

# Death Perception

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## Dedication

To Phyllis and Karen for reading all those early manuscripts and not telling me how really bad they were. I hope these new ones meet your expectations. Marie C., you are one of those friends I will remember for as long as I live. Say hi to Smoky for me.

Murder is born of love, and love attains the greatest intensity in murder.

Octave Mirbeau

The eyes sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.

Henri Bergson

Mind moves matter.

Virgil

Only one who can see the invisible can do the impossible.

Frank Gaines

## Chapter I

I was sitting on the edge of the overpass on I35N halfway between Waco and Temple when the

DPS cruiser hit its siren and pulled over. I slowly set my backpack down and swiveled to face them, keeping my back to the drop but mindful of my balance.

The two front doors flew open and a matched pair of officers in starched uniforms and crisp straw hats under burr cuts approached me cautiously.

“Son,” the younger male drawled in a South Texas accent that reminded me of my own. “You’re not thinking of jumping, are you?”

“Down there’s where they found her,” I told him and watched as their brows creased in confusion.

“Pink Socks. That’s where they found her body,” I returned.

He looked over the edge. “Sure enough. Down in that ditch.”

“What’s your name, son?” The other asked me and I stared briefly at their name badges. V. Striker and T. Lambrecht.

“Cale Snowdon,” I answered.

“Cale---you know the FBI has a BOLO out on you? They think you’ve been kidnapped. What in Sam’s Seven Hells are you doing out here?”

“You ever wonder what it’s like to fly?” I asked dreamily, looking over my shoulder at the hundred-foot drop.

“Don’t do anything foolish, son,” the one called Lambrecht cautioned sidling closer.

I swung my legs around awkwardly; they had only come out of the casts a week earlier. My crutches were lying in the grass nearby.

“Come on, Cale,” he soothed. “Give me your hand, let’s get in the cruiser, go back home.”

“Don’t touch me,” I cried in alarm. I hated it when anyone touched me, I saw their innermost desires, hidden shames and things they denied even to themselves.

“I want to die,” I whispered quietly but he heard me and spoke softly into his mike.

“Cale, your uncle is worried about you. Come on back, now. Don’t do anything you’ll regret later.”

He turned his head and muttered something to his partner who moved to flank me.

I scooted further down the railing, my jean jacket popped open and the neck of my hospital gown showed clearly stuffed into the stolen jeans that were four sizes too big and six inches too long but they were the only ones available to me when I’d rummaged through the patient closet in the room next to mine and stolen them.

“How did you get here from Cardinal Glennon Children’s Hospital in Austin?” the older man asked.

“Hitched.”

I had; everyone wanted to stop for the lonely figure on crutches but I was particular about who I climbed in with. Some of those that stopped were sexual predators sensing an easy mark or so they thought but as soon as my hand touched the car or truck door, I knew what kind of character the driver had.

“You hitchhiked?” He was aghast. “After what happened to you and your family, you hitched? Are you nuts?”

I looked at him, in the eyes. “Yes,” I answered seriously and sadly. “I am.” And I jumped.

Of course, I didn’t get far. The other DPS officer had a lariat and roped me as soon as I pushed off and when I jumped; the noose tightened around my arms, shoulders and ribs, snugged up tight and stopped my fall some four feet over the edge. I dangled, unable to breathe as the rope compressed my lungs but he hauled me up rapidly. Both of them grabbed my jacket and hoisted me back onto the concrete apron.

I was pale, unresponsive and in shock. One of them ran back to the cruiser, dug into the trunk and came back with a blanket, which he wrapped around me.

We heard the wailing of sirens, an ambulance and more cruisers. Within minutes, a ring surrounded us of vehicles, which disgorged more uniformed personnel.

Four EMTs knelt at my side, checked me over and carefully lifted me onto a gurney.

“He tried to jump,” the DPS officer told the lead paramedic.

“Cale, how are you feeling? Any pain?”

I just stared, went away so that their touch would not affect me. I could and did wander in my own mind in a world I created to escape the horrors of the real one.

“Cale? Wake up, Cale. Someone wants to talk to you.”

Slowly, I turned my head and perused my surroundings. I was back in a hospital with cheerful cartoon characters on the walls and bright artwork everywhere.

It was not a place I remembered, though all hospitals looked generically the same. This one was not Cardinal Glennon of Austin but another in the Dallas/Ft. Worth metroplex. I was not in a private room but a large area with several beds all housing children from four to fifteen. Most of them were awake and happily playing with toys or their visitors.

Next to my bed was my uncle, my father’s twin and a man I did not know; he wore a three-piece suit that was expensive and screamed feds.

“Cale, how are you?” My uncle’s face was compassionate but he was a stranger to me. Even though he was a twin to my father and identical, I did not know him. I did not remember any of my family. They had all been murdered by a serial killer and the only reason I was still alive was because I had lied to my parents and twin brother; taken the four wheeler out to the far pasture to goof off rather than work on the fence. Machine and I both had fallen into a brand new sinkhole that went twenty feet deep.

I fell off the ATV and hit the bottom breaking both legs, and then the vehicle landed on me, broke my arm, my nose, my pelvis and crushed my skull.

I lay in that hole for three days until a neighbor came looking for the help my dad had promised in installing a well pump and he found instead, a slaughterhouse of bodies.

Someone or something, had broken in, dropped the truck on top of my dad, Tasered, raped and butchered my mom and then did the same thing to my twin sisters and my twin brothers.

My family was unique in that way; we were all sets of twins, even my mom and dad. We lived on a ranch that had been in the family for nearly 150 years and twins went back even then.

My fall had resulted in a skull fracture, severe concussion and coma; when I woke 72 days after the accident, I remembered nothing of the last ten years. My earliest memory was of a heifer calf poking its nose into my face on a porch swing around the age of three. When the nurses told me my family was dead, murdered, I asked, “Who?”

I did not remember any of them.

I spent the next three weeks in the pediatric wing. When I became somewhat mobile on crutches, I escaped one night by stealing clothes, some money and the crutches. No one came out to stop me as I hobbled down the hallways to the exits and out onto Fifth Street.

It took me several hours to reach 35S but it was more of a case of needing to rest frequently; my health was precarious after surgeries on all my breaks. I could not move fast on my own. I had made it all of 75 miles up the interstate and been compelled to stop at the lonely overpass where the murdered girl wearing only pink socks had been found.

Her violent death and lingering emotions had been overwhelming and triggered the despair I was already feeling from my own situation.

“Cale,” my uncle’s voice had the unique ability to draw me back from wherever my mind had skittered.

I looked at him from out of the corner of my eye; I did not like to see anyone full on, it made me nervous to have him or her stare at my eyes.

My family was known for their luminous, oddly colored deep violet eyes and their strange psychic powers, or so they told me. I knew that when someone touched me, I knew what they had done that they didn't want anyone to know.

If you raped your daughter, I saw it when you put me in the wheelchair. If you stole drugs from the med cabinet to feed your habit, I felt it when you stuck the needle in my arm.

When you held the stethoscope to my chest and listened to my heartbeat, I saw you steal your way through med school and perform illegal abortions that killed a young girl.

"Cale, look at me."

I could only obey that insistent voice and both sets of violet eyes looked into each other. I sighed in relief. Nothing came across from his mind to mine but love, compassion and fear. Fear for me.

"What were you thinking, Cale?" Jamison Tucker Snowdon asked quietly. "Your aunt and I have been frantic with worry. We thought he had come back and taken you from the hospital. We called the FBI. This is Dr. Jedidiah Deleon."

"Hello, Cale," the agent said and I heard Boston in his accent. He made no move to touch me; his face was narrow with dark brows, electric blue eyes and was more than a generic clone. He wore his hair short but it was styled rather than just cut; he had creases at the corners of his eyes and a frown line between his brows.

"What do you want?" I asked wearily, wanting only to go back to sleep where the constant bombardment of psychic impressions did not follow me.

"We want to make sure you're safe, Cale. Safe from whoever did that to your family and safe from yourself. Will you tell me what you're feeling?"

"Nothing. I feel nothing," I said with a depressed sigh. "Just whatever everyone else is feeling. It's like I have no emotions of my own, anymore."

"So it wasn't your idea to jump?"

I laughed shortly. "Oh, that was my idea. I thought if I jumped, I could just fly away from everything that haunts me."

"You know you can't fly, Cale? You would have smashed head first onto the concrete and died."

"There is no death," I muttered.

There was a knock on the door and a nurse with Hispanic features poked her head in.

"Time for your pills, hon," she said cheerily and I scooted back in the bed up against the wall so that cold Sheetrock touched me.

The FBI agent held his hand out and she looked startled. "He doesn't want contact with your body," Deleon explained. "Ever hear of psychometry?" The nurse shook her head, asked with a lifted eyebrow.

He explained. "It's a genuine psychic sense where the person holds an object and can read off it the last person's emotions or actions that held it. So, if you've screamed at your husband, beat your child or done something you're ashamed of, he knows it."

She handed him the cup of pills. He looked through it.

"Tegretol, Pen VK, Zoloft, Xanax, Tylenol 3. Seizure meds, antibiotics, anti-anxiety and anti-depressants," he recited. "Have to be careful of the anti-depressants. He's still only a child, just fourteen. They can make him more depressed."

"Are you a doctor?"

"Yes. And a Special Agent with the FBI," he showed her his badge and ID. She left my cubicle, pulling the curtain around us.

I was just thirteen. My birthday had been only a month after the massacre. One of the first things I had seen when I came out of my coma in the ICU were balloons and gifts with 'Happy

Birthday, Cale' in big letters emblazoned everywhere.

"We have a lady coming to talk to you, Cale. She's a counselor, very nice. Very intuitive," my uncle told me.

"You mean she's a shrink."

"Yes. She's that, too. She'll shrink your problems down to a manageable size."

"Why didn't you let me die?" I asked. "Why didn't I die with the rest of them?"

"We're not going to let that happen, Cale," Deleon interrupted. "You're alive for a reason. Whether you believe in God or whatever, there is a reason for your existence, why you survived. Hold on to that." He handed me the pills with a glass of water and a straw.

Cautiously, I took them, sensing nothing from his touch but a calm blankness. "I can't feel you," I said in wonder, as if I'd found a safe harbor in a storm. I reached out the weaker arm that had both bones shattered and still wore the soft cast but it was my left and dominant hand. I grasped his forearm in the blue suit with the crisp blue shirt and sighed.

Nothing. He emanated nothing but a bland shell of still waters. "Uncle Jamesy," I sighed and he started as I called him the name I'd last used when I was three. "I'm going to sleep."

"That's okay, Cale. We'll be here when you wake up. In fact, you won't be left alone for the next 78 hours."

I yawned as the pills took effect, rolled over and pulled the sheets over my head.

## Chapter II

The social worker, shrink was a young woman with curly dark hair that she constantly ran her fingers through as if trying to pull the curls straight. She had pretty hazel eyes with green and amber flecks in them, dark tanned with Mediterranean features, skin tone and a magnificent Roman nose. Her teeth were white and she smiled rarely so that when she did, it was as if the sun came out. She introduced herself but did not offer to shake my hand and she had a broad New England accent. She told me her name was Connie Cavaliero.

"I know, I know," she grumbled. "My Yankee accent."

"I like it. Pak the cah," I teased and she smiled at me.

"Do you know Dr. Deleon, too?"

"No. Why?"

"You sound alike."

"He's from Boston. I'm from New Hampshire."

"Both Yankees."

"But not damned," she returned swiftly. "What's going on with you? Want to talk, play video games, role play and play with toys?" I gave her a look. "Some kids your age like to play with toys," she defended.

"Fuckups, maybe." I watched to see if she would correct me for cursing. I looked around her room, it was a big one with lots of windows, low bookshelves and small tables set with kids' stuff and carpet on the tiled floor that invited you to crawl or spread out. There were computers on the desk with flat screen monitors that went horizontal or vertical and high screen resolution.

"Tell me what you remember, Cale? May I call you Cale?"

I shrugged. "They say it's my name."

"They?"

"The doctors, the police and the man who says he's my uncle."

"It is your name. Cale. Cale Austin Snowdon, son of Parker Hurst Snowdon and Silmarra

Tremarric Snowdon, brother of Curt, Delilah and Leah, Travis and Boone. Your family was noted for being all twins, even your parents.”

“Seventh son of a seventh son for seven generations and all that hokey. People always wanted séances from my mom.”

“You remember that?” she questioned.

“No. Someone told me. I don’t remember them, the murders or the accident. I remember waking up in the ICU three weeks ago with a ton of plaster on me and a really bad headache.”

“You had two broken legs, fractured your pelvis, arm and had a severe head injury. You were in a coma for two months. You look like you’re healing well externally. How are you inside?”

“I didn’t have any internal injuries,” I said deliberately misunderstanding her.

I pushed my wheelchair over to the window and looked out at the tops of other office buildings some floors down. A perfect one-way drop to oblivion if someone hadn’t designed the windows not to open.

“Thinking about jumping?” She asked softly and I gave her a startled look. She had read my mind but then, Dr. Deleon had said she was intuitive.

“You think that would end everything, Cale? What if it just frees your mind to experience everything more openly? Ever wonder why there are so many ghosts still around? Why they don’t move on when they die?”

“I don’t see the dead,” I returned. “Just those that are going to die.”

“Does it scare you?”

“It used to.”

“Did you see your mother and father before they died?”

“I told you, I don’t remember them.”

She opened her desk drawer and pulled out a silver bowl, which she filled with water from her Oasis jug and set it down in front of me. The water rippled as if alive and I stared at it uneasily. I looked back at her but she was staring out the window, looking at the skyline of nearby Dallas/Ft. Worth.

“Tell me what you see,” she coaxed and I fell into the well like a stone down a cenote.

Images swirled through the mirror but they came so fast and fleeting, I could not decipher them and with my cry of alarm, she snatched the bowl away, splattering cold water on the desk, her arms and me.

She wrapped her hands on my shoulders and they were cold and wet but the contact warmed quickly and her mind was shielded like the SAC agent where I could not read her.

“You’re clairvoyant, a seer and a psychometric reader?” She asked in disbelief. “Were you as gifted before your head injury, Cale?”

“Don’t call it a gift,” I snapped. “It’s a curse. What good is it if I couldn’t use it to prevent my own family’s murders?”

“Do you blame them for dying and leaving you alone?”

“NO!” I yelled at her. “I blame myself. If I hadn’t been goofing off--” I paused and gave a reluctant laugh. “Didn’t see that one coming.”

“Do you think that you, as a thirteen year old boy could have stopped a grown man who’s made a career of serial murders of families? Yours wasn’t the first, Cale. Not even the second. He’s done this seven times that we know of.”

“Seven? How come nobody’s caught him?” I was horrified.

“Each one is different, different MO, different weapon, forensics. The only thing that is the same is that it is always a family and always different. Dr. Deleon is the one who has connected them all, from Florida to Maine, from California to New York, on interstates, off back roads, big cities, tiny villages, even on Indian reservations. No one knows how he picks them just that he

does.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“You’re supposed to worry about getting better. There was nothing you could have done to prevent the murders and no way for you to stop it even if you had been there. You want to blame someone; blame the psychopathic monster that slaughtered your family.”

“I was afraid, maybe, that it was me,” I whispered into the window ledge.

“What?”

“I was afraid this thing in my head drove me crazy and I killed them. That would explain why there was no DNA or forensics.”

“You were unconscious in a sinkhole three miles away when it happened, Cale. You had a watch on; it broke when the ATV landed on you. Date and time stamped at your accident. The murders happened late in the evening. It wasn’t you.”

I heaved a sigh of relief, even though I didn’t remember any of it that had been one of my great fears---that I had gone berserk and killed them all.

“What are your hobbies, Cale? What do you like to do?”

“I don’t even know what I like to eat, lady. My past is a blank.”

“You were in the band in grade school. Art class where you did very well. You were on the archery team. Got good grades---A’s and B’s mostly. Good in computer science, both you and Curt. Only class you two shared. Did you do the twin thing---share papers, take tests for each other, drive the teachers crazy?”

I had no memories of any of that, only a blank white wall with nothing scribbled upon it, only a black spot that sucked away at everyday memories until they too, disappeared.

I felt suddenly, as if a monumental mountain sat on me, covered with a hurricane of despair whose winds lashed me flat. I gave an inarticulate sigh and laid my head down on the window ledge while slow tears oozed out of my eyes to puddle on the heater vents.

“When the sadness gets too heavy, try to remember the good things,” she suggested. “You’re healing without serious damage to your arms and legs, your head injury, although severe, has not caused any major neurological changes. You have had no seizures since you were brought in and no infections.”

“They told me my memories would probably never come back.”

“After having seen your X-rays and MRI, probably not. You had a severe crush injury; they had to remove pieces of your skull. It’s a miracle you didn’t have to relearn how to walk, talk, etcetera. You weren’t expected to survive and even the doctors had told the papers you would most likely die from your injuries. That’s what they reported and the FBI encouraged it. They didn’t want any chance of the serial killer learning you were still alive.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me about my mother?”

“You said you don’t remember her. Besides, I’m more interested in what you’re going to do, how you’re going to cope with all this?”

“I thought you were going to tell me what to do about this? Or medicate me.”

“If I give you drugs, what happens when you stop taking them? You want to kill yourself; you’ll find a hundred ways to do it where we can only find a few ways to stop you.”

I was surprised and showed it. “You wouldn’t stop me?”

“I didn’t say that,” she returned swiftly. “I just pointed out that I couldn’t prevent you. Sometimes, the pills don’t work, you vomit them up and someone finds you, pumps your stomach. Bullets miss and blow off your jaw so you eat through a tube and drink through a straw. Or you lay in bed a vegetable for years with people changing your diapers. I’ve even seen people survive jumping off bridges. They lived in constant pain from broken bodies that never healed right. Most of them regretted it afterwards. Those that lived, those that died never came back to tell me.

Sometimes, you can almost sense them hovering where they died. Do you feel their regrets, Cale?”

“I told you,” I mustered a feeble anger. “I don’t see the dead.”

“What do you want to do, Cale? You have any ideas? You want to go back to the ranch?”

“NO!” My denial was vehement and swift.

“Ah. Genuine emotion. Can’t say I blame you but you’re only thirteen. Your uncle wants you but he’s willing to relocate to Alpina if that’s what you want.”

“No,” I shivered. “I never want to go back there again. Dallas is fine.”

“You don’t mind living in the city?”

“I don’t care.” As an afterthought, I asked, “Where does he live?”

“In a nice subdivision, gated with a pool, tennis court and a mini golf course. He makes a very good living as an insurance agent. He’s married with twin daughters. Do you remember them---Ruby and Crystal?”

I shook my head. “Are they pretty?”

“Very. Blondes with blue eyes.”

“Not---violet?”

“No.”

“Then they’re safe,” I whispered but the feeling of doom persisted when I thought of them. “If I don’t go there, where can I go?”

“To a rehab center for a couple of months. I’m recommending that, anyway. You need extensive counseling. After that, we’ll see. You might feel differently by then.” She looked at her watch. “Want anything to drink? Are you hungry?”

“No.”

She got up and pushed my chair to the door, opened it and waited for Dr. Deleon to get up and meet me. They spoke over my head without using words but I caught the gist of their conversation. They were worried that I was going to attempt suicide if given the chance and I would.

“Bring him back in three days. 11 a.m.” she said. “We’ll see how he feels then.”

The SA pushed me back down to the elevators and to my hospital room. When we reached it, I noticed that all the mirrors had been removed and anything else I could break or was sharp was gone. No ropes, ties, shoe laces; although they had left my sheets.

There was a nurse waiting on us and she transferred me back to the bed and pulled up the rails like I was a kid. Planting her bottom in the corner, she sat in the chair making herself comfortable.

“Your dinner’s coming,” she told me and folded her arms. She didn’t look happy to be there.

“You’re not to be left alone, Cale,” the FBI agent told me. “Sorry, but it’s this or a locked room on the Psyche Ward.”

“Put me there,” I spat. “At least, I’d be alone.”

I lay back and covered my eyes, did not open them even when the dinner cart came in. Minus any real utensils, only a plastic spoon.

## Chapter III

Resignation was a new emotion I had learned in the following three weeks. I had been transferred by ambulance to a rehab center in downtown Dallas; a four story square brick vaguely reminiscent of jail but the inside was obnoxiously cheerful. The grounds were pretty with masses of rhododendrons and Tyler roses, gravel paths and stone benches.

I was mobile enough on crutches and with a walking cane by then and I always had an attendant with me. They doctors changed my meds several times and though the feelings of despair

lingered; thoughts of suicide no longer dominated my waking moments.

I was distraught with visions of a dead girl dressed in school uniform and wearing pigtails even though she was older than me. Her throat was cut from ear to ear and she wore an almost puzzled look on her face. She was blonde and pretty, carried her schoolbooks in a backpack that she swung against her leg. She had been dogging me for hours and driving me crazy.

This morning I had spent in physical therapy, strengthening the muscles in my legs. The doctors had done tests on my cognitive ability and declared me sound mentally in that respect. Emotionally, I was still a mess.

I'd been going to the woman therapist but we went round and round, not getting anywhere. I did not trust her and would not open up to her. To tell the truth, I would not open up to anyone.

My uncle came to see me every day, sometimes with my aunt, sometimes with my twin cousins. I felt an instant bond with them even though I did not remember them.

They cried when they saw me, gave me hugs and handed me wrapped packages that were belated birthday presents. Before I could open them, the FBI agent took them.

"Sorry," he said briefly. "I have to check them over."

"For knives, dynamite, guns," I snorted.

"Why?" Ruby asked, curious.

"So I can't hurt myself," I returned.

"But why?" Ruby persisted, frowning. I had an instant vision of her lying on her back, naked with blood making a geometric cabala on her torso. Her eyes were open and blank, terror had etched her face.

I screamed and pushed her away, sobbing. Alarmed, people converged on me and I fought to get away from them.

Not only was I a small, thin thirteen year but I was recovering from a major accident, had no muscle tone, no stamina and no strength. My outburst lasted only minutes though it felt like hours. Sweat made me slippery and the pile of bodies got in each other's way. Finally, I was grabbed and held down until a doctor stuck a needle in my ass and everything melted like ice cream left out on the kitchen table on a hot Texas day.

They let me slide slowly down to the floor and I had several of them kneeling next to me. The doctor ordered the crowd of people out of my room and he and the orderly lifted me up to the bed. The orderly was sent out and returned minutes later and I was put into four point restraints.

Slow tears pooled from my eyes, my mouth sagged open and strange, mewling cries came from me that I had no control over. He flashed a penlight in my eyes. I blinked.

"Cale, can you hear me, understand me? You'll sleep for a while, then, someone will come in and talk to you."

I tried to explain but it was too much of an effort. Twisting my wrists, I worked at them trying to get them loose. They left me alone in the private room. The ceiling seemed to grow heavier and press down on me. I felt like it was going to crush me if I didn't escape it.

My wrists began to bleed under the cotton and fleece lined restraints. Mixing with sweat, the straps slowly stretched until I was able to slide my narrow bones out. My ankles took longer, my fingers didn't want to coordinate the strap knots and buckles; they were like fat pillows with no feeling. Once free, I slid off the bed on rubber legs and held onto the wall so I wouldn't fall on my face. The room wavered, retreated until it seemed like I was a tiny bug at the end of a telescope and looking up at the giant world.

Colored rings surrounded the lights. When I took a step towards the door, my feet moved before the rest of me, I wanted to fold over them and sink to the ground.

I fought it, fear would not let me sink into the dark I could feel hovering at the edge of my consciousness. Sound muted, and then became louder, trailed off until I was in a cocoon of muffled

noises---the slow thumping of my heart, the sloshing of my blood through my veins, the crackling of my feet on lush carpeting.

The door opened to my gentle push; there were a few people going about their business and no one paid any attention to me as I walked like a zombie past the nurses' station, to the front doors and out onto the sidewalk that led to the parking lot.

I was in jeans and a starched oxford shirt with the cuffs turned down and loose over my bleeding wrists. No one noticed, no one said a word to me as I moved relentlessly through the parking lot amidst the SUVs and small compacts. My eyes were set on the towering skyline of skyscrapers.

Most of the trip was a blur, my psychic sense told me where I needed to go without my conscious control and was probably the reason I did not get stopped or attract attention.

My destination was not a planned decision; I became aware that I was resting on a bench in the lobby of a giant building, staring at the corner of the plaza where there was a big potted plant in a courtyard of plants making an indoor garden. No one could see me but I could hear the muted murmurs of many people; the bubbling of water. I looked up to see the atrium's ceiling far overhead. Light panels let sunlight filter through making dapples on the tiled floor.

When the pretty girl in the catholic school uniform walked by me, I knew why I had come there. With a groan of pain and effort, I got up and followed her out into the lobby, through a crowd of people who stared at me oddly, talked over my head and attempted to grab at me but I adroitly avoided their grasping hands as we marched to the elevators.

I slipped in besides her as the doors closed and we traveled up in silence to the 15th floor, down the hallway, past the open atrium and around to the room numbered 1561.

There was a maid cart next door which was open and I could see inside the suite all the way to the double bed. There were couches, tables, and a large screen TV. The maid was changing the sheets. She was a Mexican woman, short, dark with pretty black hair. She looked up at me and her hands froze as she shook out the top sheet.

"Cual es el asunto?" Her voice was sharp, frightened.

I put my fingers to my lips. "Tranquilo! A despertar a los muertos."

I went into the room after the school girl and as the door closed and locked behind us, I heard the Latina woman screaming.

The hallway was short, bathroom on my left, large beds, two of them separated by nightstands with a lamp and the Bible. At the end of the beds were a long dresser and it held a phone stand and a computer station bolted to the table.

There were nicely framed prints on the walls and the curtains out to the balcony were completely closed. The phone was on the floor, torn from its jack and without a dial tone.

She was standing by the balcony doors smiling at me but she wouldn't say anything. I asked her name, memorized the weave of her plaid skirt and the emblem on her jacket.

The door pounded behind me and I turned round to watch it fly open, Security and the cops barged in. When I turned to look again, she was gone.

I sat down on the floor in the spot where they would find her several hours from now while the authorities screamed over my head. It was as if they were speaking a foreign language and I could not understand them.

No one wanted to touch me but rather ringed me, jabbered away at me until I put my hands over my ears and screamed at them to shut up and blessed silence ensued.

Slowly, clearly, I iterated, "Call Special Agent Jed Deleon of the FBI." I repeated it until it became a mantra and several of them detached and left.

To me, it seemed only light seconds later but they told me it was an hour later before the FBI agent strode into the hotel room and squatted in front of me. He pulled at his knees and I heard the

cracking of his joints. His square hands with manicured nails, lightly tanned and haired fingers took hold of my chin and lifted my face to meet his.

“Cale.”

I blinked. His voice sounded like it was low rpms, deep, slow, sonorous. Even his Brahman accent was gone. He gave me a little shake and snapped his other fingers in my space.

“Cale. Where is all the blood on you from? Are you hurt? Who’s dead?” I looked at the floor between the beds, pointed. He turned round, spoke to the policemen. “Help me get him up.”

I shrank away but the cop had blue vinyl gloves on and nothing came through as he lifted my legs while Deleon took my shoulders. They put me on the bed and I bounced on the firm mattress. Deleon pushed up my sleeves and rolled both of my wrists over. “First aid kit?” he asked.

“Should I call 911?” the cop returned.

“Yes.”

He spoke over his shoulder. “Get these people out of here,” he told the DPD and they shoed everyone out but the officers.

“Cale, tell me what happened?” Deleon’s voice was soft, but insistent.

I cleared my throat, looked at my sleeves which were red with fresh blood. I did not know where it came from, I had not felt the pain from abrading my wrists in the restraints and there was too much to be from those minor scrapes.

“She’s a silly girl, goes willingly to her death, doesn’t even fight when she sees the knife,” I said in scorn. “She just sits there and weeps while he slices her throat.”

“Who, Cale? What’s her name?”

The patrol officer’s eyes grew round and wild. He swallowed and his Adam’s apple jumped up and down.

I spoke to him. “You better not forget your vest tomorrow when you stop for Devil Dogs.”

His hand went to his shirt. I turned back to Deleon. “It’s already too late for her. I can’t stop it. He has her, he’s raping her. I can’t see his face but he’s tall and good looking, strong. He has a mind that bounces thoughts back at me. Like a mirror bounces sunlight.”

“Why does he dump her here?” he asked.

“Because he likes to taunt the police. There’s a forensics convention here.”

“What’s her name, Cale?”

I looked around the room, gestured to the desk and he brought me the writing stuff.

Concentrating, I drew the school emblem on the notepad in pencil and then the plaid uniform with a description of the colors. Green and black with a red and yellow stripe. He handed it over to the policeman with instructions to track it down.

By now, voices could be heard coming down the hallway and an EMT team burst into the room complete with stretcher and kit bags. Deleon moved out of the way so that they had access to me.

“Where are you hurt?” the woman asked. She was in white shirt, blue cargo pants with belt from which all sorts of gear hung. Her shoes were Hi Tec boots like Fire and Police wore. She started at my neck and her fingers worked down, manipulating for wounds and the source of blood. The other was a man and he slipped a blood pressure cuff on my skinny arm. Both wore gloves.

I could not keep my eyes open. I sagged, huddled into myself while they took my vitals, watched my pupils react and assessed me.

“Only injuries I can find are some minor wrist abrasions,” she pronounced, puzzled. “Has he been around any other blood source to pick up these splashes? His BP is low and he’s verging on shock, but I can’t find any real trauma.”

“He needs to go to the Rehab Center, or do you recommend the ER?” the FBI agent asked.

“Given his low BP, the presence of blood and his obvious unresponsive condition, I would recommend the ER. I’m going to insert an IV, put him on lactated Ringers, and get his system back

up. Kids crash so quickly and easily.”

They slid me onto the gurney, tightened straps around me and soon, I felt the bite of a needle and a sensation flow up my arm as fluids hit my blood stream.

We went rolling down the hallway like I was on a roller coaster ride with no brakes. Deleon stayed at my side all the way to the ambulance where he gave orders for one of the cops to drive his government sedan after the unit and meet us at the hospital. They only used the siren to go through red lights and intersections.

I was in a state of lethargy, did not respond to any of their questions, not even when they wheeled me into the emergency room and stripped my clothes off me. They gave me a shot and I faded into my dark, quiet place.

## Chapter IV

The first face I saw when I rolled over was Dr. Deleon’s and he looked very disturbed. He was speaking to three other men who all looked like him.

“Jed,” the youngest said and pointed with his chin. He turned and studied me. My heart sank but it was a distant feeling, like I was disconnected from my emotions.

“Her name was Frances Panek, she was a senior at St. Catherine’s Prep School and she was having an on line affair in a chat room with a seventeen year old boy who turned out to be a 40 year old pedophile,” he said, staring at me. In his hand, he held a folder and when he opened it, I saw the same scene in digital that I’d seen in my head.

There were other photos, several of different men and I pulled out the one of the blonde with gray eyes flat and enigmatic, thin lipped and handsome in a rugged, outdoorsy way.

“That’s him.” I did not touch the face, I could feel the waves of lust, anger and evil coming off the man’s soul.

“John Peter Lusk. The Lusk Killer. We caught him dumping the body where you said and when you said.”

“So you caught him?”

“He’s in custody. We searched his place and have found evidence of six other child murders. He was a coordinator at the school bus lines, had access to bus routes and children’s names and addresses. He had a list of future victims. You might not have saved Frances but you did 12 others, Cale.”

“Twelve?” I whispered, exhausted.

“Girls, boys, all under the age of 16. Most were around 12.”

“Now what?”

“First, you have to get well, Cale. Nothing can take place until you’re healed. But we’d like you to help us solve some open cases. In return, we’ll provide you with a safe place to live, medical and psychiatric care. If you track down and bring the killers to justice, you’ll make the feelings go away.”

“Promise?”

His face softened. “I want a promise from you, too, Cale.” I looked at him sideways. “I want you to swear your most solemn oath that you won’t try to kill yourself without coming to me first and letting me talk to you.” I hesitated. He continued. “If I can’t change your mind, I won’t try to stop you.”

“Y’all swear?” I asked. He nodded. “I swear by Grandpa’s tombstone on Boot Hill.” I crossed my fingers and swore, “I promise I won’t try to kill myself unless I talk to you first or so help me, cross my heart and hope to...die.”

He grabbed my pinky with his own and we twisted. I grinned and dropped my hands to my lap, looked at the folder he still had.

“Y’all want me to look at that?”

“No. I want you to eat something, drink and do whatever thirteen year olds do when they’re happy.”

I looked at him sadly. “That ain’t gonna happen. Happy is something ain’t in my forecast. Gotta settle for content.”

He shook on that. “What do you want to eat?”

“Where am I?”

“Dallas General. Private room reserved for VIPs. There’s a guard outside your door and another at the elevators. You can’t sneak out and they know your face. You’ll find it somewhat more difficult to escape now, Cale. Besides, the hotel reported your incident to the papers and you made the news. We’re afraid that it will attract the attention of the man who took your family and he’ll come back for you.”

I didn’t say anything for a moment. “Chicken fried steak. Mashed potatoes, cream gravy and corn.”

“You know its breakfast time? Might take some doing to get lunch served.”

“You’re the FBI,” I said. “Show them your gun.”

He laughed and the other agents looked startled.

My first meal was take-out from a diner down the street, chicken fried steak and all the trimmings. He ate with me and told me that he had never tried it before, had wondered what it was.

I didn’t answer him, being too busy shoveling food into my mouth and he stared in awe at the amount I put away and was looking for more. For dessert, I had a big bowl of pistachio ice cream with whipped cream, maraschino cherries and sprinkles. When I was done, I let out a long hard burp and rubbed my stomach.

“Can’t wait for lunch,” I announced and he laughed so hard he almost choked.

“They’re going to release you before then.”

“Where am I going?” I pushed the tray away and slipped out of the bed to look out the window. I was on the second floor and could see the massive Dallas/Ft. Worth overpass exchange that rose hundreds of feet into the air like a Sci-Fi movie set.

“We have a safe house out in the country. Or an apartment here in the city, in the FBI building.”

“City. I’ve had enough of the country.”

There was a knock at the door and we both turned to see who it was and another agent, one of the group that had been there when I woke up entered my room to Deleon’s ‘come in’. The agent’s eyes flickered briefly on me then he bent over Dr. Deleon and spoke into his ear. His face stilled and he looked thoughtful.

“Thank you, Mason. Will you see to it that Cale’s paperwork is expedited so he can leave as soon as possible? We have to go clothes shopping.”

“Yes, sir.”

He waited until the younger man was gone. “Patrolman Jensen,” he began and at my questioning look, “The police officer you warned two days ago?”

I nodded, scratching at my stomach. I had an uncomfortable feeling where this was going.

“He took your advice. Went back to get his vest, walked in on a convenience store robbery, took two in the chest and shot the perp on the way down. Without his vest and warning, he’d be dead.”

“Is he hurt?” I asked.

“Bruised. Sore. Grateful to you, he’s told a bunch of people about it.”

"I wish everyone would heed such warnings," I muttered.

"Will you tell me how you see it?" he was curious.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, dangled my legs.

"Any clothes around?"

He pulled out my jeans and shirt from the closet and handed them to me.

"Underwear, socks, my Ropers?"

"In the closet. Aren't you wearing your shorts?"

I peeked. Sure enough, my tighty whiteys were still on me. I pulled on my Wranglers and my shirt over my head. There were still blood stains on the cuffs and my wrists had gauze wrapped around them where I had torn them getting out of the restraints. I had Band-Aids on my hands where they had removed my IVs.

"Is there anything wrong with me? I mean, besides the normal thing wrong with me."

"You have no new trauma, no wounds. You were just in shock, with a low blood pressure and a possible drug overdose. How you got out of the hospital and to that hotel is a total mystery. The doctor said he gave you enough Valium to knock out a horse."

"They come to me. Stand in front of me until I see them. They look like they do when they're dead---they wear the same thing, they have the same wounds. Sometimes, they take me to their death place. Sometimes I'm called to it, and sometimes I just find it."

"How many times have you seen them?" He asked, curious and appalled.

"Four times, now." I would not tell him about Ruby, my cousin. I could not share that with him.

"I know about Frances. Who else?"

"Pink socks, someone in the hospital in Austin. I saw them in the morgue, after but it wasn't a murder---a suicide."

"Who killed Pink Socks? Not Henry Lee Lucas?"

"He claimed to but he's lying. She was an émigré from Brazil, a student under a false visa and smuggled drugs in. She stole some money from her bosses. So they raped her and murdered her."

"Cali cartel?"

"Nothing so exotic. Local man. Owns a garage where they service city vehicles."

The doctor knocked and came in, was surprised to see that I was up and dressed. "Hi, Cale," he said and I looked at him once not staring at the large purple birthmark that covered over half his face. I knew what it was like to be stared at and although he hid his feelings on the outside, I could sense what it had done to him inside over the years.

"I'm Dr. Ross, how are you feeling?"

He checked my eyes, my pulse and my wrists. I noticed he wore vinyl gloves and he made the comment, "It's on your orders, Cale. No one is to touch you with skin to skin contact. Your vitals are good. I see you've eaten. You ready to go home?"

"I have no home," I said, sadly.

"Your paperwork is ready. I'm discharging you into the custody of Dr. Deleon. The nurse will bring things for you to sign. I'm putting you on a minor course of anti-antibiotic and some anti-anxiety drugs. You should see physical therapy; continue your exercises for your legs and arm. Eat well, get plenty of rest. You're young, you'll heal fast."

"Some things never heal," I muttered.

He went to talk to Deleon and I used the bathroom, finger combed my hair, brushed my teeth and washed my face. I could not see my face; there was no mirror inside because they had removed it, leaving a blank spot over the sink.

"Cale," I heard at the bathroom door. I came out and found myself surrounded by his agents and a nurse with a wheelchair.

“Ready to go? Sit here and we’ll take you down.”

“I can walk.”

“Hospital policy,” she said. Sitting in the blue padded chair, I put my feet up on the rests and took the clipboard and pen from her. The discharge papers required four signatures and I signed my name under Jed’s.

It was a short ride down to the first floor and out to the lobby. When we exited, there was a big black SUV with blacked out windows waiting at the curb but my attention was riveted to the big skyscrapers two blocks over where Frances had taken me. I wasn’t that far from her death scene; it no longer called to me nor had I any interest in it, it was psychically dead.

The minute I planted my skinny cheeks on the black leather seats, I could sense the undercurrents of old emotions, predominantly fear, lust and anger. I broke out in a cold sweat, pushed past the agent attempting to get in and stood on cold concrete.

Deleon wisely said nothing but opened the front passenger seat and put my palm on it.

We waited. The only thing that came through was the residue of a mundane affair between two unmarried agents and I could handle that. I nodded and climbed in; he put my seat belt on for me and sat directly behind me. The air conditioning was on and I shivered in the frigid air as the doors slammed shut and locked.

## Chapter V

Jed Deleon’s office was a private one; he shared it with no one else. His team of agents had desks in an open area with a room set off to the side where they had a task force set up, currently working three other cases. One was a serial killer, another a serial bomber and suspected terrorists. They had cleared a recent kidnapping but with unhappy results. The boy’s body had been found in a field near Temple, raped, tortured and burned. I had not been drawn into his murder; did not understand why some victims came to me and not others.

His desk was Government Issue but his chair was a custom thing of leather, plump and plush. He had pictures all over his wall and commendations for shooting, bravery, his medical degrees and college diplomas. There were no pictures of a wife or children but I did see some that might have been siblings dressed in elite services gear. He had introduced me to his team, there were four men from around thirty up to forties and I felt both older and more jaded that they.

We had gone straight from the hospital to the FBI building downtown, with a planned excursion to Dillard’s for the afternoon.

“Dillard’s?” I had questioned. “What’s wrong with Wal-Mart?”

“I think you can do better than that, Cale. Do you know you bought a LOTTO ticket the day before your family was murdered?”

“No, I don’t remember that.”

“Well, it was a winning ticket,” he returned grimly.

“And?”

“It was the only winning ticket. 258 million.”

I sat down abruptly. Looked at him, attempted to speak, finally croaked, “You’re kidding, right?”

Slowly, he shook his head. “Your uncle had a million dollar policy on each of your parents, too. We’ve kept it quiet, only the Lottery officials know and your uncle, the family lawyer.

“Anyway, money’s the least of your problems.” He studied me curiously. “Anything you really, really want?”

“You mean like a Ferrari?”

He laughed. “I don’t think so. You don’t even have a license. I suppose you can drive?”

“I guess. I grew up on a ranch, probably can drive tractors, ATVs, trucks, probably skidsters. I don’t remember anything about the ranch.”

“I gather it was a rather large chunk of West Texas, raised Black Angus, some horses. You used to ride, roped some. There are trophies for archery and target shooting and horse shows, rodeo in the house. You and your twin shared a computer but it was your sisters that were big into surfing the net, Face Book, Twitter and chat rooms. We took your hard drives, found nothing untoward but we don’t know who might have seen their profiles. They did mention you and Curt extensively, more so than your other twin brothers. We think that’s how the perp found your family. Even though your town knew about your family’s gifts, it wasn’t out there for others to speculate on.”

“I’d like a laptop. One of those small ones. A cell phone, although I don’t know anyone to call.”

“I’ll get you a sat-phone. We want you connected, available at all times and everywhere. The Justice Department will give you a new identity and new papers, make an account available to you with a debit card.”

“Who found me? In the sinkhole, I mean.”

“Your neighbor. Your dad promised to help dig a new well, put in the pump. When he didn’t show up, your neighbor knew something was wrong, and came looking. Found the bodies, saw you were missing along with the ATV and tracked you. Life Flight brought you to Austin. Didn’t they tell you any of this?”

“Yeah. But I didn’t remember any of it.”

“Circuit City or Staples has a good laptop. Unless you want to order it from Dell. Most kids don’t like to wait for things.”

“You have any kids, Dr. Deleon?” Now it was my turn to be curious.

“Call me Jed. No. Never married. Spent too much time in school, and then traveling.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-five. I suppose that seems fairly old to a thirteen year old.”

“I wonder if I’ll live that long,” I mused and he gave me a startled look.

“Why? Do you know something I should be aware of?”

“No.”

“Are you ready?”

I got up and followed him out to the elevators down to the lobby and out front where his car was waiting. No big SUV this time but a small compact sedan with government plates.

“Carpool vehicle. Want to ride up front or in the back?” he asked.

I hesitated. Gingerly put my hand on the door and received muted impressions that were so vague I could not read them. I climbed in, seat belted myself and relaxed.

“Does it make a difference if they clean something?” he asked.

“Everything is new to me, Jed. This...ability, these feelings. I don’t remember any of it from before. Sometimes, it just overwhelms me, sometimes, I can’t deal with it. I can’t answer your questions cuz I just don’t know.”

He turned the corner and we hit the interstate and the dizzying overpasses that climbed the sky like greedy hands.

I did not like heights; I knew that much. I kept my eyes closed and gripped the dashboard, inciting comments from the driver.

“Haven’t had an accident in 20 years,” he told me. “Relax.”

“Can’t. Don’t like heights.”

“We’ll be down on the ground in two more minutes. The Mall’s two exits up.”

I could feel us descend and risked a peek. It only took him fifteen minutes to reach the big Mall and it was a hell of a lot bigger than anything I'd seen in San Antonio or Austin.

There were stores here I'd only heard about, never imagined I'd be able to see, let alone shop in. Like Neiman Marcus, the Sharper Image, Dell Computer.

That was the first place I dragged him to and he protested as I hurried him along. Grown-ups were so slow when it came to shopping for toys. I wasn't aware of the curious stares but Jed was and he moved protectively around me and that I noticed.

The reason why became apparent when we passed a newspaper kiosk and on the front page was a picture of me and a headline that read, 'West Texas Boy Prevents Cop's Death.'

"Where did they get my picture?" I wondered.

"School photo. They still haven't picked up on your lotto ticket. We've managed to keep that secret. It's a good thing, too. Otherwise, you'd have a million so called 'relatives' after you. Of course, you being a minor, you can't legally collect. It's in a trust with your uncle as trustee. Still, there was a million dollar policy on each of your parents. That's in trust for you, too."

I could feel their eyes on me like an itchy cockle-bur stuck in the seam of my clothes; poking, scratching till I dug at it with fingernails trying to remove it.

The clerk inside the computer store ran his eyes briefly over me and then his attention remained on the Special Agent. "May I help you?"

I waited patiently, standing at his side nearly touching him, deriving comfort from the close warmth given off by his body. He smelled of expensive cologne and coconut shampoo.

"Laptop," Jed said. "Small enough to stick in a backpack, Wi-Fi ready, 4 gigabyte memory."

We followed him to the display and I was torn between the mini 10in. Acer and the slightly larger HP and settled for the HP. I was surprised when Dr. Deleon pulled out his wallet and put the purchases on his credit card.

Crowds of people passed by the front entrance, several stared in at the tall figure in the fine suit. The sensation of being stared at and assessed grew so strong that I whipped around and studied the crowd. No one started or jumped. I took his hand and pulled; he looked astounded at my contact and I could feel the uneasiness communicate itself to him through that touch.

"What's wrong?" His face remained unchanged but his pupils narrowed and made his eyes hard and dangerous.

"Someone's watching me. Someone bad," I whispered.

"Can you see him?"

I shook my head slowly, felt the hairs lift on the back of my neck. "Can't sense him other than his dirty eyes crawling on me, like a slug."

"Don't let him make you feel that way." He grasped my hand, took the carton with the laptop and exited the store. We walked briskly towards the Dillard's and into the customer service area where he spoke quietly to the service rep and she took us back to Security where he flashed his badge. We were allowed into the room where closed circuit TVs covered every inch of their particular store and the avenue leading up to it.

"See anyone, Cale?"

I scanned the faces, touched the screens but felt nothing other than the pulse of electricity that went through the unit. I sighed with frustration.

"Nothing. It's like a door closed. I can't *FEEL* anything." I looked at the security guard and before I could think about it, I said, "Don't go home tonight. Not before 7:27 p.m."

"Why?"

"Gas explosion. City ruptured the main while working."

"Warn them!"

"Won't do any good. Those that are going to die have already started the process. You have a

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