

LUC VORS

A large white wolf with glowing orange eyes is the central focus, standing in a dark, misty forest. The wolf's head is in the foreground, looking towards the viewer. In the background, a woman with long blonde hair, wearing a dark, flowing dress, stands with her back to the camera, looking towards the wolf. The forest is filled with tall, dark trees and a hazy, blue-green light filtering through the canopy.

WHERE SLEEPING DOGS LIE

HER MIND IS A WAR ZONE

Alyson is in love with her therapist, Doctor Alan Greene, and while the feeling is mutual, Alan has a job to do—cure Alyson of her addiction to killing. Together with his mentor, Alan begins the process of treating her for PTSD, pulling the addiction out by its roots. With each session, however, the beast inside of her awakens, hungry for a fresh kill.

Hot on Alyson's trail is FBI profiler, Doctor Roni Price, a forensic psychologist struggling with her own addiction—sex—and Alan is just her type. Not to worry, though. The only interest Alan has in Roni is figuring out how to keep her from knowing he slept with the killer.

A page turning thriller with twist after twist, *Where Sleeping Dogs Lie* is a trip through the psychotic wonderland of a killer whose innocence somehow remains intact.

Sound impossible? Wait till you meet “The Wolves” and Alyson’s “Sleeping Dogs.”



LUC VORS is a native Texan with education in Art, Psychology, Biology and Music. His research includes studies in the psychology of human consciousness, free will, and creativity. When he isn't writing, Luc enjoys composing music, painting, drawing, photography and inventing games.

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Where Sleeping Dogs Lie

Luc Vors



LUC VORS
PUBLICATIONS, LLC

Where Sleeping Dogs Lie

We'll speak thee a place
That sits low and high
A deep crescent valley
Where sleeping dogs lie

A place made of secrets
'Neath mountainous peaks
Where the fog never lifts
And the blind puppy shrieks

A war here is coming
Between wolf and hound
Where inside the chaos
The order is found

But tell not a soul
Keep quiet and still
Or the beast that is standing
Inside you will kill

Hush says the mama
So hush, not a sound
Bury bones deep
In the backyard ground

Where inside the chaos
The order is found
Deep in the backyard ground...

The Fore

Chapter 1

Cattails sway just below a giant, flat rock jutting over a cove in the lake. Its bulk is buried deep into the bank, surrounded by an overgrowth of plants on all sides. From the water below, Alyson can be seen peeking over the rock's edge, her head sunk into the puffy shoulders of her nightgown, her arms dangling.

"Dobson!" yells a familiar voice. "To The Fore! Now! Back away!"

Alyson's eyes are fathoms deep and slanted in that Betty Davis kind of way, sleepy at the edges. Glancing down, she sees Koi fish swimming in the indifferent waters below.

What a thing, to be a fish.

One of the cattails reaches perfectly where the tip of her middle finger is. Without effort, she flicks it, watching it rock away then back.

Flick

Away...

...then back.

Strong mountains form a crescent around the lake, while dark vegetation spills over its banks into the water. The air is cool, allowing thick fog to hover just above the lake's glassy surface. It is always morning here, always gray.

But none of it is real. The mountains, the lake, the fish. None

of it.

“Alyson?” asks the same voice.

Her therapist describes this place, this Valley, as a “complex structure of the mind,” but she always called it her imagination on steroids. It is her safe place, where she goes when remembering the trauma of her past gets too intense. The trip is instantaneous, always under the escort of two imaginary German Shepherds, one named Dexter, the other Dobson. Today, they sit behind her on either side of an opening in the woods. Sphinxes guarding a sacred passage.

Flick.... She watches the Cattail rock slowly away, then...

“Alyson,” the voice repeats.

“Hmm...?” She doesn't want to look up. It's perfect here in The Cove.

Flick...

“Alyson, I need you to pay attention.” The voice is controlled but urgent.

She releases a deep sigh as the imaginary Shepherds stand, ready to lead her through. In an instant, she is brought back into general reality, back into The Fore, as it has come to be known, where she and her therapist are in the middle of a session. Looking up, she realizes something bad has just happened.

Doctor Alan Greene's jogging suit has blood on it, and behind him, next to his desk, Doctor Kreige's body lies dead on the floor.

The desk sits in the office portion of the suite. It has a small brass lamp on it, shaded by a green globe. Token cup of pencils. Token cup of pens. His token office phone has too many buttons, most of which lost their use decades ago. To the left, a heavy office door hangs halfway open. On the other side, a large window with red velvet curtains overlooks the courtyard below.

Behind the desk, built in shelves line the wall, floor to ceiling. They are stocked with thick books and peer reviewed journals, several of which the good doctor (and the dead one) penned themselves. Arranged among them are framed certificates, degrees, awards, and letters of recognition...all of which should be hanging instead of propped.

The front of the office opens out into a larger room, where a wall once stood between them. It has hardwood floors and a vaulted ceiling. A red Chinese rug sits in the exact middle, staging an

ensemble of sofas bordered by stylish end and coffee tables, all under a suspended rectangle of track lighting that hazes the cabinetry in the background. A fireplace sits nestled into the far wall, facing Alan's office. Candlesticks mark the corners of its mantel. A varnished painting of fishing boats moored in a quiet harbor hovers above. The ceiling in this room is several feet taller than the one in Alan's office. And in here, steps echo.

“Alyson, I want you to listen to me, very carefully.”

“Okay,” she says.

“Slowly, now. There is a knife in your right hand. I want you to put it down.”

“I...what?” Alyson sees it and instantly tosses it away. The bloody knife thumps on the carpet of the office. Alan holds his hands out in her direction, visually keeping her steady. Doctor Kreige's bloodless face stares at the ceiling with his jaw relaxed open.

“Easy, Ally,” Doctor Greene says.

She feels dizzy. “Alan?” Without effort, The Cove emerges back into her consciousness, and the office begins a fade-to-white.

“No, no,” Alan says. “Don't worry, I've got you. I need you to stay here. Can you trust me?”

Her body frozen, her eyes frantically search for a stronghold. She nods.

In The Fore, the imaginary Shepherds stand in a corner on the deep side of the larger room, watching, listening. A Doberman Pinscher is there, too, pacing behind Alyson with eyes locked on Doctor Greene. Her name is Sasha. A speckled Great Dane, named Pepper, sits closer on the Chinese rug while The Mighty Chesterfield King, a black, Giant Schnauzer, leans into her leg just enough to let her know he's there. In front of her, Red Rover, a solid-red Pitbull with glaring eyes, lies all the way down with his chin hovering just above the hardwood floor. Gwen, a Boxer, and a St. Bernard, named Diane, sit on the other side of Alyson, opposite Chesterfield King. Alan can't see them, of course, but he knows they're there, a product of his and the dead man's new “Housing Method,” a cutting-edge form of hypnotherapy quickly gaining notoriety as the next step in the treatment of PTSD.

That is, until now.

Now, everything's different.

Alyson's hands stretch forward and splay out as if to maintain her balance. In The Valley, she wears her white cotton nightgown,

but here in The Fore, she is dressed in her customary combat boots, jeans and white T-shirt, all covered in an oversized canvas coat of standard Army green. Here in The Fore, she hates dresses, but in the solitude of The Valley, she wears as little as possible.

The Valley. It took months to create—fences, locks, forests with trees that almost seem to grow together, clouds and fogs, holes and caves, and hard to reach places. Everything is surrounded by vast seas of prairie, meadow, and grasses mixed with all manner of prickly things. Complete with its own set of guard dogs, all of it had been meticulously designed, then clinically installed as controlled defense mechanisms—powerful symbols to be used as containers for all the horrible memories of her life...so they might eventually be remembered, one by one, without being *relived*. It was brilliant.

“Listen,” says her therapist, “I need you to remain calm. The police are on the way and—”

The Dogs gather around her tightly, some of them growling.

“Trixie, what the fuck!” demands the shiny red Pit. He rises in attack position with eyes trained on Doctor Greene.

“Shut up, Red,” snaps Chester, the Giant Schnauzer. “And stop calling her that.”

“All of you, quiet,” says Pepper. “Go ahead, Ally. We’re here.”

“Alan?” she asks.

“Stay calm,” Alan says. “I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

“Like hell you will,” says a voice not Alyson's. Her body stoops down and picks up the knife, then lunges toward Alan, tackling him to the floor. His head makes a large *thunk!*, and the room blackens as red and blue lights paint the windows from the courtyard below.

In the fadeout, Alan’s thoughts linger to the regret of knowing, first hand, how soft and delicious Alyson’s body feels.

Chapter 2

Dark uniforms rush into Alan's office with their guns drawn, hips jingling with assorted gear. When he wakes up, Alan's hands are wrapped in gauze that is already starting to turn red. Throbbing pain glows in his palms as the room blurs back into vision. Shoes step carefully, while white, latexed hands place small, numbered markers next to areas of concern. Flashes of light—*Thp!*—capture evidence. *Thp!* Delicate and twisting brushes further dirty the not-so-clean surfaces of things for fingerprints. One person dangles a Zip-Lock bag open, while another carefully lowers the bloody knife into it. They'd found it placed in his desk drawer, which had been pulled wide so no one could miss it.

Sergeant Terry Hayes squats down, leaning his balding head into view. His hands have the same gloves on as the others, and they dangle loosely between his knees. "He's coming around," he says to the room.

Thp! goes another camera flash.

A medic shines a penlight in Alan's eyes—as if the camera hadn't done a good enough job at blinding him—and helps him sit up. "Here you go. Drink," he says, holding a sports bottle filled with water.

Instinctively, Alan reaches for the bottle, but the medic says, "Nope," holding it for him. The red in his bandages continues to seep as Alan raises his mouth to the bottle. The medic squirts in cool water.

"Just sit for a while, Doc," says Hayes. His hair started thinning in his twenties, and all but disappeared once he reached his forties. His face is tired and much older than he really is, yet he is a handsome man, his wrinkles providing him a chiseled look. "Do you

remember anything?"

Alan takes another squirt of water, searching his memory. But his mind bends to what Alyson's skin feels like: pure softness sprinkled with a layer of baby powder. "Alyson," he says, coughing. "Woods—p'hh! Alyson Woods. She's one of my patients."

Arrogance has its price. It narrows the mind, makes excuses, exceptions. It rationalizes.

"A patient of yours?" Hayes asks.

Alan nods and winces as the medic gives him a shot for the pain.

Sergeant Noah Townsend walks in through the creaking door of the larger room, returning his .45 to its shoulder holster. His boots echo, adding to an already dominating presence. Six-foot-four, he's as tall as he is handsome. His African skin glints sharply when the light hits that clean-shaven head, and his almond shaped eyes make women want to stare. He wears clean smelling cologne, loves his boot collection, and keeps himself fit by teaching self-defense classes at the local Y.

Three uniforms follow in after him. "Nothing, so far," Townsend says to Hayes. His voice is smooth and strong. It, too, echoes. "This and the bottom floor are secured. I got eight more searching the third and fourth, but it's gonna take a while. Campus security didn't see anything. They're on their way to make sure we got every part of the building." He turns to one of the uniforms. "Get with campus. I want to know every corner of this building. You got me?"

The cop nods, leading the other two out.

Hayes helps Alan up onto the gurney, checking the bump on the back of his head. "Looks like you got a nice one there. Are you okay to talk?"

Alan immediately realizes he isn't wearing a shirt, and the legs of his jogging pants are all but shredded, thanks to the emergency crew. Other bandages adorn his skin. Legs, stomach, clavicle, arms. "I don't know," he says. "I guess."

"Yeah," Hayes says with a sigh. "Looks like she was trying to add to your collection. How'd you get those other scars?"

Alan tries to turn toward Doctor Kreige's direction. His remains peek out from the half-zipped body bag. Alan had used the sleeves of his jogging suit as tourniquets for Kreige's legs, his socks for the arms. "Not my first attack," he grunts. "Used to work

security at a ranch for..." He reaches for the back of his head, but the medic puts his hand back down. "...foster kids. What time is it?"

It isn't a lie, but the scars aren't from working at a ranch. She had cut him before.

Hayes checks his watch. "Eight fifty-two. What do you remember?"

Remember? I remember we couldn't get close enough. Our bodies were in the way. Instantly he shakes it off. *Get a grip.* Letting the others help him onto the gurney, Alan holds his hands out in front, making sure they don't bump into anything. The movement causes him to be aware of the other fresh cuts on his body. "Hal and I had—"

"Hal?" asks Sergeant Hayes.

"Doctor Kreige. We'd finished for the day. Alyson was my only appointment. I changed clothes and went for a run. When I came back in, I saw..." Alan shudders as he recalls the image of his door sitting half-open. "I saw my light on, and..." His eyes lock on the body bag. Flashes of him and Doctor Kreige reel through his mind. Conventions. Walking through the campus. Clinking glasses of scotch, smiling. The fireplace at Kreige's house. The fireplace here. Dorothy, Kreige's wife. Cigars. Dinners. Parties. A patient's arm. A soldier's tears. Alyson in the dark, naked under a light from Heaven.

"Running?" asks Hayes, bringing him back.

"Jogging." Alan tries to remember. He thinks of a student in his class on aggression last year. Her name was Amanda, or Mandy or something. Her lips were perfect for kissing, dipping and curling at the corners. "...and I saw..." His head begins to swim. Dana. Another student. She was a junior. Long fingers that loved to scratch his back when she "made it."

Thp! The cameraman has gloves on, too. *Thp!* He takes several shots of the desk where a lot of blood spilled and smeared. *Thp!* The file drawer has been tampered with. Knife marks. No handprints. A small replica of Janus had been thrown across the room.

Janus. The Roman god of transition and new beginnings. A therapist in deified form.

Alan's head droops to the side. "Damn it, Jeffries," says Hayes. "What'd you give him?"

The medic looks up from his tackle box. "Morphine, man. Dude's got canyons in his hands. He'll need surgery for sure."

Sergeant Townsend steps out of the larger room into the main hallway. "Hold on a second," he says into his radio mic. It statics out

with a chirp when he releases the button. One of the campus police has arrived, carrying blueprints. He squeezes the mic's button and bursts of static reopen the line: "Okay. We've got 'em. I'm on my way down." He calls out to Hayes that he's going outside, and his boots can be heard thumping on the hallway carpet, then stepping down the marble stairs.

"This doesn't look good," says a voice. It's the duster, Paul Thomas, a slim, older man of extraordinary taste in small antiques, like reading glasses and pocket watches. Hayes puts his hands on his hips as the duster rises to a height rivaling Townsend's. "I'm pretty much done here. I'll let you know when the results come in, but it doesn't look promising."

"Why?" asks Hayes. "Not enough prints?"

The duster scoffs. "You kidding? I stopped counting at twenty-six."

Hayes frowns. The duster is well paid for a reason. "Just twenty-six prints?" he asks, hoping his hope wouldn't sound too naive.

"Nope," says the duster.

Hayes sighs. "You mean twenty-six *different* sets."

"Yup."

Chapter 3

In his new hospital gown and old hospital bed, Alan stares down at his bandaged hands. The mattress cover crinkles beneath the sheets. God knows how many people had peed on it. A twenty-something doctoral student named Simóne lies next to him. She has the confident build of a volleyball player, lean, yet muscular arms and legs, permitting her a competitive reach over the net. She has strawberry blonde hair, and her lips are not thin, but the kind that will be.

He doesn't want to disturb her, but his backside itches something awful. He tries using the rough mattress cover to his advantage, but it won't work. And forget about his hands—they're useless. The itch would last, too, if he didn't get someone to help him.

The surgery had taken seven hours.

“Okay,” says a man in scrubs, walking in, flipping pages in a metal chart. Health and good smells radiate from his clean body and fresh clothes. His arms and chest are shaved and well formed, with bulging veins and muscles. His sturdy face is framed by salt and pepper hair and an impressive jaw. “So we managed to save your left hand,” he says without looking up. “Injuries to the right were superficial, just a few stitches. You can take the bandages off that one in a day or so, but the left is going to take several weeks. You have good bones. They saved you.”

Good bones? What the hell are good bones? What would bad ones have done?

The surgeon gives him a courtesy look intended to suggest concern. “I'm Doctor Cavanaugh,” he says as he tucks the chart

under his arm.

Simóne rubs her eyes and sits up with no words. She was awake but didn't want to disturb Alan. Doctor Cavanaugh sees her tan leg sliding off the side of the bed. He notices it just a hair-second too long, but she's used to it.

Alan introduces himself, knowing he didn't need to. "It's good to meet you, Doctor. I'm Alan Greene."

"Yes. I read several of your articles on post trauma recovery," he says returning to the chart. "Good stuff. I'm a vet, myself." No doubt, he liked the ones on PTSD for war veterans.

"Well, Hal did most of the wri...ting." It was true, and for a fleeting moment, Alan believes his friend and mentor is still alive. Then the flashes of blood, Alyson's face, and Kreige's dead eyes slam into his consciousness, reminding him that it only *feels* like Hal is still alive. He shudders on the inside, trying not to show it, forcing himself to stay present. *Quick, Alan. Say something.* "A veteran, huh? What branch?"

"Army. I was a medic, of course." Medics saw the worst of it. Their own men blown up, trying to stay alive while they pick up arms and legs on the other side of the street. His speech is short and to the point, but he doesn't come across as in a hurry. More like his words are somehow expensive. "I see no reason to keep you here," he says. "The other wounds shouldn't give you any trouble. Their stitches can come out in a couple of days, too. But that left hand needs changing twice a day, for at least ten days, plenty of Neosporin." He jots things down and tears off slips of paper, handing them to Simóne. "These'll keep the pain manageable. Make sure you drink lots of water and keep the salt to a minimum, none if you can manage it. If you're not pissing at least once an hour, you're not drinking enough. Got me? It'll keep the inflammation from hurting so much and steady the healing. But only if you drink a lot." He mutters something to himself. He knows his advice will be ignored, but he has to give it anyway. "Go home, Doctor Greene," he says. Walking away, he points in the air as if to emphasize his advice. "Remember. Water. No salt." He pauses in the doorway, and without turning around, he says "Got me?"

"Gotcha," Alan says. "Water."

And with an extra point in the air, "Good man," the surgeon leaves.

"Well," breathes Simóne, snuggling back into Alan, who winces

in response. Her voice is naturally raspy, struggling between sex and intellect. "I guess we should get you dressed, huh? That does give me more ideas. Wanna play doctor when we get home?" She immediately catches herself.

Seriously? My best friend just got murdered by my own patient. But he forgets how young she is. She even lives in the campus apartments. Not a dorm, but still keeping her walking distance from class. Alan knows not to visit her there. If any of the students saw him go in, they would instantly know why, furthering his reputation as one of *those* professors.

Alan's feet dangle from the edge of the bed and his head won't stop tilting. "Ooo."

"Come on," Simóne says, dipping his legs into a fresh pair of jeans. "Ups-a-daisy."

The ride back is nearly four hours, but the trip was worth it. Doctor Cavanaugh is the best hand surgeon in The Four Corners, theirs being Colorado. Alan fades *in* more than *out* of consciousness as the latest dose of pain killers begins to wear off, the pain, of course, worsening by the minute. Simóne had decided to take the top down on her convertible. It was a good call, too. The cool, open air feels good, and the sound of the wind helps to distract. Simóne tries to keep him talking for some reason, when she should probably just allow him the whirl of the road. His thoughts drift anyway, though, despite her prattling.

"Sergeant Hayes was there last night," she says. "He stayed longer than everyone else. He said to call him as *absolutely* soon as possible. Some other lady was there, too, and I could swear she was from out of town, because she didn't say anything to anyone, just hung out." She taps her temple. "But I knew she was there for you. Also, you got a million and one messages. News stations, papers, practically everyone from the department. I'll sift through them when we get back." Simóne pauses. "And Alan?"

He hears her and drifts into the present, his half-shut eyes slitting open. "Mm?"

Simóne puts her hand on his leg, and he almost flinches. "Dorothy called, too."

Alan stares down at his bandaged hands. "Yeah," he sighs, reaching in the back for his pills. Simóne notices, and with one eye on the road she retrieves them from the side pocket of a complimentary hospital bag. She holds the steering wheel with her

knee and cracks open the bottle, giving him two instead of the prescribed one. He accepts, of course, without argument. "I know," he says, popping the pills in his mouth without anything to drink. "I'll call her when I get home." What will he say? *Dot, I'm sorry*. No. *Dorothy, I may have seen this coming*. Hell no.

His home doesn't look as new on the outside as it does within: large, two-story, lodge style, with treated wood siding, brown and rustic. Nestled within the northern Colorado piney woods, it stares out at the lake. The trees surround the property on all sides, leaving only a curved, white-gravel driveway that leads in from the main road. There is a long, open-air carport with a baby blue pick-up truck, a white '69 Charger, and a modest fishing boat inside. His Blazer is still on campus, parked outside the Psych building. As they pull in, Alan notices a small, blue sedan waiting in front of the house. A woman with dark brown hair rests against it with her arms crossed. She is wearing a skirt suit and has deep-amber Ray Ban sunglasses on that make her face look smaller than it is.

Chapter 4

Summer has ended, and the Fall semester at Praetor University has only just begun. The weather has cooled down significantly, but the first snow is still yet to come. It won't be long, though.

Simóne's convertible pulls in, her tires crackling against the popping gravel. "That's her," she says, nudging Alan. "The lady at the hospital."

Alan says nothing, peering through the sunlight.

They get out and Simóne gathers Alan's effects. "Yes?" asks Alan, walking up to greet her.

She promptly extends a hand, but notices the bandages. "Oh, right. Sorry. Well, I'm shaking your hand in spirit." Turning, she makes cursory glances around the property. "It's really quiet here."

Alan forces a smile. "One of the things I like most. Is there something I can help you with?"

"I'm Veronica Price. That's Agent Poole in the car. He's with, I mean, we're with the FBI."

A young man in a white shirt and dark blue tie finishes typing on a laptop and shuts it. He places his gun into its shoulder holster, and steps out of the car. "Sorry," says the young man. "If I don't get my thoughts down right away, I lose them. I'm Agent Poole, FBI."

Simóne steps in. "Hey, can't you people come back some other time? A lot's happened and he needs his rest."

"Sorry Ma'am," says Poole, grabbing a rolling file case out of the back seat. "I'm afraid we need to do this now instead of later. We'll only be a few minutes."

Alan waves Simóne down. "It's alright. Come on. We'll have to

go through the side door.”

He flips the light switch with the side of his arm, and the kitchen glistens awake. Kashmir white granite countertops, stainless steel appliances, white cabinets, large, sandstone floor tiles. Pots and pans hanging from an overhead rack. The cooking area has a large grill, six gas burners, and a wok furnace attached to its own propane tank, all under a massive vent. The restaurant size sinks with their special sprayers and sanitizer sit in front of a window that overlooks the lake through the party deck outside.

“Shoes off, please.” Alan escorts them through the kitchen and into the main living room. Nervous butterflies rattle his stomach, but he always did well with keeping up appearances. White leather sofas with custom-made glass coffee tables line two of the walls and extend outward on gray carpet. A fireplace sits in the middle of the room in natural stone masonry. Vaulted ceilings and matching picture windows display in full view the pine trees and lake. A built-in bar completes a lowered lounge area on the other side of the living room, and between there and the kitchen, is his favorite part of the house: an indoor/outdoor Jacuzzi that opens to the party deck.

The deck is enclosed in a light framework of posts and plywood under a corrugated tin roof, and it is wrapped in a series of mosquito screens. Multicolored fiesta lights weave through the cross beams of the tin roof and around the railings. Wooded steps go down from there to a path stretching to a pier with a ski boat tethered to it. Water skis and fishing equipment hang from racks on the guardrails.

“Everything but a television,” says Poole, checking the large front door. It’s new, and still needs to be painted. The door frame is also new, and Poole can barely make out some chips of paint that had splintered off underneath the replacement molding. Either the carpenter who installed it was careless and clumsy, or the previous door had been kicked in. He decides not to comment, which Alan notices with his clinical eye.

“Alan doesn’t like television,” says Simóne. “Waste of time, right Alan?”

Alan gives a quiet smile, tries popping open a bottle of pain medicine with his teeth and wrists. It drops and Simóne comes to his aid. “Here, I got it. Go sit down.” Her mothering. Normally he doesn't enjoy others fussing over him, but he can't deny the warmth. She’s happy to give him yet another dose of pain meds, but decides to allow the ones she handed him in the car a little more time to kick

in.

Alan seats himself at the kitchen table with his guests. “So, Agent Poole, Miss Price, what can I—”

“Roni, please.”

“And it’s *Doctor* Price,” says Poole. Roni sends Poole an admonishing glance.

“Sorry,” Alan says. “Roni, then.” He adjusts his torso inside his shirt while Simóne busies herself with something clinking in the blurry background. “What can I do for you two?”

Simóne sets glasses of ice water with mint and lemon on the table and joins them. Agent Poole glances at her and leans over to Alan. “I’m sorry, but we need to speak in private.”

Alan gives Simóne an apologetic look, and to her credit, she accepts gracefully. “Sure. I’ll just be upstairs getting your bed ready. She kisses his cheek and pads across the spongy living room floor to the staircase facing the front door. When she reaches the top, she sits at the edge just out of sight, leaning forward to listen.

Drips of condensation run off the glasses. Agent Poole reaches into his roller case and produces a large Zip-Lock bag. He puts on a vinyl glove and pulls Alyson’s chart out. “Okay,” he says. Alan can tell he is a rookie. Too disjointed, not enough routine in his voice and manner to suggest he’d done this enough times. “So. So, we’ve only had a little while to check things out, but Doctor Price needs to get a better idea about this patient of yours before she can...well. You see we think, or we have a theory, rather...”

“And Doctor Price? I take it you’re the profiler,” Alan says. “You’re not FBI, though. You only contract with them.” He rubs the side of his face with the edge of his wrist, noting something out of place. “You teach, too, right?”

“Forensic Psychology, yes.”

Alan dismisses it. “Lucky guess.” Roni gives him a doctor-to-doctor, don’t bullshit me look. She knows he was reading her. “Alright. It was your dress suit. Slate gray, conservative. The kind that plays it safe.” But there is something else.

“Huh?”

Alan breathes a sigh and lowers his head. The last thing he wants to do right now is his ego’s favorite: show off his skills at reading people. “You don’t like wearing suits,” he says. His ego wins, though. “I could tell by all the straightening. You’ve either got an old suit on that doesn’t fit anymore, or a new one you didn’t care to try

on before you bought it. And the skirt is shorter than you're comfortable with. In fact, it looks like you don't like skirts at all."

The muscles in her arms and hands twitch imperceptibly under her skin, responding to the unconscious intention to tug at the fabric to make it longer. He's right. She hates skirts.

"The only department at universities that wear suits are Business and Law. You didn't flash a badge, either. Neither did Agent Poole. And you take the lead, which says he's either nervous, still learning the ropes, or both. No disrespect." Poole swallows as inconspicuously as possible, deciding right there to be more confident, remembering his status, his worth. There's something else that doesn't fit, but Alan can't quite put his finger on it. Perhaps if the circumstances were different and he wasn't drugged up... "Your greeting says you're comfortable in a crowd, even guest speaking at large conventions, like me. Bottom line, you've got academia written all over you." Alan takes a breath. "It was mainly the suit, though."

...and something else. What is it? Something doesn't fit.

"Impressive," says Roni. "All that from a..."

"Not really." The pain in his hands begins to smooth out, the drugs drifting into his consciousness. Soon his feet and arms will start floating. "I'm sorry, I don't want to be rude, but if we could, I'd like to move things along." He sees her manicured fingernails. They are expertly painted in high gloss scarlet. That's it. She has a thing for nails. She has time for nails, *makes* time for nails.

Roni gives a gentle nod. "Sure."

Agent Poole places his hand on the file. "Well, you're the witness, Doctor Greene, probably the best witness an investigator could ask for, but your notes are worthless. They're short, and very general." He doesn't realize how transparent his intended rudeness is. The kid's definitely a rookie. "We'll need a lot more if we're going to catch this one."

Her name's Alyson, not 'this one.'

Alan looks down at the table, his right pinky finger tracing the details of its tile work. In his mind, he is still in the office, cradling Doctor Kreige's head, blood pooling on the office carpet. Suddenly, a flood of emotion overwhelms him and he blinks it away, deciding to ignore it. Then he sees Doctor Kreige's hand reaching up to grab his shoulder. This one is stronger. Blinking won't suffice. He has to shake his head now. In an instant, the emotions are blocked out and he has to force himself to remember. What was it Doctor Kreige

said to him? “He said he was sorry.” Alan watches the path of his pinky finger on the tiles. Another thought emerges, and he raises his head. “She had method.” And his thoughts drift again. What was the last thing he saw? What was it? There was something else.

Drop the knife, he thinks. Wasn’t that it? No, that’s not right. Something else happened. The memory of her lunging at him is gone, sequestered into post-traumatic repressions meant to save him from emotional overload. “...so they don’t freak out,” he’d said in his class on *Post Trauma and the Treatment of Abuse*. The pain meds are really taking over, now. Right? Is it the drugs? Or has his mind shut things out? He can feel his eyes responding less and less to his intentions.

“Sorry?” asks Roni. She and Poole exchange looks.

“Hm?” Alan catches himself. What was he saying? Something is wrong. He can’t remember anything. Whole blocks of time. Gone.

Roni repeats something he hadn’t heard just now. “You said she had method. What did you mean by that?”

Alan searches his swimming mind. He *was* cradling Kreige’s head. Right? The memory returns. *That’s right*. But it comes in disjointed flashes. She had cut him in strategic places: heels, the knees, elbows. She was disabling his tendons. She even managed to crush her knife into his vertebr...

Chapter 5

Kreige could barely speak. “I’m sorry, my boy,” he gurgled through the blood in his throat. Alan told him to keep still, try not to talk. Help is on the way. “I thought I knew what I was doing.” Alyson stood frozen in the rectangular stage light, her face transfixed, her wary in The Cove, flicking cattails while the Shepherds stood watch at Alan’s request. Pepper, Chesterfield King, and the others stood by in The Fore, all of them confused, wondering what Alan would do.

“He’s our only hope,” said Gwen, the Boxer. “Without him we’re all lost.”

Red Rover, the Pit, snarled and paced in front of Alyson, glaring at Alan. “Bullshit,” he said to himself, but loud enough for the others to hear. “We don’t need him. What we need is to get the hell out of here.”

“No,” said Chester. “None of us did this. Alan will help us.”

Red glared at Sasha, the Doberman. “Don’t you dare think this was my doing,” she said, glaring back.

Red stopped pacing. “Then who, Sasha? *You’re* the jealous one.”

“Enough!” snapped Pepper. “Argue about it later.”

“...and there was so much...” Alan’s mind teeters side to side as the tiles in the table seem to overlap. “...blood.” He glances at Roni to check her expression, then returns to the tiles. “He didn’t mean he was sorry about what just happened. He was sorry for

introducing us. Me and Alyson.”

“Okay?” Roni asks.

“But it wasn’t Hal who failed me. It was the other way around. I’d never encountered someone like her. Neither of us had. And I thought I could figure it out as I went along, but...” *I’m going to have to rethink all of this.* Rethink, indeed. He was sure it was Sasha who lunged at him. But now? No. If it were Sasha, there’d have been a glare in her eye. *Red, maybe?* He knew Red Rover was violent, but killing Kreige? He refuses to accept it was one of Alyson’s pack. *None of them could. Especially now, so close to the end of treatment. They were almost there!* “All except Ally.” His words hold little voice. *There’s got to be something else, something I missed.*

“Doctor Greene?” asks Roni. She sees the fog thickening in his eyes, part drug, part loss. “Alan?” Part confusion.

He flinches to attention. “Yeah?” *Keep clear, Alan, or you’ll really hit the slammer.* Alyson’s naked silhouette flashes into his mind, the light from behind her hinting at the red stain of blood on her hands. The light disappears with a door closing behind her, and she looks at him with that look. He had known that look. Adella Roskeif gave him the same look once. That was his first time seducing a student. She was platinum blonde, an exchange student from Bolivia. When he saw her in his Developmental Psychology class, he knew. That look that said *“Hi there. We’re going to do things together.”* Their bodies writhed for a whole weekend. Her favorite place was his Jacuzzi, deck-side, at sunset. She got her A for the semester, and that was that. By summer she was gone without so much as a goodbye.

So, wait. Who seduced who?

It didn’t matter.

“We may need to come back later,” says Roni.

“Yes,” Alan says. “Well, you have my number, but if I’m out here, you’ll need to use the land line. Nobody gets a signal this far out of town.” He tries smiling, but for some reason it doesn’t show. He’ll have to keep his wits extra sharp. One wrong answer and he could lose his license. Lose his license? Screw that! He’d become the bitch of one Mister Bubba Cellmate!

This couldn’t be true, could it? How could he have missed the signs? *“Regression always comes before they finally heal,”* he told his clinical classes, strolling around the room. *“Much as they want to, they don’t like letting go of their pathology. Too risky. Regressing keeps the world predictable.”*

Healing makes it precarious.”

Was that it? he thinks. *Had she regressed?* “Is there anything else?” Roni pulls a Polaroid photo from Alyson’s file. “I wouldn’t go by that picture,” he says. “She hardly looks like that anymore.”

The Polaroid shows a girl wrapped in a blanket she seems unwilling to give back. Her face is gaunt, malnourished, and looks to the left through long, dark, and freshly washed hair. Or is it just oily? Her cheeks are all but holes in the sides of her face, with eyes hovering in the wide sockets of her skull. Sunken temples complete the outline of her face’s bones. Her expression stares off, low. Numb. Barren. So pale, she is almost blue.

“Where does she live?” asks Poole.

“It’s in the file.”

Poole sends Roni a glance. “Are you sure it’s current?”

“Far as I know.”

“Meaning you don’t know.”

Alan rubs his forehead. The lights are starting to hurt. “I focus on the patient, Agent Poole. Not addresses.”

“Fair enough. Any family? Who else knows her?”

Alan breathes out a sigh. This has become irritating. “No. She’s a Human Services case, came straight from the hospital.”

“How does she come see you? What kind of car does she drive?”

“No car. She takes the bus. There’s a stop at the psych building.” *Careful what you say, here, Alan.*

“So, you don’t know where she lives,” Poole presses.

Alan reaches for the chart, but Poole picks it up. “Sorry. You’ll need to put on a pair of gloves. Here, hold on a minute.” He proceeds to reach into his rolling file cabinet.

Alan and his ego lean forward. This rookie needs to check himself before throwing around weight he hasn’t earned yet. “I need you to understand something, Agent Poole. I treat very sick people. People with severe and profound disorders. Not just your domestic violence case or car crash. I’m talking the lost causes, *worst* of the worst, okay? So, I’m going to need you to excuse me if I don’t pay attention to such petty details as addresses and car models. They’re in the chart. Now, you want an address? Or do you want to know if I *pay attention* to an address? Or are you just trying to show me who’s boss here? Maybe you think an interrogation in my own home will show me I need to be intimidated by you. Maybe you don’t realize

how green you're looking right now, how wet your ears. Still. Are."

Poole brushes it aside. "What kind is 'worst of the worst?'" he asks.

"War vets," Roni says, stepping in before Poole does any more damage. "Feral children. People who've been tortured. Ritualistic abuse. Sex slaves. What else... Human trafficking?"

Alan nods his head, and then tries propping his cheek, but the pain in his hands quickly reminds him he won't be able to do certain things for a while. "Soldiers trained to kill families, blowup schools, cut open their own dead."

He may be a little more than vain, but Roni can tell his heart is truly warm. A quiet smile of admiration adorns Roni's face, part real, part encouraging. "You've helped a lot of people."

"Worst of the worst," he says with his eyes closed. The room has started swimming. Two pills were definitely more than he needed. Thank God Simóne took that bottle away from him. "I want to tell you something, Agent Poole. Alyson's case makes my usual patients look like a bunch of dancing Hare Krishnas. Okay?" He turns to Roni. "Human trafficking is only the beginning of it."

"So, who else knows her?" asks Poole, dismissing any and all of Alan's warnings.

Alan stares at the swirling ceiling. "If you're looking for specific names, there are none. She's a stray."

"A stray?"

"A Jane Doe. She came in off the streets. No ID, no memory. Hal said they named her 'Woods' because she kept saying that's where she was from. And from what we've accomplished, I'd say that might not be far from the actual truth."

Roni motions Poole to pack up. "That gives me enough for now," she says. Any more, and he'll actively refuse to cooperate. "Can you meet us tomorrow? They'll need you to give a statement downtown. We could meet you there."

Alan nods, and tries to point to the door they came in from. "It's a date."

As they make their way to the door, Simóne hops up from the top stair and runs to get in the shower.

Alan steps outside into a special pair of sandals on the pavement. "Doctor Price?" he calls. Roni's feet stop in the gravel. She turns, one hand tapping her sunglasses in the other. "The FBI

doesn't usually handle things like this. Local homicide does."

Roni's eyes go to the ground. "That's true. I'll fill you in tomorrow. In the meantime, I want you to think about the big question."

"Motive," says Alan.

"Right." Donning her sunglasses, she walks to the sedan and opens the door. "Hey Alan," she says. Agent Poole starts the car and gives it a rev. "If I may, I'd say your subjective impressions are going to be very important to us. Not just your *objective* ones. Agent Poole's right. You're probably the best witness we could ever ask for."

She's good. Alan can tell she chose her words carefully. But he keeps seeing Alyson lunging at him, and he shudders. That's it. She lunged at him. That's the last thing he saw. It was the first time he'd seen her act so quickly. *That definitely has to be Sasha.*

"That right there," Roni says, pointing at him. He must have made a face. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. Subjectivity. I can use that."

Alan has to squint to see her in the sunlight. She's pretty, true enough, but her keen observations just made her prettier. "Flashback," he says, matter of fact.

"Mm-hmm. If you're up to it." Meaning, his post-traumatic symptoms will help.

Alan considers the possibilities, the risks. Would he even be able to help, knowing he'd slept with the killer? How would he keep from exposing himself? And should they catch her, what would that mean for him? Clearly, Alyson is beyond what even *he* had considered to be psychotic. And if they do manage to catch her, what if she tells them the truth about her and Alan? He could just deny it. Easily. Tell everyone she'd become fixated on him, obsessed, and that's what lead her to kill his best friend, revenge for not loving her back, the whole "his word against hers" thing, because...because she's the psychopath and he's the doctor. Or maybe they just won't catch her. Maybe she realized what she did and got the hell out. For crying out loud, he could even help her leave, send them all on a wild goose chase until they just call it and go home. No. That would be aiding and abetting. The possibilities. The risks. He gives a noncommittal nod. "I'll think about it."

Chapter 6

Inside, Simóne and her long, tan legs saunter down the open staircase wearing a short bathrobe she'd found in his laundry. She knew better than to think Alan was always hers, and enjoyed the freedom that came with it. Besides, for now, *the bathrobe* is hers. And that means, "I win."

Alan looks up at her from the base of the stairs. "Fastest shower in the West," he declares. He can barely keep his eyes open.

Simóne shoots him a mocking frown. "You knew I wouldn't be able to stay out of it. Do you blame me?"

"I suppose not." He doesn't feel like arguing, or even talking, for that matter. All he wants is a dark place to lie down and some soft skin to pet his face while he drifts away.

In his huge, California King-sized bed, Simóne snuggles him into her bare breasts. "Can I ask you something?" Alan asks.

Simóne traces the side of his cheek. Her fragrant skin is warm and soothing. "Wait, I need something to write on. You want *my* opinion?"

"Stop it. I'm serious." He reaches for another pillow, but the pain bolts through his left hand. Simóne grabs it for him and helps him reposition. "Thanks." He thinks for a moment. *Arrogance. Nothing but Ego. This is your doing, Alan. Take responsibility. It doesn't matter what Hal said. It doesn't matter.*

Simóne sees he is fading. She quietly smiles, pulling a joint from the drawer in the headboard. "Want some?"

"I'm barely hanging on as it is," he mumbles. "I'm serious. I need to ask you something."

She lights the joint and a relaxed cloud drifts out of her mouth. It's all he can do to keep from passing out. Now she has to spark up? "So, ask me."

"Would you say I've gotten..." he can't say it. *Arrogant? Entitled? Too big for my britches.* "Um. Older looking?"

"Hey, listen." She can tell this is not his usual way. Placing the joint on the crystal ashtray and sliding herself along his side, she lays her cheek on his chest, and traces a circle on his stomach with a delicate finger. "You're almost my dad's age, Professor." What's *that*

supposed to mean? “Go to sleep.”

Alan feigns a chuckle and the world slowly blurs away.

Chapter 7

Large pine trees fly by on either side of the road while Poole drives, talking on his cell phone. In the passenger seat, Roni stares out the window with the edge of a scarlet-red thumbnail between her teeth, contemplating the visit.

Poole ends his call and tells her to open the laptop. “There is *no* signal out here. We may as well be back in the nineties. Dean's sending everything we've got on Kreige and Greene.”

Roni opens the computer and links up through a satellite antenna in the trunk. “Signal's fine here.”

“Oh, ha-ha,” he mocks. “You know what I mean. I could hardly hear him.”

“But you did hear him, right?”

He gives her a look.

“Whatever,” she says. The screen flashes a series of pictures, graphs, scrolling data, employment, and personal histories. “Did Hayes check out Alyson's address?”

“Yeah. It's a dead end. Nothing but an old scrapyard.”

“Crap.” Roni sifts through the continuously loading mess of data. “Okay. Doctor Hal Wieten Kreige: born September 1, 1941. Graduated Suma Cum Laude, Jefferson High. Professor Emeritus, Cal Tech, Harvard fellowship, UT Austin. Lots of articles on him: Time, USA Today, Scientific American, Psych Quart... Ooo. This is interesting. Kreige worked for the Army as an independent contractor. ‘Hypnotic Suggestions and Clinically Induced

Repression’.”

“Complex? What's that?”

“Beats me.” An article in *The Journal of Consciousness Studies* pops up. “Integrated fields in beta and alpha awareness states.”

“What's that?”

“I don't know. Something about memory recall.” Kreige's grad school records: Harvard, Dartmouth, St. Croix. “He married an heiress from Long Island, Dorothy Brighton of Brighton Steel. They had four children: Maggie, Richard, Danielle, and Sandra.” She gives him a mild tap on the shoulder with the back of her hand. “She’s an MD. A Psychiatrist.”

“So, why’d he have to work?”

She gives him a look. “Because he wanted to?”

A picture of a charity ball in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Doctors Dorothy and Hal Kreige sitting among other gowns and tuxedos with the president.

Another photo: Kreige on the cover of *The Dallas Morning News*: Master Hypnotist Cures Post-Traumatic Stress. “Criminy,” Roni exclaims. “This guy’s phenomenal.”

“What?” Poole tilts the steering wheel as they veer left a little faster than needs be.

Roni clicks open other files. Then others. “Not seeing anything on Greene, though. Oh, wait. Here you go. It says Kreige got him into the graduate program at the University of Texas and mentored him till they both came here. They co-authored a book together. Let's see... Practical Pain: On the Healing Properties of Mental and Emotional Suffering.”

“I’ll bet *that* was fun to write,” says Poole.

“Psychic Split, Hypnosis and the False Memory Protocol. Healing the Wounds of War. Geeze *a’criminy!* Their publications list is a hundred miles long!”

“Seriously?” Poole’s eyes go flat.

“Ritualistic abuse. Caning. Self-hypnosis and Interrogation. Malingering. Ritual abuse on teens and children. Mind control and pain. Hypnotherapy. Ritua—A lot of these are about ritualistic abuse. One, two, three...”

“A’criminy?” asks Poole. “Really?”

“Have Hayes and Townsend double check on the address. I want to know if she might be connected to it in some other way. Ex-boyfriend, second cousin, anything.” She takes out the intake photo

and studies it. The eyes, sunk in, she can barely make out the color. Brown, maybe? She shoots a copy of it with her phone and sends it through. Noting a full set of bars on the display, she smiles and shows it to Agent Poole. “Plenty of signal on mine.”

“Whatever. We were in the woods back there.”

“Dean,” says Roni into her phone. “Sorry. I need you to do something for me.”

Poole snickers to himself and raises an exuberant, mocking hand. “A’criminy!”

“Shut up. No, not you, Dean. I’m sending you a shot of the killer. Doctor Greene says she looks different, so I want you to work on it for me.”

“Work on it how?” Dean sits down on a metal stool in his lab coat and glasses, sucking on a Blow-Pop and talking on his Bluetooth. He has curly dark hair that could stand a cut. He’s tall and naturally lean and muscular. “Wait a sec. (*slurp*) I’m pulling it up now. Oh. Yeah. I get what you mean. Put some meat on ‘er, eh?”

“Something like that. Can you do it?”

“*Borr-ring*,” he sings.

“Can you do it, Dean?”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll have it to you by tomorrow.”

“Dean.”

“What? I got fifty million on my plate today. You think I just sit around waiting for you?”

The car screeches to a halt, and Roni grunts against the seatbelt as her phone falls to the floorboard. “What the hell, Peter?”

“What? We’re here.”

Roni looks up. The apartment building is old, but clean, courtesy of the bureau. One story, comprising four vacant bedrooms, each with their own kitchen and bathroom, it sits at the edge of downtown, just a few blocks away from the police station. Her room has hardwood floors and a vintage style, clawfoot bathtub that sits in a room almost the same size as the bedroom, with two armoires in lieu of closets. Her bed is white, painted iron that looks like a loaf of bread, higher in the middle with a handmade quilt that hangs exactly one inch from the floor. She sets her duffle bag on it, causing the wire spring net underneath to squeak. Bed and breakfast style, it’s twice as homey as the hotel they were staying in, not to mention a welcome reprieve from the noisy life she had just gotten used to in New York. It’s quiet here, unsettlingly quiet, and with an

air of family. *This* will take some getting used to.

Chapter 8

The streetlight at the corner of Alan's driveway glows on as night arrives. Across the lake, the towers of the Army Core of Engineers can be seen turning on, too, their daybrights illuminating the main building and surrounding areas, all of which are lined with twelve foot fences and razor wire.

Simóne's hip emerges from the covers when she turns in the bed, stirring Alan awake. They slept hard after Roni and Poole left. Since the previous night offered little to no rest, bedtime had arrived ahead of schedule.

No one really sleeps in a hospital...

...or when they've just watched a friend die.

Alan's eyes try so hard to remain shut, but his bladder betrays him. Rising from the bed, he feels the strange time of the evening, how eerie it is to wake up now instead of the morning; everything's backwards.

Walking into the bathroom, he only half shuts the door so the moonlight can show him the toilet. His mind is wonderfully quiet, pleasant. The drugs took good care of him, even though he knows they'll wear off soon. Flushing the toilet, he drags himself into the bedroom, picking up a small saucer of pills from the nightstand. Simóne had left them out for him along with a bottled water wrapped in a paper towel. He marvels at how good she is to him. If

she weren't so young, he might even consider more permanent plans. But she is. At twenty-one years old, Simóne is remarkably mature for her age, focusing more on her future as a psychologist than spring breaks and frat parties. And even though Alan is still in his thirties, sixteen years' difference might not matter as much. But when you turn fifty, things start smelling different.

The water Simóne set out for him is still cool, and refreshes his warm throat. He downs the whole thing, realizing how thirsty he is. Then something catches his eye across the room. Slowly, Alan lowers the bottle, freezing in place.

Oh shit.

In the moonlight, a shadow appears on the sliding doors to the balcony. It is too thick to be a pine branch, and judging from the shadow's crisp edge, much closer.

His heart thumps and thumps, gaining rhythm. He doesn't want to check, but knows he must. In his stomach, a pang swells as he thinks about Alyson's imaginary dogs. If she were here, if she were out there on the balcony, they'd be sitting around her, Red Rover pacing in the front or back, Sasha doing the same—if sex might be of interest.

"Simóne," Alan whispers. All she does is moan, expressing no desire to listen. His voice low: "Simóne, I want you to move very slowly." To that unique sound, her eyes flip open, the rest of her, frozen.

"Very slowly," he says, moving toward the bed. "When I say so, I want you to go down stairs and take the truck. The keys are hanging in the pantry. The blue ones with the bottle opener." She knows where they are, but he doesn't take the chance. The shadow on the balcony seems to quiver, like she was cold. Is she carrying a knife? A gun? Where would she get a gun? Did she want refuge, perhaps? Was it even her, or someone else? Another one of his stalkers? Alyson wouldn't dare. But after Kreige, who knows? Maybe it *was* Sasha who killed him. He knew Sasha could be vengeful. Nobody turns her down if they know what's good for them, himself, included. *This is why*, he thinks. *Idiot!* The memory of his class on Advanced Clinical Techniques flips through his mind. Countertransference is studied for a reason. *Stupid, stupid.* Thank God the front door was replaced. *Stupid!* But the house alarm wouldn't be ready for a few more days.

The quivering shadow remains as he walks by the foot of his

California King. He yells in a whisper, "Go now!" Simóne's naked body slips breathlessly from the covers. She claws the floor for the skimpy robe, and makes it out of the room without a sound.

Alan speaks to the direction of the balcony gently, "Alyson, it's alright. We'll figure this out, okay?" The shadow, it's definitely quivering. "Do you understand? I want to help you." He walks, a slow and steady pace, toward the sliding doors. Alyson's bare shoulder flashes in his mind, how beautifully smooth. "Listen," he says. "I'm going to trust you, okay?"

Simóne had reached the kitchen soundlessly. She lifts the keys from their hook and struggles with the door lock. It had never given anyone problems before, but things are different when you're afraid.

Alan takes another step and reaches for the curtain. "I'm going to trust you, Alyson. And I want *you* to trust *me*." Another step, and his bandaged hand is close enough to touch the fabric. *God, what am I doing? Go, the other way, you idiot!* But he can't. He has to prove it to himself, prove he can keep her safe, convince her she can still make a good decision. But above all, he wants to prove that he knows what he's doing. Stupid ego. His heart thumps in his throat, shivers running from his legs to his hands. He swallows once and slowly pulls the curtain aside. And in a flash, the shadow uncovers the moonlight into Alan's eyes and a raccoon leaps from the banister onto a nearby tree.

Air releases from the edge of his lungs, and he pants as a cold sweat seeps through his brow. Oh my God. Thank God. His hand drops, while large gulps of blood and adrenalin continue pumping through his mind and body. Looking down, he notices the water bottle is still in his hand, crinkled in a fist full of plastic, blood and bandages. Outside, the sound of an engine revving can be heard.

"Simóne."

She'd gotten to the truck, and was getting ready to make a break for it. He darts for the stairs to stop her, leaping three and four steps wide, swinging on the banister with his elbow.

The truck has only backed out when Simóne sees Alan raising and waving his arms. She shoves open the passenger door.

But he's not running. He's drooping his shoulders, letting out breath. Confused, she calls out. "Come on! Come on!" She scoops

her arm inward, toward her. Walking? Why is he walking?

“Raccoon!” he yells.

“What?”

“Raccoon! It was a raccoon!”

As they go inside, the feeling of safety does not return. Simóne’s eyes scan the inside of the dark kitchen. She holds onto Alan, who, with the length of his arm, flips on the row of light switches. “It’s alright,” he says, “but I’m going to check out the rest of the house.” Aware that he doesn’t need to, he still *needs* to.

Simóne’s arms tighten around his waist. “I’m going with you.”

“There,” he says, pointing. “Look in my junk drawer. Grab the flashlight” Simóne’s hand touches Alan’s arm as long as it can until she has to go the rest of the way alone. She scrounges through the mess and finds a large Maglite, then rushes back to Alan’s touch.

Flight instantly shifts to fight as she whips around, pressing her back against his. “I’ll look behind you. You take point.” Her eyes vigilant, she mimics a voice suited for covert operations.

Alan’s eyes only slightly roll. At least she’s not cowering.

After securing the grounds, the two of them fall on the bed, their shoulders touching, which doesn’t seem to satisfy. Simóne wiggles over, tilting her head to his. “You take point,” he mocks, turning on his side and tracing the contours of her face with his pinky finger.

“What? I’d’ve stuck the shit out of that raccoon if you’d given me the chance. I ain’t afraid.”

“Yeah?”

“Hoo-ra, bitch,” she says with a slight head swivel. “Matt, Rick, Phillip, *and* Robert are all in the military.” Her brothers. He’d forgotten.

“Okay.” Alan gives her a double check. “So how come I’ve never seen li’l miss G.I. Janet until now?”

“Seriously?”

Alan thinks about it. She’s right. He liked the smart, soft ones, the kind who enjoy their femininity. Not to say he wouldn’t welcome the “gotta prove something” types. Simóne was deftly neither, and yet both. “So now what?” he asks.

Simóne opens her new robe, exposing the ripeness of her skin and tan lines. Fight had shifted to the *other* ‘F’. Feeding would have to wait, although his appetite is definitely voracious. Simóne’s

smooth legs are almost hot against the outsides of his thighs. Her mouth sucks hungrily at his lips, her tongue pressing and tasting the roughness of his face. Alan's arms lift to touch her, but his hands hang uselessly, palms out and throbbing. She is in control now, his little G.I. Janet. Slowly, slowly down, her lips bend awkwardly open like swollen fruits on his chest, weaving between the bandages on his torso. He can't help but to recall a lecture he did on trauma and sex. "*It is proper for a species to mate,*" he'd said, "*after intense fear. Brushes with death remind animals to ensure continuation of the species.*"

Slowly, slowly down, her mouth sucks at the skin on his chest, while she scoots lower, trailing below his ribcage. It tickles, but not too much. His head tilts back. *This isn't right*, he thinks. *It still isn't right*. Echoes of a million lectures he did on the subject of sex and survival fly in all directions in his head. "*The Limbic System, the emotional centers of the brain, continue to control things long after the coast is clear. Mating is a must. The most classic example is the Baby Boom of the mid Forties. Soldiers returning to the safety of their homeland giving in to the desire to mate? Do you really think that was all a conscious decision? Well, of course it isn't! It's primitive!*"

Her arms push at the mattress as she repositions. Her legs slide down farther, making sure every possible inch of her skin touches his. *Alan*, he ponders, *what are you doing?* Her skin is so smooth. *This isn't right...* her hands, her mouth, her breasts. All of her cups around him. He can't resist it.

Nature takes over.

The Limbic System wins.

Slowly, slowly down, Simóne reaches her destination and Alan's mind goes primitive...

...while Alyson watches from the balcony window.

**You'll never guess
what happens next!**