah."

"He'd wanted you to join up, too."

"I remember. I wanted to think about it for a while." I wanted to work on my painting, see if I could make it as an artist. The job had been tempting, though. If he'd come back, I might've said yes.

She pushed her plate to the side. "I don't know all of the details, but Kevin was believed killed on a deep-cover mission shortly after graduation."

"So Donald...." I tried to think about that conversation. He'd been trying to convince me that psionics was not possible, was all a figment of my imagination.

"Was lying. And because Kevin was dead...."

"Someone was wrong."

Marie shook her head as if Kevin's being alive was not relevant. "Yes, but what you have to understand is that SciTech doesn't rescue bodies. Since he was dead, no one went in after him. The file is sealed, but wherever he was, he was out of touch for years. My boss knew Kevin had recruited me, so when he was found, they told me about it. I went to see him in the hospital."

"You knew he was back, and you didn't tell me?"

She licked her lips. "Kevin wasn't back, Dana. The man who came back was crazy, kept talking about spirits. He'd been through hell. It was hard to see him like that. I know he was in and out of surgery, physical therapy.... SciTech takes care of their people. They moved him to a hospital where he could get very specialized help. If he's out, great, but Dana, he's not ... I don't know what he is, but I'd be careful around him. I didn't tell you he was back because I didn't think you

needed to know. You were married. I thought you'd gotten over him."

"I have gotten over him. But he's still a friend."

"Then I'm glad he's back, but be careful, okay?"

I laughed. "At least he's less predictable than Donald."

Marie looked so concerned, I leaned forward and reassured her. "I'll be careful. Thanks for letting me know."

We finished dinner in silence.

Back at the hotel, the owner greeted us and handed Marie a note with her key. "A handsome man left this for you, dear." She winked.

Marie glanced at the handwriting and a frown flitted across her forehead before she smiled her thanks at the older woman. She didn't comment as we climbed the stairs.

"I'm thinking that's not from a boyfriend." I tried to sound playful, but her nervousness was contagious.

"My boss." The note disappeared into her pocket. "Just a scheduling change."

"You're on vacation."

She smiled. "Yes, I am. Tomorrow. But for now, let's get you tucked into bed." She saw me to my room. "The bathroom is between our rooms. Knock on my door if you need anything." Marie opened the door to the bathroom and then paused. "Oh, and if anyone comes to that door," she pointed at the entrance to the hallway, "don't open it."

It took a while to get to sleep. What had Kevin found on the disk? I didn't want to know, did I? I hadn't come to Paris to learn Marie's secrets, and I didn't want to think about the compartment in my suitcase. Was Kevin crazy? He hadn't seemed...sane, but then Kev never had.

When I got home, I would fire the maid. It had to be Apollina who was putting things in the suitcase. Kevin thought it was Donald, but that was ridiculous. Once the divorce was final, I wouldn't have anything that would interest anyone. That would put an end to any of this spy nonsense.



[Hotel Corneille, Paris, France — Dana]

Marie tapped on the inner door to our room the next morning. Typical of our friendship, she plopped down on my bed with a tray of pastries, most of which involved chocolate, and some English Breakfast tea. She knew what I needed to wake up and face the day.

We munched on what Marie called a “pain au chocolat” as I unpacked my clothes and picked out a deep blue pair of leggings and matching tunic to wear.

Marie giggled, her laughter making her seem younger. “You still wear the same clothes.”

I looked down at them with a grin. “Not the same pair from college...I’ve worn out a few since then, but I can’t find anything else I feel this comfortable in. Besides, they pack light.” I looked at her pale blue pants and black tunic top. “You’ve started wearing black. You never used to wear black.”

“It blends. That helps in my line of work. White eyelet doesn’t cut it most of the time.”

“You’re wearing more makeup these days, too.”

“Part of the job.”

“It’s your JOB to wear makeup?”

Her voice sounded strained. “No, but it helps to change my face. Don’t worry about it.”

“Marie, there’s more to this that you haven’t told me.”

She looked toward the window. “I can’t now.”

I brushed my hair, letting it fall straight to my shoulders. The sunlight from the window picked out the blonde and auburn highlights. In the mirror, I looked at Marie. Her hair was pinned up in a twist with a pair of ornamental sticks, a pair I’d given her years ago for her birthday. Whatever else she might be, this woman was still my dearest friend, and something had her spooked.

“Tell me what you can.”

She chewed on her lower lip. “These people want information on a project created by SciTech in-house. No outside

involvement. Proprietary and need to know. I don't know the details."

"Okay..."

"Whoever these people are, they're amateurs, not real scientific types. Beats me why they are even interested or how they learned of it." She winced at something she'd said and then brushed off the mood with an act of will that I watched in the mirror. "My boss has given me information to give them next time we meet. That should put an end to their interest."

She watched me. "Put your hair up like mine. It'll get filthy in this city."

I twisted my hair and secured it with sticks topped with antique blue beads as I tried to think of questions to ask. Marie got up and looked out the window into the courtyard. "You've seen other people following you...other than George, haven't you? You know what they look like."

She dropped the curtain. "I've seen...something. Haven't seen them in about a week. I think I gave them the slip. I needed to see you, but I don't want you getting caught in my troubles at work."

As if she was talking about a broken copier. I tried to match her tone. "So what did your boss want?"

Her thin frame collapsed back onto the bed. She looked exhausted. "Let me forget about them for a while and enjoy you. There's only George out there...and he won't bother us."

"What do you want to do first?" I asked.

"We'll tour the Louvre, see the shops, visit any little park we can find, dine in as many cafes as possible, and enjoy ourselves to the fullest. Next week, I'll deal with running errands."

"At least you have George for protection."

Marie traced the pattern on the bedspread. "He's not always as much help as I'd like."

Her mental touch was gentle but distant. It was as if she were sending out a minute radar pulse to measure the distance between our hearts. "It isn't going away, is it?"

I ran a comb over my hair, spraying back the stray wisps. "No. I don't think it will. I thought once we stopped practicing it would fade, but I don't mind. I've missed the sense of you these last weeks."

She chewed on her perfectly painted lower lip. "Well now you don't have to miss me." Her wistful smile brightened as she got up from the bed. "Let's go exploring."

I slipped on a sweater and boots and we left by my door, chatting all the way down the elegant spiral staircase, which I felt was much safer than the elevator. Leaving our keys at the front desk, we emerged into hazy daylight.

Specialized shops lined the street. We explored them with the unspent delight saved from our youth, our senses enchanted by the gleaming brass, polished wood and the lush scent of tobacco.

Antique bookstores drew us in, and we spent hours exclaiming over our finds. I ran my fingers over the smooth leather covers and breathed the scent of ancient paper. As usual, I favored the most loved and abused of the books, while Marie found the gilt edges of the classics. Her sharp mind craved the meat of the master poets, while I was content to be soothed by the romantics. She knew a bookstore that sported an extensive English section. The morning wafted by in a haze of dust.

Lunchtime found us at an outdoor cafe, books propped open between us, each of us reading passages of poetry to the other. I sipped my mocha while she drank her cappuccino. Nearby, a fountain bubbled its music. It was as if we were in college again, minus the hunger. Marie was at home in Paris, and I relaxed. Given time, I could learn the language and come to love this city.

I was contemplating buying a sketch from a local street artist when Marie looked up from her Dante and asked, "Do you believe in Evil?"

"You mean God and the Devil, Heaven and Hell, that sort of thing?"

"I don't know. I guess. I'm thinking more of Evil as a living force."

It seemed more than a rhetorical question for her. "I've seen evil in people's spirits, good too. But Evil as an entity? I don't know."

Marie picked a splinter of something out from under her nail and then met my eyes. "I think I saw it the other day. I'm wondering if Dante was writing about something he had seen."

I tried to laugh. "I guess it's possible." I gestured at the city in general. "There are enough churches here, I'd think you'd be finding God first, though."

She gave me one of the looks she was so good at that I could never master. With that one withering glance, she made it clear I'd crossed a line and disappointed her. She'd hoped for more understanding. I felt miserable and reached out to grasp her fidgeting hands. "I'm sorry, Marie. I don't have any answers. You know me. I joke about what I don't understand. Whatever you saw, I trust you. If you say you met the Devil, I believe you."

"Not the Devil, but one of his friends, maybe." She shivered and shook off the mood. "Don't mind me. Let's move on before I get morbid."

I wanted to ask questions, but couldn't think of how to approach her. She seemed so fragile, so disconcerted by whatever had happened, it felt best to let her share bits with me as she felt comfortable. The longer I was with her, the more certain I became. Something bad had happened to her after I had the nightmare.

After lunch, we went to the Louvre. Her company had given her passes, so we could spend several afternoons here.

The glass pyramid of the entrance awed me into silence. By tacit agreement, we began with the Mona Lisa. Tourists were everywhere. Each time someone took a forbidden flash photograph, the room would go pitch dark. I found the repeated experience unnerving. Marie brushed against me in the dark and let out a gasp. "Let's go somewhere else," I suggested, and we moved on to other rooms, ending our afternoon with a study of Raphael.

"He was only 37 when he died," she pointed out.

"Why is it that I'm the artist and you know more about these painters than I do?" I asked in frustration.

"I study. You draw?"

I looked closer at one of the paintings. "I remember reading once that he died from an over-dose of sex."

Marie's laugh was light and ironic with a hint of disapproval. "More like medical error. It does help if you tell your doctor what ails you."

"Was that what happened?"

Marie's attention was captured by a painting.

"Marie?"

"Hmmm?" She seemed trapped in a maze of thought.

I looked at the painting. "Saint Michael Overwhelming the Demon?"

"You know, he changed his view of demons between his two versions of this painting. In the earlier one, the demon is almost dragon-like. In the later one, the demon looks more like the angel. Makes me wonder what he saw to change his imagined vision."

"Aren't angels and demons the same thing?"

"What?"

"Maybe he decided that demons were just fallen angels."

"There are different schools of thought on that." Marie looked back at the painting, seeming fascinated by the creature under St. Michael's foot. "Maybe he heard of the grigori."

"The who?"

"A type of angel...or angelic like creature. Supposed to watch over mankind. They intermarried with humanity and legend has it that they were the ones who brought witchcraft into the world."

"So does that make them angels or demons?"

"I haven't figured that out yet."

She glanced at the painting one last time before turning her mind away. "I'm starting to get hungry. Shall we break for dinner? I want to take you to Chez Gabriel."

We wandered out and walked down a side street, looking for the cafe. Marie turned around and realized we'd come out on the wrong side of the museum.

"You're going to love this. Small, quiet, great service...."

As we walked, I found myself staring at the stoplights in frustration. They didn't seem to be in the right place. At last, I realized that the lights were where one was expected to stop as opposed to across the street.

A car screeched to a halt next to us, barely in time for the light.

Marie was a few steps behind me, her face turned away to search for the cafe. An elephant of a man dressed in black got out of the car. Another came from a candle shop to my right. The shopper pushed Marie to the ground. She fell with a cry of pain.

"Hey!" I'd barely turned to help when her attacker grabbed my shoulder. I dropped my packages and tried to fight him off, kicking and punching with as much effect as if he'd been the tree trunk he resembled. I screamed for help despite my tightening chest.

The other man grabbed my arm and they dragged me into the car. My stomach churned and I felt weak, my mind trying to catch up to events. Marie's terror made a grab for my soul.

I could hear her yelling, "Stop!"

In less than a breath, I had been deposited in the car next to the man who reeked of incense and it sped off, leaving behind Marie and echoing gunshots.

Chapter 5

Here is the Hunter —
he calls from high mountains,
echoes through woods,
past rivers and fountains.

See him lift high
his horn of great sound.
Hear him call forth
to Hawk and to Hound.

I heard the Hunter
once and forever.
Beware the Hunter —
from life he is severed.
— Herne, Annalise Phenix

[Paris, France — Dana]

Dana! She opened a link to my mind that stunned me with its intensity and panic.

I tried to look back, but the candle scented man on my right demanded my attention. “You were supposed to bring us the information, Marie.”

I stared at him. He thought I was Marie...so he had never met her...only had a general description. I tried to think of something clever...something Marie would say. “I’ve been busy. I had to get the information together.”

“You had time for the Louvre.”

"There is always time for the Louvre."

"You've been entertaining. You must not value your friend very much."

"Why?"

"Because if you don't give us the information we want, we might decide to pick her up. She looked like she could be fun."

I tried to look casual and in control. "She's just someone I met."

"She's a friend from college....someone you've known for years. Why don't we go back and get her?" He let go of me and reached forward to tap the driver.

"That won't be necessary."

"I didn't think you'd like that. So, you'll tell Anna what she wants to know?"

"What is this about? We were supposed to meet next week."

"Nice try. We changed the meeting last night. When you didn't show up, Anna got mad. I thought you learned not to irritate her in Japan."

I didn't say anything. I could see no way to get away from them. One behemoth sat on each side of me...and I couldn't tell them apart except by their smell. "Are you two twins?"

They looked at each other and barked a laugh. The one on my left, who had been silent, spoke up. "Anna said you were cocky."

"It's hard to find two people who look so much alike, isn't it?" I was babbling, but couldn't stop myself.

"Shut up," commented the unscented man on my left.

Good, shutting up would help. I could feel Marie's panic, mixed with my own as she reached out to strengthen the link between us. How would I pull this off? How had they found us? Marie had been so sure that she had lost them. What clue had been left? Or was it that we had gone to the Louvre — a predictable place for us to go?

The tiny car raced through streets with names I did not know and couldn't begin to pronounce. My escorts were a solid presence on either side, menacing and yet I hoped their bulk would be protection in the accident I felt must be imminent. I lost track of the turns and was almost relieved when we pulled to a stop in front of an empty shop. The twins pushed me into the building, oblivious to the cobwebs and dust on the staircase that led to the basement.

It had been years since I'd heard Marie's thoughts so clear in my head. ***Where are you? You've got to get away.*** Of course, they were my own thoughts as well.

No kidding, was the best answer I could manage. I did not concentrate on the details of my location. I didn't want her here. She'd opened at least a crack in her shielding, allowing me to sense her fear along with her words. If the link was strong enough, she'd be able to track me down. I tried to shut her out and found that her abilities were much stronger than mine.

Tell them who you are, crossed my mind.

That won't work. I want them to think I'm you so you can get away. The longer I was able to keep up the farce, the better.

Marie's frantic touch was laced with the scent of roses that I had always associated with her. I relaxed into that scent, blocking out the frantic messages she was sending.

"Here she is, Anna," the more talkative one offered as he shoved me into a room and stood behind me with his companion.

When Anna looked up, I knew my plan had backfired. The sculpted features changed from calm control to amazement. I watched her ivory face turn red with suppressed anger.

"So that's how you found us," I commented. The metallic taste in my throat echoed the adrenalin surge rushing toward my pounding heart. I couldn't blame anyone but myself for this disaster. I had rambled on and on for hours as we flew,

telling "Margaret" all about my plans. I'd even told her where I was staying so that she could call the cab for me.

"You idiots!" Anna's petite hands hovered in the air before she slammed them against her thighs. "This isn't Marie...this is Dana."

The twins looked at me in surprise.

"She said she was Marie," one of them said.

Anna gazed at the faces of her two guards and then stepped closer, inspecting me eye to eye. "You're dumber than I thought." I watched the pulse beat in the vein at her throat.

"What did you do with the baby?"

"That? That's an orphan. She's already back with her foster parents. She served her purpose. You told me everything I needed to know. It was almost worth putting up with the little brat."

I had never felt so stupid. She looked into my eyes, seeming to search for answers, and I looked away, finding fascination in the dusty floor.

"We can go back for the other one," suggested Mr. Quiet.

"No you can't. If you'd gotten Marie, then you could have gone back for this one. Marie is too smart to go back to the hotel. We'll have to pick up her trail again as soon as we can." She ran a manicured finger down my cheek, leaving a thin scratch. "Dana will help us."

I glared at her.

"I wouldn't know where to look."

Marie's voice was insistent in my head. ***You don't know anything. Agree with them. Do whatever they want. Get away...now.***

"I think Marie will find you."

There were no chairs in the abandoned store. The twins left me sitting on the floor with my back against the wall and went upstairs to watch for any sign of a rescue attempt.

Anna and I watched each other. Eventually, I broke the silence. "Why are we waiting? Marie isn't coming."

Anna glared at me angrily. "Because I haven't any better ideas at the moment."

"Keeping me won't bring Marie here — she doesn't know where I am."

"I'm betting she will figure it out," Anna replied.

"How?" I had a sinking feeling she knew.

"You forget...I've read your letters for years. The two of you are closer than many sisters. You have a way of knowing where each other is, what each other is thinking, that sort of thing. I don't claim to understand it, but you've commented on it enough. I'm betting you're pretty scared right now. That ought to get the message through to Marie."

"If we're too upset, we can't communicate."

Anna denied this with a shake of her pony tail. She knew too much about us. She walked over to the desk that sat abandoned in the room, brushed across the surface in frustration and sat down on a corner of it. "This place is filthy," she grumbled.

I leaned back against the wall and focused on the motes of dust dancing in the artificial lighting. I was very much in contact with Marie, and didn't want to be.

You've got to tell me where you are, she insisted.

No. Besides, I don't know.

Dana, you can't handle these people. I can.

Obviously.

You're being difficult. Marie let her frustration flow through the link. ***I don't need you to be stubborn right now. Don't be brave. Don't be stupid. Just picture the front of the building. Look out a window or something.***

Nope. No windows.

Dana, listen. These people are violent. What they're after is important to them. I need to get you out of there.

Your coming here is not going to help.

Will you knock it off! This is my problem. Marie was panicked. My lack of cooperation was making her frantic.

I glanced at Anna who had pulled a comic book out of a bag and sat reading it, pouncing on each page as if it held vital data. ***Seems like it's my problem now. Why don't you tell me what you're supposed to say. I'll feed it to them and they'll let me go.***

Comic book? I looked again at Anna's reading material. "That's Marie's."

She glared at me. "Of course. I know you gave her the information, but it is too well hidden. We need Marie to interpret it for us."

My mind flashed to the disk hidden in my suitcase. "I didn't give Marie anything. Those are just comic books."

"You wouldn't know you had it. Your precious SciTech kept you in the dark: spoiled and stupid." She leaned towards me. "But that makes you the weak link, doesn't it?" She went back to flipping the pages of the comic as if she hoped the secrets would be flung loose in the turning.

The disk made me think of Kevin. I tried to reach out to him, but his mind was as closed as Marie's had been these last few weeks. Whatever else might be true, one thing I knew: my friends' abilities had developed while mine had not. I'd need to work on strengthening my psionics if I was going to live outside of the cocoon Don had kept me in.

There were tracks in the dust on the floor...small footprints. I projected a distracting thought to Marie as she demanded details. ***Rats. I don't like rats.*** The mundane wisp of information made Marie angrier, but I didn't care. If I could just concentrate on enough distractions, Marie might never find me. Better yet, she might ***give up and get out of the country.***

Not likely. Rats were the least of Marie's worries. ***I hope one of them bites you.***

I smiled. ***At last we get to find out which of us is the more stubborn.***

Me. Never was a question. Listen, Dana — I'm being paid to deal with these people. Just tell me where you are

and I'll come. We have a pleasant conversation, and we all go home.

Marie had never lied to me before. I knew she'd been hurt last time, and she would be in more danger if she fell into their hands again. Anna had made it clear: I was useless to her. Through the link, the lie flared and echoed like a scream.

Last time they tried to shoot you.

I caught a flicker of denial before Marie tightened the link, trapping her emotions before they slipped into my head.

No, that wasn't the last time, was it? What was she so determined to hide? Something she'd said earlier...something about evil?

Dana...just drop it. But the images were there in her mind, too strong to hide without breaking the link. Now that I knew what I was looking for, I could see what had happened. She'd gone to give them the falsified information. They'd known it was not real. The images of the beating that followed were hazy — only partially from her attempt to hide the pain. She'd passed out just as her senses were overwhelmed by another being in the room, something not human. She'd woken up in an alley. It had taken weeks in a hospital and a ton of makeup to hide it from me for this long. Now that I looked, I saw the signs in her behavior, the way she'd flinched when I brushed against her.

Rage boiled inside of me and my stomach churned. ***What has SciTech gotten you into?*** I'd always pictured Marie as fragile — a willowy beauty with wisps of blond hair framing her classic features. I knew there was more beneath the surface, but chose to ignore the parts I didn't understand.

Dana, my position with SciTech has changed. I take risks like this. It's my job — not yours.

Anna glanced up, and her eyes narrowed as she took in my rapid breathing. My face must have been a billboard for rage.

"Is she coming?"

"No."