

Deadman's Switch – by MMB

Chapter 29 – Storm Swell

Zo? came awake with a jerk, uncomfortable and suddenly cold with her legs dangling over the edge of the bed even as her head nestled against the soft lump of a pillow still covered by the quilted bedspread. She sat up again on the edge of the bed, pushing her tumbled hair out of her face and gazing about her without recognizing her surroundings. Her mind madly struggled to remember where she was and how she'd gotten there.

Oh yeah – she'd rented this room in this little one-horse berg in order to get close to the private detective from Miami she'd been following, hoping he'd lead her to Jarod – no, Sydney – no... She shook her head. She was after the detective. HE knew where Jarod or Sydney was, right?

Only she'd evidently fallen asleep. The lights in the room still blazed, her backpack still lay on the bed behind her where she'd tossed it earlier. And there, near where she'd laid her head, was her gun and the fingernail file she'd pulled from her pack. She dragged her fingers through her abundant red curls while she pondered why she was still here, in the room she'd rented, rather than across the hallway grilling the detective.

That's right – she'd been waiting for the hour to get later so that she could break into the detective's room and get him to tell her what she wanted to know. But she'd been tired from the long drive – she must have fallen asleep while she waited. A quick glance at the window across the room told her that there was very little time left before the sun would start peeking over the far horizon and the people she'd been hoping to avoid would start stirring again. If she was going to do something, she'd better do it quickly or risk discovery.

She pocketed the gun where it was easily retrieved, grabbed up the fingernail file, and walked silently to her room door and peeked out into the hallway. The hallway light was bright – but the building around her had the feeling of being filled with people sleeping. Zo? crept across the hallway and put her ear to the door – and frowned with frustration. She could hear the sounds of movement inside – the detective was up already, awake and aware. There would be no slipping quietly into his room and accosting him there.

She crept back to her room and closed the door with exaggerated caution – when the temptation was to slam it in anger. Her body had betrayed her – forced her to give in to the need for rest when she'd been SO close! Then a thought struck her, and she sighed and released the anger.

Perhaps this was better. She would follow the detective to his car – and take control of the situation there. From the sounds of things, the detective was already packing and getting ready to depart – so she hurriedly slipped the fingernail file back into a side pocket of her backpack, shouldered one strap, and walked back over to the door to listen again.

If the detective could be up at that hour, then so could she. And then she'd get the answers she needed.

~~~~~\*

Miss Parker slowly rose from the depths of sleep to find herself pillowed on a shoulder – her favorite place to wake up. She could feel the pressure of an arm wrapped around her, holding her close in the night, and knew herself safe, protected. Loved. She shifted against him and felt the light embrace tighten ever so slightly to accommodate her movement.

She'd never known the peace and security of waking up in the arms of a man she loved before she'd met him – and without opening her eyes, she murmured, "I love you, Tommy," and kissed the muscular chest beneath her. Then, taking a deep sigh of contentment, she slipped backwards again into the realm of Morpheus. Her descent back into deep sleep was rapid enough that she didn't feel the stiffening of the arms around her.

Sam had roused quickly when Miss Parker had begun to move in tiny ways in his arms – and he had rehearsed yet again the words he was going to say to her the moment she was awake enough that would open the discussion that needed to happen. And then it happened. She'd murmured to him in her sleep – and in four words demolished the argument he'd spent sleepless hours earlier preparing, in the process leaving HIM searching his own soul yet again.

He should have seen it. She wasn't cuddling up to HIM – she was mistaking him for Thomas Gates, the man she'd been poised to leave the Centre with and marry, and in her remembering, taking her body along for the ride. All this time, it was Thomas she was reaching for in her sleep.

What a fool he'd been to think that there was anything going on in HER that would make her turn to HIM! He should have known – women like her would have nothing in common with or to do with a man like him. He WAS only a bodyguard, someone in whom she could trust her body both during waking and sleeping hours without the hassle of emotional entanglements. This was nothing but a Pretend – one that was hitting a little too close to home for him on a number of fronts, it seemed.

He tipped his head and gazed down into the face of the sleeping woman. What should he do then? Should he continue to hold her the way he was – should he drop his arm and lay there like a complacent but unfeeling pillow until she awoke on her own and moved away, or should he try to extricate himself without making his broken rib hurt OR waking her just to move closer to the edge of the bed away from her? WAS there a way out of this situation that wouldn't in the end leave him utterly humiliated and her completely embarrassed?

Probably not.

And either way, he had a legitimate point to make with her. Whether she was cuddling up to Thomas in her dreams or with him unknowingly, it was HIS body that was the object of her nocturnal snuggles – and it was HE who was starting to feel at the very least uncomfortable with the direction things were going. A discussion of some kind still needed to happen. But the emotional overtones that he had earlier assumed to need to be present – at least on his part – would have to be excised from the conversation.

And then he focused his attention very sharply on his own emotional reaction to the situation. After nearly ten years of close association with his direct superior, he had evidently become far more emotionally attached to her than he'd ever imagined possible. This was definitely NOT a good thing. He'd had no trouble maintaining emotional distance in the days of the Centre, when she was out of reach emotionally and in terms of class, functioning in his presence ONLY as his boss; but now the very important barriers of social status, physical and emotional distance had been stripped away. If she was unable, while asleep, to maintain a physical distance that would reinforce the emotional, then it would be up to HIM to find a way to put up an emotional distance between his waking self and the very contrary situation that came about in the night. He couldn't allow himself to care...

Oh, who was he fooling?! He already cared – he cared too damned much. Social status be damned! His arm around her shoulder, holding her close as she slept – regardless of whether SHE believed him to be Thomas Gates or Sam the Sweeper – spoke eloquently of his feelings. He cared more than he should. He looked at his reaction to the last few nights and had to admit to himself that he LIKED the way Miss Parker felt when she curled up against his back – that he LIKED the idea of being able to hold her in his arms like this, even if just for a little while. He LIKED the idea of her being his wife, even if it was only a role she was playing for an unsuspecting audience.

He knew she cared too – a little – about as much as he would normally expect of someone with whom he shared ten years' acquaintance and occasionally intense work situations. But she didn't care about him the way he evidently did about her – she couldn't – and expecting more of her to suddenly happen as the result of a discussion would be unfair to them both. The Pretend demanded that they put up a good show of casual

intimacy for the Foundation, and part of that would be dealing with what the nighttime uncovered.

He could do this. He would talk to her in the morning about the things happening in the night – maybe they could find some way to lessen the discomfort of the previous night. He remembered reading once about young people a long time ago sleeping together before marriage – and a way of doing so without chancing other bedtime activities before they were permissible. They called it "bundling", didn't they?

Maybe THAT was what they'd have to do from now on...

~~~~~\*

Jim McKenna liked his morning coffee – after years at the Centre, facing a computer screen filled with financial reports and columns of numbers, he'd become addicted to a very strong and hot cup of coffee to begin the work day. The Centre's cafeteria had supplied excellent espresso coffee to him for years – he had yet to institute such an innovation in the Foundation's cafeteria. So today, like yesterday and all the days since he'd "returned to the fold," Jim sipped at an insipid cup of coffee that wasn't strong enough to even begin to satisfy his caffeine craving.

And today he would definitely need that caffeine – and he toyed with the idea of sending his secretary out to the nearest Starbuck's for something more acceptable. He'd been up until after midnight, poring over the documents that had been handed him by the Foundation's legal department that pertained to his not only inheriting the controlling stock interest in the family firm, but spelled out his new authority and responsibilities. The information had been heady – and he'd tossed and turned for the better part of the night trying to make sense of it all.

"Newspaper's at your desk, sir," Kathleen nodded at her new boss – who looked disturbingly too much like her old boss except for the facial expressions and a slightly lost look in the eyes. "I've got a pot of coffee brewing in the supply room. Mr. McK. – your brother, I mean – never did think much of the swill they served down in the cafeteria." Her voice hitched – she'd never see her Mr. McK. again.

"Thanks," Jim nodded back as he walked past the large desk. "Mr. McK.", eh? Well, Kathleen had been with the firm since as far back as he could remember – being his father's secretary even before he'd been shipped off to the Centre. Certain licenses came with familiarity – he could only hope that he'd earn a similar moniker in his time. "When's my first appointment?"

Kathleen shook her elegantly coiffed silvered head. "I cleared your calendar for the morning at least," she told him gently. "I figured you'd like a little bit of time to just do some settling in and getting your feet under you. Your afternoon starts promptly at one with Colonel Sharp from the Pentagon."

Jim scowled, grateful that he wouldn't have to face the Colonel until that afternoon. The Pentagon liaison would be inquiring about progress on that pesky bio-toxin project that had stalled in the lab and eventually pushed Jake into stealing a Centre Pretender – and that Pretender was still out of commission... Well, a clear morning would give him plenty of time to light a fire under the Centre mentor they'd also snatched to manage the genius. "Good. Bring in the coffee when you have it."

"Yes, sir!" Kathleen smiled. Maybe Jim McKenna wasn't all that different from his twin brother after all. Mr. McK. had always wanted his coffee right away as well. Still, it would be strange knowing her first boss to be dead and yet looking at his living face everyday.

Jim steeled himself, just as he had the day before, and then walked into the huge Chairman's office. The police tape that had barred most from entering the room was gone now – and the maintenance crew had worked overtime to make it appear as if nothing untoward had happened less than twenty-four hours earlier. The

blood-stained carpet where Jake had fallen had been removed – taken by the crime scene forensics team – and replaced by the maintenance crew with a carefully installed patch that could only barely be discerned by the slight color shift between light-faded older fabric and unadulterated new. As Kathleen had promised, the newspaper sat to the left of the leather and paper blotter on the desk, folded over pristinely.

Jim shrugged out of his overcoat and hung it carefully on the highly-polished wooden coat rack that stood behind the desk for that purpose, then set his briefcase on the floor near the chair and took his seat. It would take a while before this chair felt like HIS, he realized morosely. It would probably take even longer before he felt the JOB was his as well. He hadn't even really had a chance to settle in as his brother's right-hand man, or get to know the various personalities of the assistants and advisors that orbited the Chairman's office. He'd have his work cut out for him in the next few days, lest the others get the sense that "the man" didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground.

"Here you are, sir," Kathleen pushed into the office with a steaming mug whose aroma reached across the room very quickly. She handed him the coffee across the desk and then stood with hands carefully folded in front of her. "Is there anything else you need me to do for you, sir?"

"No," Jim shook his head. "I'm sure I'll need some phone calls placed in a little while – but I'll let you know when I'm ready to start digging in. Thank you."

He brought the mug to his lips and sipped appreciatively at the remarkably good coffee. He'd have to remember that Kathleen already knew how to make his morning coffee – and have her make him a pot every morning from now on. The caffeine slipped into his system like a hand into a well-tailored glove, filling him and giving him strength and substance. Fortified, he took yet another sip and reached for the folded newspaper, letting it fall open as he pulled it toward him.

And then he stared at the banner at the top of the page – which announced Part II of the series "Another Centre here?"

"KATHLEEN!" The bellow was heard all the way past the clerical pool to the lobby.

~~~~~\*

Cancer closed his eyes and schooled himself not to make the slightest sound as the nameless medical technician peeled the bandage from his back with far less skill and gentleness than Sydney had used. The day was already getting off to a far worse start than the last two. With Sydney nowhere in sight as yet, he'd been awakened abruptly at a far earlier time than normal, ordered to sit up and choke down a tasteless bowl of something that now sat at the bottom of his stomach like a rock. And now, as if to add insult to injury, was obliged to endure the less than gentle nursing skills of a person Sydney had routinely tossed from the room the moment he arrived.

"What the Hell do you think you're doing?" Sydney's voice sounded from across the room, and Cancer could hear the outrage in the gently accented tones of his fellow captive and mentor.

"I have my orders," the med tech complained, even as he backed away from the injured young man, aware that the wounds on the broad back were healing nicely – far better than they had under his watch. "Adam is to be made ready to resume his duties this morning."

"We'll see about that," Sydney growled, moving to his new prot?g?'s side and physically placing himself between the hammer-handed medic and the young man. "But you are not to touch him. I'll take care of changing the dressing myself."

"You aren't in charge here!" the medic complained bitterly. "I was doing just fine..."

"Which is why I've been battling an infection that YOU allowed to go virtually untreated," Sydney snapped even as his trained eye took in the healthy and tender pink where once angry red had reigned supreme. He pointed. "Bring me the peroxide and the sterile cotton swabs – and then make sure his breakfast..."

"He's already eaten," the tech snapped back as he scurried for the supplies that had been demanded.

"Make sure his breakfast is more than just a single bowl of nutritional supplement gruel," Sydney continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "Adam will NOT even begin his exercises this morning without an adequate breakfast, is that understood?"

"That wasn't..."

Sydney rounded on the baby-faced medic, his eyes snapping and his accent made harsher in his fury. "Do you want me going to the Chairman and telling him that the reason that Adam is unable to perform today is because YOU wouldn't do as I requested? That I was ready to present him with the quandary for which he was acquired, but that YOUR refusal made it impossible for Adam to be functioning at full capabilities?"

The medic's face grew pale – both from fury and from fear. His orders had been given to him as he'd come onto his shift, but he knew that the old man had a level of authority with the reluctant genius that he never would. Moreover, he was well aware of the old man's disdain for him – and didn't doubt for a moment that any failure today could result in the old man laying the blame directly on his doorstep. His paycheck wasn't so good that he was willing to risk it just to say "I told you so," later on. The greasy-haired loan shark to whom he owed a lion's share of his money would never be very understanding. Without a word, he spun on his heels and stormed from the medical bay, resigned to playing waiter yet again.

"Sydney?" Cancer asked in a soft voice. "Back to the whiteboard today?"

Sydney had a cotton ball soaked in the peroxide and began to daub gently at the still open areas where the wounds had been deepest and were still raw flesh. "If they're pushing this hard, we don't dare NOT give them at least a little of what they want," he answered in a soft and understanding tone. "We'll do our exercises – and while you are preparing, I will try to speak to the man in charge to give us a table and chairs in front of the board. But have you worked out what you're going to do?"

Cancer nodded. "It will take them months to figure out what went wrong," he said with a tight smile, "if ever. With any luck..."

"We won't be here to catch the flack for it," Sydney finished, bending close to his prot?g?'s shoulder and nearly whispering. "I saw Jarod yesterday evening."

Cancer jerked – twisting to try to see into the older man's face. "You're sure?"

"Yes." Sydney's eyes were clear and without any sign of subterfuge. "And if he's found us, you can bet that a rescue isn't far behind."

Cancer turned back and let Sydney finish cleansing his back silently. His mind was spinning. Sydney had seen Jarod – it was true, then, that the original Pretender was still alive and actively working to free them? It was so fantastic, it was hard to wrap his mind around. But Sydney believed it was true, that was visibly obvious. And Sydney had proven that he was trustworthy, hadn't he?

Cancer felt his stomach tighten. Sydney had proven himself a talented healer and an excellent mentor for a

Pretender subject – but that was all. The only proof that had been offered that Jarod was still alive had been Sydney's word. And for the first time in his life, Cancer wasn't entirely certain that it was wise to blindly believe everything his new mentor – or ANY mentor, for that matter – told him anymore. If he could have been lied to by those who had raised him, it shouldn't be beyond belief that he was being lied to now. The men who held his life in their hands, both before and now, could be extremely good actors – and that number included Sydney. The look of innocent belief and hope that had spread across the older man's face could be nothing but a fabrication in and of itself. What if Sydney himself were nothing but an actor – an ingenious psychiatrist who knew exactly which button to push to promote trust and compliance in the face of intractable refusal to cooperate?

Still, the plan to appear to cooperate while truly sabotaging what these people wanted him to do was a good way to exact a little revenge for the abuse he'd been subjected to. Even if it cost him his life in the end. Fighting back, in the only way that was truly open to him, was better than just giving up. And if Sydney were one of THEM – and reported his attempt at sabotage so that they knew the solution offered was flawed – well, then, he'd just have to take what consequences would come.

Cancer watched as the other medic returned to the room bearing a tray filled with far more appetizing fare, his resolve shaken to its foundations and yet rebuilt. He would play along with this new mentor – subtly sabotage the bio-weapons project he'd been stolen to resolve – and then see what happened next. Either way, he would never be played as a fool again. Not by the men who held him – and not by Sydney either.

~~~~~\*

Miss Parker sighed as her internal alarm clock signaled the beginning of yet another day to her, and then she froze as she became aware of her surroundings – and her situation. It was one thing to awaken snuggled up to Sam's back – at least then she didn't have to look him in the eye as she would carefully slither out of her side of the bed and tiptoe safely away from him. It was another thing entirely to wake up with her head pillowed on his shoulder, with his arm wrapped lightly around her and HER arm slung across his belly and holding him as well. She wouldn't be able to get out of this one half so easily.

This was HER doing, of that she was entirely certain. Sam was still on his back very much on his side of the bed, leaving her the greater share of the comfortable mattress – she had come into his space again. Her face flooded with mortification as she pondered just exactly how to extricate herself from this compromising position with a minimum of fuss and drama.

Very slowly she pulled her arm back from him and then began to reach for the arm that surrounded her. If she could just get out from under THAT...

"I think we need to talk about this," Sam rumbled gently in her ear.

Again she froze, and she could feel the blood rush to her face again. "About what?" she asked as she tore herself from his loose embrace to scoot back across the bed as fast as she could and throw her legs over the edge.

Sam rolled himself up onto his good side, grimacing as the movement made his broken rib ache for the first time that morning. "I think you know what about," he told her, his voice remaining quiet and gentle. "Despite what you might think about the composition of my skull, I'm not made of stone – and it isn't entirely fair for you to treat me as if I were. We need to discuss this, Cat."

"I'm sorry, OK?" she sighed then, hoping that a sincere apology – on top of serious consideration on how she was going to control her rebellious body when she wasn't in complete command of it – would head off a discussion guaranteed to make her uncomfortable. "Can we leave it at that?"

"Perhaps, if this weren't turning into a nightly thing, that would be enough," Sam conceded. "And while it was just a little bit of snuggling just before morning, I could believe that it was simply that Jarod didn't buy enough blankets for us when he was setting up housekeeping and let it slide." He pushed himself to sit upright and twist to face the opposite side of the bed away from her. "Last night, however..."

"I said I was sorry..."

He got to his feet and walked over in front of her, so that if she looked anywhere but at her feet, she'd be looking at him. "I'm not upset – an apology isn't necessary, Cat. That's not what this is about." If he hadn't heard those treacherous four words earlier, he would have been willing to reach down and put a hand beneath her chin to force her to look at him. Now, however, he resigned himself to only using words. "I'm just telling you that waking up in the middle of the night with a beautiful woman fast asleep in my arms would be heady business to ANY red-blooded guy. I just want to know where the boundaries are when it happens again – before one or the other of us steps over a line that should never be crossed, and probably can never be uncrossed after that."

Miss Parker hung her head. "This is only supposed to be a Pretend, damn it!"

"There is a limit to which a Pretend can go, and you know it," Sam reminded her, still leaving his voice soft and gentle. "I seriously doubt that, when we decided to take this role into the bedroom to sell it to the Foundation, either of us would be doing anything other than hugging the edges of our respective sides of the bed in the night. Besides," he gave a dry chuckle, "at least I know WHY you've been so chummy with me while you sleep..."

Storm-grey eyes that were sharp and defensive flew to his face. "What did you say? What are you talking about?"

Sam merely smiled at her. "You told me you loved me in your sleep last night – but you were really talking to Thomas Gates. You even said his name. Trust me, I don't have any illusions here."

Again Miss Parker's face flooded with blood, and her eyes pulled away from an astonished stare at his face to focus on the thick shag carpet. "Oh God..." Could it get any worse?

"I suppose I feel a little flattered that you would mistake me for him when you're not completely awake," Sam tried to ease her embarrassment. "And I'm not saying that I mind it that much... It's just..." This wasn't helping – he saw her run her fingers through her hair and hold it back out of her face in a gesture that had always meant frustration or trouble before. "It's just that, like I said, I'm not made of stone. I'm not exactly sure where you – or your subconscious – intend for this to go... It's just that if I'm not exactly awake myself when you..."

"It's going to stop, Sam – I promise," she rose to her feet and pushed past him without daring to take a glance at his face. "You're right – you don't deserve to be put in this position. Maybe... maybe I should just crash on the couch from now on..."

"The couch is the domestic doghouse, and it's usually the man who gets stuck there," he informed her with a quirk of a smile. "I can take the couch – you'll sleep better in here."

"It will hurt your rib... No," she shook her head. "You need your rest too."

"It won't hurt that much, if you think it would be the answer to this." She was rifling through the closet, obviously in search of something to wear to work that morning. "Cat," he called, then finally gave in to the temptation and put a hand on her shoulder to turn her. "Look at me."

Slowly she turned with her work clothes clutched in front of her like a shield. "It won't happen again, Sam, I promise. I'll... I'll figure something out. But right now, I... I..." She lost her nerve and made a dart for the bathroom and slammed the door shut.

Sam shook his head. He was certain that the discussion had actually solved nothing – and that he'd have to be on his guard even more now, if for no other reason than emotional self-protection. She was now in a position to hurt him badly, and he wasn't about to let it happen.

Maybe sleeping on the couch was the best option open to them – to hell with selling the charade to the Foundation.

~~~~~\*

Abner Wilmot juggled the key to his office door and finally got the reluctant lock to let him in before he dropped his coffee, his mail, his heavy overcoat and his briefcase. He rushed into the room in time to set the precariously held ceramic mug on the corner of the desk and then dropped the loose envelopes next to it, let go of the handle of his briefcase so that it only dropped inches to the floor – and then straightened to hang the damp overcoat from the coat tree in the corner behind his office door. The cramped little space that he shared with Oliver Musconi was warm, and he reached for his coffee mug as he moved back toward his desk.

Patiently he opened all of the mail that had been delivered to him in care of the University – no junk mail however, thank heavens. That was one good thing about having the department secretary distributing mail to the professors on staff – she would cull all the obvious duns and come-ons into the circular file before they'd waste valuable time. He set aside an invitation to attend a national symposium focusing on the practical applications of psychological profiling in the business setting for later consideration – he'd have to think about that one for a while. He had people at home who would have to come before any academic events.

That reminded him – he needed to call Larry Treecher to arrange for another collaborative session on their joint paper on savants. He eyed the clock and reached for his Rolodex. It was still pre-dawn on the west coast, but he could have his co-author's phone number found and ready for after his first class. He pulled the "T" tab forward and began paging through the various business cards and cards that he himself had written out over the years. Some of these were getting pretty worn – he'd have to buy some new blanks and replace some of them one of these days. Tackins, Talbot, Tangeant, Tap... Wait a minute! He flipped to the previous card and stared down at the handwriting, amazed that he hadn't thought of this before.

Tangeant. Jarod Tangeant. Jarod – the very man he'd been trying to locate and contact!

That was right – Jarod had given him his personal cell phone number the morning after the police had raided the apartment of the man responsible for the sabotage of academic research, letting him know that if he ever had need of him again, he could be reached at that number. Less than two hours later, he'd been a no-show at his departmental meeting, and nobody had seen or heard from Jarod Tangeant again.

Wilmot again eyed the clock on the wall – this time with a decided air of impatience. Seven forty-eight. Even HE knew better than to try to contact people before nine o'clock in the morning. But the frustration was that he had a eight o'clock class – so any call he made would have to wait until at least nine or so, depending on when he could finally shake off the inevitable student with questions. After all, even if Jarod were only in the very next time zone, it would be unreasonably early to expect him to field a phone call of this nature. He sat back and carried his coffee mug to his lips again.

Then again – this was important.

He reached for the telephone and then stopped himself as he cast yet another guilty eye at the clock. The

university took a very dim view of its professors arriving late for their classes – and heaven only knew how long a discussion with Jarod would take, IF the phone number he'd been given all those years ago were still good, that was. It took him five minutes to walk from his office to the room in the Economics building where his Psych 101 class had been located this term. No, on second thought, the call would definitely have to wait until after nine.

Wilmot took another deep draught of the still-hot coffee, rose and again reached for the briefcase. A lecture on the fine points of Jungian thought could hopefully keep his mind occupied for an hour.

~~~~~\*

Unbelievable! The man has been up this long and NOT left yet?

Zo? shifted back to her left foot as her right began to truly ache yet again. She'd been on her feet for two hours now, standing by the door waiting to hear her across-the-hall neighbor desert his room for either the dining room or his vehicle – only to be disappointed. She hadn't heard the door open, nor footsteps in the hallway, so he HAD to still be there, right?

Below her window, she heard the sound of a car engine starting, and in a sudden fit of panic, moved quickly past the bed to tweak the curtains back. What she saw made her heart drop. He HAD gotten out of the room without her noticing – and was now backing his car out of the parking space, getting ready to vanish.

Zo? wasted no time. She grabbed up her backpack, tossed the gun and nail file into it, and was out her bedroom door like a shot. She took the stairs two at a time and didn't even bother stopping at the desk to drop off her key on the way out the front door, despite the friendly call from the desk clerk.

Already the detective's car was rounding the far turn, preparing to enter the narrow county road that would lead him back to the highway. Zo? banged her fist on the steering wheel as the engine of her convertible balked at starting in the cold morning air twice before finally roaring to life. Damn her fatigue! And damn HIM – the clerk had said his name was Carlton, Carl... something like that... – for being one of the most silent people she'd ever known.

Thankfully the streets were empty as the pink convertible shot down through the tiny business district and squealed around the turn onto the lane leading to the highway. Ahead of her, the dark sedan that the detective was driving was barely visible, and Zo?'s foot pressed down on the accelerator harder to catch up. The last thing she needed to do was lose him in the traffic of the main highway. She had to find him – and find out just who it was that he'd needed to talk to in that dinky hamlet of a berg. He knew where Jarod was – or where Sydney was – and she needed to know what HE knew.

She'd follow him until he pulled over for gas or a break. And then she'd know what he knew.

~~~~~\*

Jim could hear the faint sounds of arguing outside his office door and smiled grimly. Kathleen was a good guard dog – even he had been a little reluctant to try to push his way past the aging secretary who knew full well the limits of her authority and was not afraid to go to the very edge of them. Whoever it was that was outside the office trying to get in to see him would have to do some pretty fancy footwork.

The office door opened, and a very unhappy Kathleen stepped in – obviously wanting to talk to him privately rather than merely announce the unexpected visitor over the phone. "There's a man from the IRS to see you, sir," she informed him glumly, "and he's not taking "no" for an answer."

Jim sighed. He'd already had a thoroughly unsatisfactory meeting with the Legal Department over the continuing story in the newspaper that morning – a story that held far too many Foundation secrets exposed for his liking. And now, the IRS? What was going on today – was a black cloud just hovering over him, waiting to dump more bad-news rain on his head? "Show him in, Kathleen," he sighed again. "Might as well see what he's here for now than have him hovering waiting for hours..."

Kathleen clucked unhappily but stood aside as the tall, dark-haired IRS agent walked past her into the office.

"Jeremy Davis, IRS," JD said immediately, extending a newly-printed business card with the logo of Internal Revenue Service and his alias along with his recently-acquired disposable cell phone number to the man rising behind the heavy desk. "Thank you for seeing me." He modulated his voice lower than normal, knowing that in all likelihood he would be seen with Jarod in the near future and needed to downplay any similarities with his older brother.

"Agent... Davis," McKenna examined the card and then looked up into the face of this latest interruption. Dark blue eyes shone with intelligence, dark hair – a bit longer than expected – was gathered neatly into a tight band at the nape of the neck, and the suit was expensive. "To what do I owe this visit?"

"To this, among other things," JD handed the Chairman a copy of the ledger page for expense accounts, showing altered figures that Broots and he had patiently manipulated days earlier – figures that demonstrated substantial profits and gifts that the previous year's tax return had failed to account for. "I'm here to confer with your accountants and find out why nearly two hundred thousand dollars in income is unaccounted for from one account alone – and to run an audit on your records to make certain this is an isolated incident."

Jim looked at the page and frowned. The numbers were indeed large – and this was but one of many ledger pages that would be involved in such an audit. "I'm certain that there's a reasonable explanation to this..."

"I hope so, Mr. McKenna," JD put on his most serious tone and face. "As it is, you can expect your entire enterprise here to face a complete tax audit come February next year, just to make certain that no such lapses are repeated. In the meanwhile, however, I will be needing access to all of your bookkeeping files – and an office in which to work..."

Not exactly certain why his stomach was beginning to turn sour, McKenna reached for the intercom. "Kathleen, will you have Jarod Simmons come to my office please? And make arrangements for an office space to be provided to Mr. Davis here for the duration of his stay with us."

"Yes, sir." Kathleen's voice sounded brisk and efficient. "Right away."

"If you don't mind my asking, how did this matter come to your attention?"

JD's eyes narrowed. "The IRS isn't in the habit of revealing our sources, Mr. McKenna. Suffice it to say that the information came from an unimpeachable source, and raised eyebrows in my entire investigative department."

"An unimpeachable source, eh? Someone here at the Foundation, perhaps – someone nursing a grudge?" Jim speculated suspiciously.

"I couldn't say," JD replied blandly. "I got my orders to do an in-depth peek into your files for the previous tax year – and to see whether this information stands up to scrutiny."

"I..." Jim would have protested his ignorance of any bookkeeping malfeasance when the intercom buzzed. With a finger raised to beg indulgence, he picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"There's a police detective wishing to speak to you, sir," Kathleen's voice sounded a good deal less brisk and efficient. "He says he has a warrant..."

"Tell him I'm with the IRS at the moment – and that he'll just have to wait his turn," Jim snapped and hung up abruptly to turn to the IRS agent in front of him. "I'm afraid I have other pressing business to attend to – I'll let Kathleen do the introductions to our financial analyst and see to your office now." His eyebrows raised. "Unless there was something else?"

"No," JD shook his head amiably. "I'll keep you informed of my findings."

"I'd appreciate that." Jim McKenna rose and stuck out his hand. "Until later then."

"Yes, sir." JD shook the firm hand and turned around and started out the office door.

"Kathleen, show the detective in!" McKenna called.

JD worked hard not to let his glee show. The Foundation was having one helluva morning, wasn't it? He turned his blandest smile on the secretary, who was just escorting a plain-clothed officer into the office he'd just vacated. "Mr. McKenna said that you would make the arrangements for my office – and get me into see a Mr..."

"Simmons," Jarod's voice sounded from the outer office door. "Jarod Simmons." He smiled at Kathleen as he extended his hand to his younger brother. "I'll take care of our guest from here, Miss Fitzpatrick."

Kathleen nodded gratefully and settled back into her chair with a sympathetic sigh. Poor Mr. McK! He wasn't having a very good day at all!

~~~~~\*

Ray Carlisle frowned as he felt an unfamiliar shudder travel up into his hands through the steering wheel. It was a clear road – no visible signs of anything that should be going wrong with his car – but the symptoms of a rapidly deflating tire were unmistakable. With a sure hand, he guided his car to the shoulder of the road and turned it off. He climbed from behind the driver's seat and began doing a walk-around to check – and immediately found his problem. The front left tire was visibly flat – dangerously so.

Carlisle sighed deeply and opened the door to pop the latch on the trunk to get to the jack and the spare tire, wondering if his benign neglect of the thing all the time he'd owned the sedan was going to bite him in the butt now. Still, he had a can of compressed air for emergencies tucked away into the spare tire well – with any luck at all, he could limp into the next available service station and get it fixed properly.

Bending over his trunk, working at getting the spare tire free of the clamps that held it in place, he heard the sound of an engine purring up behind him and smiled. Help, any help, would be appreciated. He gave a vicious twist on the stubborn wing nut and finally cracked it loose as the engine noise died and the sound of a car door closing came from behind. "I appreciate the help," he said loudly enough to be heard as he reached in to manhandle the spare from the tire well – only to freeze as cool metal touched the back of his neck.

"Where are they?" demanded a soft woman's voice as the pressure from what could only be the barrel of a gun pressed harder into his neck.

"Listen," Carlisle's mind spun as he tried to take control of a dangerous situation, "I don't know what you're talking..."

"Jarod and Sydney – where are they?" Zo? growled.

Jarod? Who else knew he was looking for a man named... And who was Sydney? Carlisle frowned. That was right – Dr. Sydney Green was the name of the psychiatrist associated with the Centre that had vanished – how would this woman...? "What do you want with..."

The metal moved away from his neck. "Stand up – with your hands where I can see them!"

Carlisle eyed the tire iron wishfully as he slowly complied. Still, with a gun on him and unsure of the preparedness of his assailant, reaching for a weapon wasn't a wise move. He put his hands over his head, straightened and began to turn.

"Don't look at me! Now walk over into those bushes!" Carlisle eyed the bushes past the shoulder critically. They were thick and tall enough to block the sight from the road – and the last place he wanted to be at the moment. The barrel of the gun pressed into the spot between his shoulder blades as he continued to stand still. "Move it!"

"Isn't there some way we can settle this without the need for force?" he reasoned, taking one slow step and then another in the direction of the bushes. "I didn't find Sydney, if you want to know... And I don't know anybody by the name of Jarod."

"You're lying." The woman's voice was low and lethal. "Tell me what I want to know."

"I can't," Carlisle admitted. "I don't know where either of them are – I only talked to someone who could pass on a message to Jarod from my boss." The bushes grabbed and snagged at the fabric of his blue jeans. He was getting too far away from the road and the safety of being in easy view of any passersby. "Really," he insisted reassuringly and began to turn around to face his assailant.

The gunshot rang out through the little valley and died quickly in the stiff, cold breeze. Carlisle's body fell and rolled down the slight embankment until it was well out of sight.

Zo? frowned. She hadn't expected cooperation – but SHE decided who lived and died. And this one had had to die – it was just too dangerous to let him live. The gun now hanging from her hand at her side, she turned away from where the detective had fallen and walked back over to the sedan and opened the back passenger's door. Inside, the detective's briefcase lay on the seat – with the cell phone tucked into the open ashtray. Did he REALLY think that she bought that story about just passing on a message?

She opened the phone and pushed buttons to get her through the menu to Last Dialed Call. She breathed out a muffled curse when the name on the last call was Susan Granger and threw the cell phone away from her in frustration. She snapped open the latch on the briefcase and pulled the top up to grab up a handful of papers filled with handwriting. There had to be something...

Her eyes caught at a small page of notepaper that had been tucked into a pocket: Lazlo Broots – 383 S. Elder St., Mercury. Who the hell was this – a contact? A go-between that would lead to Jarod? It had to be...

She raised her eyes from the paper and gazed backwards, eyes narrowing.

Leaving the door ajar and the briefcase wafting papers into the wind, Zo? headed back to her convertible and made a quick U-turn. She was getting closer – she could feel it.

Ray Carlisle moaned heavily against the agonizing headache and rolled himself up on one elbow, then put a hand to his head that he drew away sticky with blood. That bitch had SHOT him – and yet somehow managed

to only graze his skull! What the Hell was going on – and what did this have to do with Susan Granger and the man SHE'D been trying to find? This Jarod seemed to have a lot of people looking for him – and obviously some of them searched for him with less than honorable intentions.

It was hard to focus – the blood wanted to ooze into his eyes and he seemed to be seeing double at the moment. Carlisle had no illusions – he knew he was losing blood rapidly and would need help if he were going to survive this. It took three tries for him to finally drag himself to his feet and begin staggering in the direction he hoped would lead him back to the road and his car. From there, he could call 911 on his cell phone.

He hoped...

~~~~~\*

Jarod double-checked the column of numbers again to make certain that they all had been entered correctly before exiting from that ledger window and back to the screen on which he was still searching the mainframe from his omnipotent administrative access. He had to push to find his proofs now – with JD on site providing additional pressure on the corporation as a whole, and with the police now openly interested in investigating the allegations that Em had been writing about in the newspaper, the Foundation's ability to do business as usual was suddenly precarious. That meant that the oversight that was given the most sensitive information was distracted – and that his search could go even deeper.

In his shirt breast pocket, his cell phone began to chirp. Jarod pulled the little device out and stared at the number attempting to reach him, then shrugged when the number wasn't a familiar one. He debated just pressing the button to silence the ring-tone and tucking the phone back into his pocket, then frowned. His number was private – the number of wrong number calls he'd received in the years he'd had the phone was virtually non-existent. With a long and audible exhale, he hid his search window behind the financial program he was supposed to be using and pressed the connect button.

"Hello?" he asked warily.

"Jarod? Jarod Tangeant? Is that you?"

Jarod's eyes widened. He hadn't used that alias for several years now – not since he'd worked at the university in Albany. So this wasn't a wrong number after all – as he had suspected He'd evidently GIVEN the person on the other end this number – and his mind spun. Who had he met in Albany back then that he'd trusted enough... Oh yeah. "Abner? Abner Wilmot?"

"Jarod!" Wilmot's voice showed his delight in being recognized. "It's been a while!"

"Indeed!" Now Jarod WAS confused. "What can I do for you?"

"Actually," Wilmot dove right into the reason for his call, "I need your help again."

Jarod shook his head in disbelief. "I'm pretty busy at the momen..."

"No," Wilmot interrupted him, "don't say anything until you've heard me out. Just answer me one question first..."

Jarod sighed. "Shoot."

"Are you the one they were talking about in the news article – the Jarod that the Centre kept cooped up all

those years?"

Jarod was aghast. Where had THAT come from? "Why on Earth would you think that?"

Wilmot's shrug was obvious in his tone of voice. "The way you used to slip from one academic discipline to another without even breaking a sweat – from sitting in and participating in Psych Department meeting to tackling equations that made some of our tenured mathematics professors shudder." His voice lowered. "That WAS you the article was talking about, wasn't it – the man who was trained to be anyone he wanted to be."

"And if it was?" Jarod asked carefully, a finger pulling nervously at the top button of his dress shirt beneath the tie.

"I thought so." Wilmot sounded satisfied. "Then I've got some news for you. I think I've found some more like you."

"What?" Now Jarod's jaw was hanging open. "What are you saying – 'more like me?'"

"I have two boys in my house – technically my foster kids now – who reminded me so much of you it wasn't funny and made me start trying to look you up again. They have a level of intelligence that's frightening and seem to have gotten training that resembles the way you would deal with complicated math or scientific topics. But what REALLY got me remembering was the way they're thoroughly uninformed about some of the simpler things of everyday life. And now I can see that the way they don't want to talk about their past is just another resemblance..." Wilmot's insinuation was clear – pointing out that even now, Jarod was reluctant to be open about his involvement with the Centre. "But I thought the article said that you were unique..."

"Two kids?" Jarod ignored the subtle probing statement. "Boys, girls, one of each..."

"Two boys – one about fifteen, the other maybe twelve or eleven," Wilmot answered. "Some of their story just doesn't add up either – they claim to be brothers, and yet, by their own admission, they haven't known each other all that long..."

"They kept us separated," Jarod said softly, understandingly. "They didn't want us interacting too much, in case the contact would contaminate their research."

Wilmot was quiet for a moment, as if sensing that he'd managed to get Jarod to open up about a part of himself that he preferred to keep well-hidden. "And SIMs – what are they?" Wilmot asked gently.

Jarod drew a shuddering breath. "SIMs was short for simulations – where I was given background material and environmental props in order to climb inside the mind of another to either dissect an event that had already happened or anticipate all possible variations on how a given situation would proceed." His voice grew tight. "Some of the minds I had to crawl into were... well..." He shook himself. "Anyway..."

"So you know what these kids are talking about?"

"What are their names?" Jarod countered gently, shaken.

"Leo's the younger one, Virgil is the older – although I heard Leo slip one time and called his brother Virgo..." Wilmot's voice gained a cynical tone. "The police who placed them in foster care gave them the last name of Doe – fitting, I suppose..."

"Oh god!" If there were anything that could confirm Wilmot's assumption, it was the apparent assignation of an astrological sign to each boy. JD had once gone by Gemini – and the number of clones that had been

housed in Montana lent itself to the rest of the Zodiac. Jarod was both elated and devastated – and he sat back in his chair with his eyes closed.

"Were you aware of these kids, Jarod? They seem so lost – like they belong nowhere, to nobody..."

"I suspected..." Jarod drew a shaky breath. "There were twelve of them originally – one was discovered years ago and liberated, the others were kept in an isolated facility until a rival firm attempted to steal them. To date, only one of the other eleven has been confirmed still alive."

"Eleven?" Wilmot had thought he couldn't be any more shocked that he'd already been – the idea of eleven young men like the two waiting for him to get home from work later that afternoon was almost nauseating. "And the rest of them are... dead?"

"There was an explosion and fire," Jarod explained. "You might want to ask your two how much they remember of how they got away from their former home."

"Actually," Wilmot took a deep breath, "I was hoping I could talk you into coming up here and doing your assessment of them personally – to see if these boys are related to what happened to you in any way."

Jarod wanted to do just that – very badly. But he couldn't yet – he knew better than to risk everything he'd been working weeks on for this. "I'll come – but right now I need you to keep your suspicions to yourself, Abner," he counseled seriously, "and just keep them safe until I can get away. I'm trying to get that other of the original twelve free from the unscrupulous people trying to turn him into the same kind of intellectual slave that I was for so long, and free an old friend caught up in the same mess as well. I'm not exactly certain when I can get away..."

"I'll keep them safe, Jarod," Wilmot reassured him. "I seriously doubt that you could convince my wife to turn their welfare over to anybody else at this point – and there's a mathematics professor here at the university who I think is going to want to have a very long talk with at least Virgil in the near future. The kid evidently took one of Jim's favorite "unsolvables" and worked past where Jim had gotten over the years."

"OK, let Jim have access," Jarod modified his warning, "but don't let ANYBODY else know about them. The men who kidnapped them from where they were being kept are still at large – and would most likely stop at nothing to get their hands on two more geniuses." He smiled. "Tell you what – treat them like visiting nephews or something – take them to the park or the zoo or the museum. Treat them like regular kids – kids who haven't had very many advantages. If they're anything like me, they need that desperately."

"And you'll call when you can get away?" Wilmot pressed.

"As soon as its safe – and as soon as I have the others safe from the people who would take advantage of them – I'll give you a call," Jarod promised vehemently. "Give me your number."

Jarod committed the telephone number that was recited to memory – and still noted it down on the blotter of his desk before he terminated the call. He stared at his computer screen for a long moment without seeing a single column of numbers, unable to wrap his mind around the fact that more of the Duplicity subjects had virtually been dumped into his lap JUST as the careful preparations that had been going on in the background were about to bear fruit.

He'd have to call his parents that evening – prepare them for the possibility of having to step up to the job of finishing the job of raising more of their unintended "children." They'd done well with JD – although there had been several very difficult moments as JD had had to make peace with the fact that while he had parents, it wasn't in any normal understanding of the word. Only then constant love and support his parents had

provided in seemingly endless amounts had gotten the young man through the latter part of his adolescence without serious incident. For that matter, JD himself needed to be told – and he imagined his parents would need JD's help more than ever now.

Either way, this Pretend had to kick into high gear NOW – end NOW. It was time to get Sydney and Duplicity away from here and let the Foundation crumble from within, as had been planned all along. Then, hopefully, they all could deal with the fallout from what had happened to them – all of them.

It was too much all at once. Jarod leaned his forehead into his hand. Two more clones found – two more human beings who would have to come to understand their place in a world into which they'd never been intended to be thrust. And somehow he was going to have to compartmentalize their existence so that the plans that he was about to unleash on the Foundation to free the one Duplicity subject and Sydney as well didn't fail due to carelessness

Chapter Index: [1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [4](#) | [5](#) | [6](#) | [7](#) | [8](#) | [9](#) | [10](#) | [11](#) | [12](#) | [13](#) | [14](#) | [15](#) | [16](#) | [17](#) | [18](#) | [19](#) | [20](#) | [21](#) | [22](#) | [23](#) | [24](#) | [25](#) | [26](#) | [27](#) | [28](#) | [29](#) | [30](#) | [31](#) | [32](#) | [33](#)

[Previous](#) <> [Fan Fiction](#) <> [Next](#) <> [Feedback](#)