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Deadly Visions

Beyond Belief

The Answer Man

CLOSE YOUR EYES

IRIS JOHANSEN

AND

ROY JOHANSEN

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For Sherry Tillinger

Who made the world a brighter and more loving place

**CLOSE
YOUR EYES**

PROLOGUE

IT WASN'T JUST her imagination.

Stephanie Marsh looked back as she walked through the second level of the parking garage for Gold's Gym. She wasn't alone.

She had been aware of distant footsteps attempting to fall in time with her own, but she had told herself that they were just echoes reverberating off the empty garage's concrete walls.

No such luck. There was definitely someone in the shadows behind her.

Or was he in front of her?

Stay calm, she told herself. It wasn't as if she were one of the gym's perfect tens who were weirdo magnets in their skimpy, formfitting workout wear.

But since when did a psycho need a reason to attack a woman at 10 P.M. in an empty parking garage?

She was okay, she told herself. Everything would be fine. As long as those security cameras were—

Her heart jumped into her throat.

Shit. The cameras were in place, but the reassuring red glow of their power lights were nowhere to be seen.

She did not break stride as she reached into her purse and gripped the rubber case of her mobile phone. She raised the phone and stared in disbelief at its illuminated screen.

NO CARRIER.

She was accustomed to losing her signal, but not her entire freaking phone company.

This couldn't be happening.

"Need help, young lady?"

A man stepped from the shadows in front of her. He wore dark tennis shoes, khakis, a T-shirt, and a pullover sweater similar to the one her grandfather wore. The man was probably over sixty, and his entire face crinkled as he smiled.

He looked like a nice man, but she knew better than to lower her guard. Jeffrey Dahmer might have looked like a hell of a nice guy.

She kept walking. "No problem. Have a good night."

"You, too." He smiled again. "The Portland Street exit is closed. You'll have to go out on Wesleyan."

She nodded and walked faster. This wasn't news. The Portland Street exit was always closed after eight.

Just a few more yards to her car . . .

The man held a map of some kind. "Could you help me out with this? I've been wandering around this cockamamie garage for ten minutes trying to find a—"

She made a wide arc around him as she neared her car. "I'm sorry, I'm in a hurry."

He took a step closer. And then another. "If you'll just take a look at this . . ."

The map fell away, revealing a glint of steel.

Pain.

She shuddered, unable to move.

The man now stood next to her. He shook his head as he slowly pulled the blade from her abdomen. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "You don't deserve this."

She stared at him in disbelief, trying to reconcile the kind, regretful face with the horrible thing that was happening to her. She was falling, the floor of the parking garage rising up to meet her. She scarcely felt the impact. Her insides felt like cold concrete, hardening and making it impossible for her to move.

Or breathe. She tried to scream, but there were only gurgling sounds in the back of her throat.

The man wiped his bloody knife with a bandana. "Shh. It will be over soon, Stephanie."

He knew who she was.

Then it hit her.

They had found out.

"Schuyler." She pushed out the word.

"Just relax."

"Tell Schuyler . . ." Darkness crept over her, from the back of her neck, over her skull, taking away thought, taking away everything that she was.

She had to say it. Gotta get this out . . .

"Yes, dear?" he asked gently.

Her eyes fluttered as she summoned the last bit of energy her body would ever give her.

"Tell Schuyler I said . . . to go to hell."

CHAPTER

1

KENDRA MICHAELS PULLED the strap over her head and adjusted her guitar in front of her. “We’re going to do something different today, Jimmy.”

“No!”

She ignored the outburst. Twelve-year-old Jimmy Matthews hated any variation in his routine, but she was determined to coax him, ever so slightly, from his comfort zone. “Look at me, okay?”

Jimmy looked up at her, his dark eyes glittering with defiance. He was autistic, and it had taken weeks for him to feel comfortable enough to make eye contact with her. She’d regarded that as a major victory. She knew there were other breakthroughs to come, if only she could unlock the secrets of that bewildering yet fascinating mind of his.

She held his gaze. “Jimmy, remember when I had you put your hand on my guitar last week? When I told you to feel the music?”

He nodded.

“You liked that, didn’t you?”

He shrugged.

“You *could* feel it, couldn’t you? I saw you tapping your fingers and moving your feet.”

He thought for a moment. “I felt it all over.”

“I know. And I thought to myself, this guy has rhythm. You know what that means, don’t you? It means you can feel the beat. You can feel it in your bones . . . and in your soul.”

He looked away again. “I want to sing. I always sing.”

“And you’re a really good singer. And you can keep singing, but I want you to do something else.”

She turned and walked across her small studio. It was a carpeted, octagonal-shaped room with a whiteboard, a piano, several colorful music-themed posters, and a large mirrored panel at the far end. “Come here, I want to show you something.”

Jimmy hesitated.

She smiled luminously at him. “I promise that you’re going to like this, honey. Don’t you trust me?”

He didn’t answer, then nodded jerkily. “I . . . trust you.”

Her heart melted. Another victory.

“That means a lot to me, Jimmy.” She gripped the corner of a white tarp and pulled it away to reveal a percussion kit.

His eyes widened. “Drums!”

“Do you like it?”

He bit his lip. “Why should I like it? I don’t know how to play drums.”

“Anybody can play drums. Whether they can play them well, that’s another matter.” She picked up a pair of drumsticks and placed

them in Jimmy's hands, curling the fingers around in a matched grip. She pulled him around to the other side of the drum set. "Now sit down. This will be fun."

Jimmy slowly sat, holding the drumsticks in front of him as if they were sticks of unstable dynamite.

"You don't have to hold them so tightly. Loosen up, feel the beat like you did last time."

He looked at the various surfaces around him. "But what do I do?"

She strummed the guitar. "Whatever you feel like doing. Whatever sounds and feels good to you." She played George Harrison's "Got My Mind Set on You," accenting the song's strong and clean rhythms.

Jimmy held the sticks over the snare drum.

"Anytime."

He struck the drum's surface tentatively.

"Both sticks, Jimmy . . . Come on, it's fun!"

He used both sticks to accompany her on the snare, striking with a not-entirely-unrhythmic beat.

"That's fantastic!"

He closed his eyes and nodded. He branched out to the tom-tom on his left, accenting his stylings with the lower-pitched drum.

"Good!" She pointed down to the pedal on the floor. "That's for the bass drum. Want to try it?"

He pressed the pedal and reacted with a start as the kicker struck the drum surface. He stepped on it again and again, repeating the motion until he found the rhythm she had set.

He continued on the bass drum as he struck the snare and tom-tom with increased vigor.

Kendra studied him. Could it be?

Ever so slightly, a faint smile was pulling at the corners of his mouth.

Yes.

* * *

KENDRA MICHAELS DIDN'T appear to be the bitch he'd thought she'd be, Adam Lynch thought, as he watched her through the one-way glass in the observation room as she interacted with the child. What he'd heard about her had been far from complimentary, but that could be due to jealousy. Her work had completely overshadowed that of the FBI agents from whom he'd received reports. Evidently, she had not done it diplomatically.

Yet every move, every expression, was warm and gentle as she taught that troubled boy. A puzzle. If he was going to use her, he had to know which buttons to push to do it. He had no doubt he'd find a way to do it. It was a skill that had earned him both applause and hatred over the years. But it was annoying that he'd been given the wrong information with which to develop a method to do it. He studied her, looking for an answer to the paradox.

Though she was of middle height and slim, she did not appear fragile at all. When she walked or moved, she had a litheness that spoke of strength and suppleness earned by frequent exercise. Her shoulder-length, pale brown hair was sun-streaked in places. Her face . . . Strength there, too. A strong chin, well-formed lips that still spoke of control and discipline, large hazel eyes that were set far apart and seemed to hold intelligence as well as humor. Not a pretty face, but for an instant, when she smiled at the boy, he had seen a flash, a beauty. It was the most dangerous form of allure, which could challenge a man to try to make that elusive beauty reappear again and again. She wouldn't appeal to everyone. She was too strong, too confident, but Lynch was drawn to that challenge.

He felt a rush of sudden eagerness at the thought of dealing with Kendra Michaels. She was interesting. He had grown so accustomed

to successfully manipulating his targets that any change, any stretch, was welcome.

What was the key that he could use to make her go in the direction he wanted? Sympathy? She obviously had a warm attachment to children. But would that extend to adults? Anger? Fear? Sex? No, that last choice had popped up out of nowhere and probably had nothing to do with logical reasoning and everything to do with his physical response. The other two were possibilities, but he would have to see if they were necessary tools.

Oh well, it would come to him. He leaned back against the wall, his gaze intent on Kendra Michaels. In the meantime, he would enjoy watching her. She was like a kaleidoscope, with different shadings and settings shifting before his eyes.

Yes, Kendra Michaels was going to be an interesting project.

THE HOUR-LONG SESSION with Jimmy stretched to an hour and fifteen minutes, violating Kendra's own rule about her enforced stopping times. She wanted to leave her clients wanting more, eagerly anticipating their next session together. It was always tempting to keep going when she saw them enjoying themselves, but Jimmy had hit such a joyful groove in his drum playing that she knew he wouldn't tire of an extra quarter hour.

Kendra opened the door to the waiting room, where Jimmy's mother, Tina, had watched from behind the large one-way glass.

As Tina entered, Jimmy rushed toward her. "Mom, I played the drums!" He pounded his drumsticks into the air.

Tina laughed and hugged him. "I saw! You were amazing!" She glanced at Kendra. "I can't believe the way he lit up!"

"Yes, he did."

“I actually think . . . he’s getting better.”

“He could be.” Kendra managed a smile. She knew that Tina wanted more confirmation than that. All the parents did. They spent their lives searching for some sign—any sign—that their children might finally be turning the corner in their afflictions, but it was rarely that clear-cut. It was a marathon, not a sprint, she liked to say, and this race could go on for the rest of their lives.

But once in a while, there could be an exception. And who was to say that exception couldn’t be Jimmy?

“It was a good day,” Kendra said. She gently took the drumsticks from Jimmy. “I’ll see you Friday?”

“Yes!” He pounded the air again, still playing to the song in his head as his mother escorted him out.

It had been a good day, Kendra thought. Maybe she should have been more—

“So this is what you do for a living.”

The voice came from behind her. She spun around to see a man strolling toward her from the waiting room. “How did you get in here?”

The man was fortyish, tall, well dressed, and his dark hair was cropped short. Ice blue eyes lit a craggy face that was as tanned as if he’d spent the winter in the Caribbean. He jerked his thumb back toward the waiting room. “The main entrance was locked, so I tapped on the door from the hallway. That nice woman let me in. She may have had the impression that I worked with you.”

“Maybe because that’s what you told her?”

“Not in so many words.”

“It doesn’t take so many words if you choose the right ones. Who are you?”

The man walked toward the piano and idly plunked a few notes on the keyboard. “If what I’ve heard about you is true, you already

know quite a bit about me.” He turned back to her. “Why don’t *you* tell me who I am?”

She gazed warily at him. She had been acquiring information about him since he walked into the room, but she realized it was being submerged by the sheer impact of his personality. There weren’t many people who possessed that instant magnetism, and she had an idea that he used it with the deftness and skill of long practice. Complicated. She had no need of any more complications in her life.

She checked the screen of her cell phone. “I have another appointment coming. Sorry, I don’t have time for games. You should go now.”

“This is no game. Humor me, Dr. Michaels.” He smiled.

It was a charming smile, she thought, meant to put her at ease and draw her closer into the web. Oh yes, she had to be very careful with him.

“It’s the quickest way to get me out of your hair,” he continued. “Much easier than calling security. I’m curious to see—”

Kendra cut him off. “You’re right, let’s get to it. Who are you? Let’s see. I know you have a background in law enforcement, probably the FBI.” She walked around the studio, straightening it for her next client. “But I’m fairly certain you don’t work for them now, though you are consulting for them in some capacity. As a matter of fact, you were at the downtown FBI branch office earlier today. And I agree with you that the third-floor conference room is quite stuffy and warm.”

He stared at her for a long moment, his gaze narrowed. “Amazing. I would say that they called and tipped you off, but I didn’t tell anyone that I was even considering coming here.”

“No one tipped me off. I had no idea you were coming, and I’m sure they didn’t either.” She covered the drum kit as she continued her assessment. “When you were with the Bureau, you carried two guns, one in your left shoulder holster and the other on your right ankle.

Now you're only carrying one, in the shoulder holster. I guess getting shot wasn't quite enough to put you off guns entirely, was it?"

He smiled. "Go on. I'm enjoying this."

"I'm sure everyone told you to spend more time recuperating, but you couldn't stand to sit still, could you? That wheelchair drove you crazy, almost as much as the crutches did."

"Anybody would feel that way."

"You more than most. Is that why your wife left you?"

He raised his left hand, where a slight indentation still appeared on his ring finger. "That's an easy one."

"It's all easy. That ring indentation is tanned, but not nearly as tanned as the skin around it. I'd say you took it off two years ago."

"Two and a half years."

"I stand corrected. I'm assuming you don't have children. If you did, that Italian sports car you drive wouldn't be very practical."

"I know you didn't see me drive up."

She shook her head. "I didn't. Not very inconspicuous for someone in your line of work, is it?"

"I'm entitled to my indulgences. I have another, much more boring, car at home. No kids, by the way."

"You've been in this area for a while, but not always. You grew up in the Midwest. Wisconsin, I'd say. You probably even went to college there. After that, you spent a few years in the Northeast. Then you came here."

"In-freaking-credible," he said softly. "I do believe that everything I've heard about you is true."

"I'm so happy I didn't disappoint you," she said sarcastically. "Will you please leave now? I'm very busy."

"And more than a little hostile. Now why is that? Could it be because I'm FBI?"

“Possibly. If you’re here, I’m sure you know I’ve had a few problems with the Bureau.”

“I’ve heard rumors.” He crossed his arms and leaned against a table. “But there’s no way I can leave without finding out how you knew all that.”

“I didn’t know. There’s no way I could know unless someone told me.”

“But you were right on the money with everything you told me.”

“It’s all a matter of probability. With the information I had, the likelihood of each of the things I said was high. But I really didn’t know. Will you please leave? You’re taking up valuable time.”

“You didn’t tell me who I am. What’s my name?”

“You can’t have everything.” She stared him in the eye. “I’d have to work on that for a while. I’ve given you the performance you wanted from me. You’re not getting anything else.” She paused. “Nothing. Don’t ask.”

“My name is Adam Lynch. How did you know I was with the Bureau?”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Lynch.”

He studied her for an instant, then turned on his heel. “I’ll go. You’ll be more willing to deal with me if you don’t have to worry about keeping those kids waiting. We’ll continue this later.”

“Make an appointment. I’ll see if I can fit you in. I doubt it. The FBI isn’t high on my list of priorities.”

He gave a low whistle. “I understand you had a very warm relationship with one FBI agent. Jeff Stedler must have really pissed you off.” He paused. “I’m curious. In the bedroom or on a case?”

She stiffened. “My God, what nerve. You’ll stay curious, you nosy bastard.”

“Sorry. I’m usually not that clumsy. You’re having a peculiar effect on me. I’m finding there’s something about you that disturbs my usual *modus operandi*. Forgive me.” He moved toward the door. “We’ll talk later.”

She couldn’t let him walk out of the room without asking the question.

“Wait.” When he looked over his shoulder, she asked, “Did Jeff send you?”

“No, though he’s the reason I’m here.” He smiled. “We’ll discuss him at the same time you explain how you knew the intimate details of my life. Tit for tat.” He left the studio.

Clever. Lynch had dangled that alluring tidbit of information to hook her into another meeting. He wanted something. He probably wanted her.

Kendra gazed after him with exasperation. She was tempted to just block him out of her thoughts and tell him to take a jump. But that reference to Jeff had made her curious . . . and a little worried.

It was strange that Lynch made that abrupt sexual reference to her affair with Jeff. It wasn’t slick or diplomatic. For an instant, she’d seen a flicker of recklessness in his expression. Another facet of Lynch’s character revealed. Another sign of the complication she’d sensed. Did she want to assuage her curiosity badly enough to deal briefly with him again?

She didn’t have to make up her mind just then. She had work to do.

She went to the door to bring in Jenny Brooks, her next student.

KENDRA LOCKED UP THE studio and walked to her car as the late-afternoon sky softened into twilight. She had tried to block Adam Lynch from her mind all afternoon. Damn him for showing

up in the middle of the day, taking her mental energy from people who needed it far more.

Forget him. She would go home and document her observations, as she usually did after a day of appointments. As much as she cared for her clients, who ranged in age from two to ninety-three years old, she knew she could make an even bigger contribution with the treatment options she had developed and was still refining with each session. With precise protocols and careful documentation, she and others were slowly pushing the discipline of music therapy away from alternative woo-woo medicine and into the mainstream of accepted scientific opinion.

If she could concentrate on what was important instead of the problem that Lynch had put before her. She still felt unsettled, and she knew that her encounter with Lynch would not be her last. She would have to consider what he'd said and decide how to handle him.

If he let her have the time to consider anything before he pounced again.

Adam Lynch was leaning against the hood of his sports car, waiting in the parking space when she drove up to her condo twenty minutes later.

She wasn't even surprised.

She got out of her Honda and strolled toward him.

He smiled. "You look a bit more mellow. Was the rest of your day successful?"

"Fairly. I think I made a few steps forward in the dance."

"Dance?"

"With my kids, learning is like a tango. Sometimes they learn the most complex steps with astonishing ease, and yet the simple ones baffle them." She turned and moved toward her front door. "You

might as well come in. You'd probably camp out here if I don't get this over with."

"Possibly." He followed her. "And, besides, you want to know about Jeff Stedler."

"That's true." She unlocked the front door. "You're very perceptive."

"Which means you still care something for him."

"Does it? We were lovers for a year, but that doesn't mean it was anything more than sex."

He tilted his head. "But I don't think that you could have an extended sexual relationship with anyone unless you at least liked him."

"You have a right to your opinion." She went into the condo and turned on the lights. "But you don't really know anything about me, do you?"

"I know you were born blind due to a degenerative corneal disease in the womb. You remained blind until you were twenty." His gaze wandered around the contemporary living room decorated in rust, red, and gold shades. "Lots of color. This is charming. I can imagine how you must have embraced color when you first experienced it."

"It was as heady as a straight shot of vodka." She looked at him. "I embraced a lot of things after my operation. Everything seemed new and exciting. Including Jeff Stedler."

"Interesting. But you haven't satisfied my curiosity yet about what crystal ball you used to reveal all my secrets this afternoon."

"Secrets? It would take more than a crystal ball to learn anything about you that you didn't want me to know. But you're not going to let it go, are you? Okay, let's get it over with." She sat down on the arm of the rust armchair. "How long has it been since you were with the FBI, Adam Lynch?"

"How did you know I was FBI? You said that before I mentioned Jeff Stedler."

“Your jacket cuts a clean line, but there’s still a rather distinct bulge under your left armpit.”

“Many people carry guns.”

“Not that many. Law enforcement and private security mostly, followed by gangsters and thugs.”

He smiled. “You don’t think I’m a thug?”

“Oh, you’re most definitely a thug. You’re just paid to be one by the FBI.”

“I’m still waiting for an explanation how you knew that.”

“You’re obviously aware that the FBI has brought me in to consult on a few cases. I’ve been in that stuffy third-floor conference room, and I’ve sat in those ridiculous diamond-backed chairs. When you take off your jacket and place it over the chair back, you’re left with three distinct impressions: one just below the collar and two others beneath the shoulders. That’s exactly what I’m seeing on that jacket of yours.”

He shook his jacket lapels and brushed his shoulders. “Seriously?”

“Don’t worry, it’s very faint, and it goes away after a day or so.”

“Okay, but how do you know I’m still not an agent? How do you know it wasn’t just another day at the office?”

“In that building, agents wear their IDs around their necks. Makes it easier to swipe across sensor pads to unlock doors. But visitors wear badges that clip to their clothing.” She walked up to him and pulled on his jacket’s breast pocket to show a quarter-inch horizontal crease near the top. “The badge holder leaves a mark that looks like this. If you were wearing something a bit more sheer, you might see what looks like a row of tiny teeth marks.”

“Fortunately, I’m not in the habit of wearing silk shirts to FBI headquarters.” His gaze narrowed on her face. “But how do you know I was ever an agent at all?”

“Even though you’re not wearing an ankle holster now, you still walk as if you are. You make a slight sweeping motion so your pant leg doesn’t press against your phantom holster. That’s law enforcement all the way.”

“Really?” He looked down at his feet. “Do all FBI guys walk like that?”

“More than you’d think. Police detectives, too. It’s only slightly less obvious than a Haggar slacks pant leg pressed up against the side of a nine-millimeter automatic.”

“I still wear it from time to time. And you were also right about the leg wound.” His brow furrowed. “But I’m pretty sure I’m not walking with a limp.”

“Not a *visible* limp.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“To look at you, one would think you move with nothing but the utmost authority and confidence.”

“I think there’s a ‘but’ coming.”

“You still slightly favor your right leg. I can’t see it, but I can hear it. But what I *can* see is a pretty nasty scuff on the sole of your left shoe. It’s covered with shoe polish, but I can see it’s been worn down quite a bit. That might have been prevented if you hadn’t been so quick to ditch your crutches.”

“How do you know I didn’t slip in the bathtub or have a motorcycle accident?”

“I don’t. But it stands to reason that a man who has a need to carry two guns might occasionally find himself on the receiving end of some gunfire.” She stood, moved across the room, and picked up her guitar, which was leaning against the stone fireplace. She started tuning it. “And you don’t impress me as someone who would slip in the bathtub. You’re very sure on your feet.”

“And where I’ve lived?” Lynch asked.

“Simple linguistics.”

“I’d say not so simple.”

She shrugged. “Simple for me. Vocal patterns and spoken language are like music. There are many people who know a Chopin melody a mile away. Some of us are just as good with the spoken word.”

“You picked up on a blend of my Midwestern and Eastern accents?”

“Not only that, but exactly how the vocal patterns interact. If you had grown up on the East Coast, *then* moved to the Midwest, you would sound much different today. It’s like the difference between a soup with half an onion cut into it, or a plate of sautéed onions with a couple spoonfuls of soup ladled over them. Totally different flavor.”

“And my car?”

She raised her phone and showed him the screen. There was a live video feed of the condo parking lot.

He held the phone and looked at the display. “What’s this?”

“It’s what it looks like. I have a Wi-Fi camera connected over the door. Here at home, it’s a security measure. I also have another one connected over the door at the studio. I like to see when my clients are coming.”

“Or men in Ferraris?”

“I glanced at it just after you came into the studio. I recognized the other four cars in the lot but not that one.”

“I’ll be damned.” He smiled and shook his head. “I have to admit, I thought everybody was exaggerating about you and your—”

“Parlor tricks?”

“I was going to say ‘perceptive abilities.’ I can see it was no exaggeration.”

“Glad you enjoyed the show.” She adjusted the tuning pegs, then

looked up. “Now you talk. Why did you think it worth your while to come to see me and have me perform for you? If you want my help in an investigation, you’re going to be disappointed.”

“You haven’t even heard what it is.”

“I don’t need to. I don’t do that kind of thing anymore. You should have done your homework on me.”

“Believe me, I did. I may not be able to write your life story based on the cut of your sweater, but I know quite a bit about you.”

“Obviously not enough. Otherwise, you would have known not to waste your time coming here.”

“Trust me, I won’t consider it a waste of time, no matter what your answer is.” He added softly, “It’s never a waste of time to meet fascinating people. And you’re remarkable, Kendra.”

“Flattery won’t work with me. Cross it off your list.”

“No flattery, just a statement of fact. You were blind since birth, but that didn’t stop you from working your way through school and getting a Ph.D. in psychology and a masters in music theory. From a very early age, you used your remaining senses to gather amazing amounts of information about the world around you. Information that most people couldn’t dream of perceiving.”

She shrugged. “I used what I had.”

“You used it in an extraordinary way. When you were twelve, a group of Fundamentalists accused you of being a witch, while another group in the same church said you were channeling the power of God.”

She smiled. “Both explanations were much more interesting than the truth.”

“Then, thanks to a stem-cell procedure in England, you got your sight at the age of twenty. Just seven years ago. I can’t imagine what it’s been like for you since.”

“No, you can’t.” She set the guitar down. “So don’t try. And I’m sure it’s not important for your purpose to try to understand me.”

“You’re wrong; understanding is essential in what I do.” He continued. “And your amazing gifts just multiplied exponentially. When you were finally able to see, you wanted to absorb everything and process every single detail. And so you do. You still see more than anyone else in the room, and you do it without even trying.”

She shook her head. “Who says I don’t have to try? It just so happens that I *like* trying. I’m greedy. I want to experience everything. I don’t take anything for granted.”

“If you like it so much, why don’t you want to help me?”

“I’ve already had that experience. I’m done with it. As I’m sure you know, I’ve already assisted on four investigations.”

“You did more than assist. You broke those cases.”

“I only did it as a favor to Jeff Stedler. He was intrigued by what I could do and asked me to do it as a favor. I agreed because I thought of it as a challenge, and it amused me.” Her lips tightened. “But then he got greedy and wanted me to keep on doing it. Suddenly, it didn’t amuse me any longer.”

“And suddenly he didn’t amuse you any longer either.”

“You could say that.” She met his eyes. “I don’t like being used, Lynch.”

“Is that a warning?” he asked softly.

“Yes.”

“Accepted. But even if Stedler used you, evidently you haven’t jettisoned him completely, or you wouldn’t have let me into your house.”

“Maybe. You said he didn’t send you here?”

“No, but we’ve met.” He added deliberately, “And I think he’s a good man.”

“Yes, one of the good guys. I never said he wasn’t. He wants to set

the world right. That's why he joined the Bureau." She added wearily, "And he wanted me to help him do it. Batman and Superwoman fighting all the bad guys. He got the idea that I could be of some help to his investigations, and I guess I was. But I just can't do it anymore."

"Perhaps you should reconsider. You can save lives."

"Don't put that on me," she said fiercely. "Jeff tried to tell me that, and I told him to go to hell. I won't be responsible for what he thinks is the right thing to do."

"It's true."

"I'm saving lives every day in that studio you visited today. It may not be as dramatic as what you and Jeff are doing, but for me, it's a hell of a lot more worthwhile." She shook her head. "I shouldn't have decided to talk to you. Whatever your case is, I'm not interested."

"Six people, Dr. Michaels," he said quietly. "Six people have been killed in the last forty-five days."

"Starting with the man in Highland Park?"

He stiffened. "So you've been following it."

"Not really," she said. "Jeff asked for my help a couple of weeks ago, and he told me a few things. I was wondering if that was the case you were talking about. I guess that answers the question."

Lynch stared at her. "Stedler came to see you about this case?"

"I turned him down. I practically kicked him out. I told you, I'm not interested in doing this kind of thing anymore."

He muttered a curse, and his tone was suddenly urgent. "What did Stedler say to you?"

"Not much. I didn't let him get very far. About the same as you've said. Except it was five murders then, not six."

"An administrative assistant was killed in a downtown parking garage at Gold's Gym Monday night. We believe it's connected to the others. What else did he tell you?"

“Ask him yourself.”

“I can’t ask him myself, dammit. He’s missing.”

Shock rippled through her. She stared at him for a long moment.

“Since when?”

“More than seventy-two hours. I think it might have something to do with this case.”

She was trying to recover from the shock. “And why do you think that?”

“It’s a little complex. Let’s talk about it,” he coaxed persuasively. “You once cared for him. You must have some lingering feeling. Help me figure this out.”

“There’s no evidence of foul play? He just disappeared?”

“No evidence.”

“Then Jeff could be working on a case and gone undercover. He doesn’t have to be in any danger.”

“That’s true. But a little unlikely since no one at the office knew about it. What would it hurt to assume the worst and try to make the attempt to find him? Then you could be pleasantly surprised if he showed up on his own safe and sound.”

She stared at him in exasperation. This man was just like Jeff, subtly pushing her buttons to get her to do what he wanted. Only Jeff had done it because he wanted to be Galahad, and she was the lance he could use to skewer the villains. She had an idea there was nothing of the white knight about this man.

Enough.

“No,” she said. “I don’t even know if you’re telling me the truth. You’re not . . .” She searched for words. “What I would call standard-issue FBI. And the FBI has a whole organization full of people who can track Jeff down. Why do they want me for this?”

“They don’t want you.”

Her brows rose. “This wasn’t their idea?”

“No. They have a few problems with your . . . attitude. It’s all mine. Will you help me?”

His urgency had given way to something else, she thought. Could it be . . . desperation? Not likely. She’d judge it would take something almost catastrophic to cause Lynch to become desperate. Or perhaps he was just trying another button on her.

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“Every minute counts.”

“Don’t push me. I’ll think about it. If you want my final answer right now, I’m afraid it’s going to be—”

“Okay, fine. Just think about it. Call me.”

“Do you have a card?”

He shook his head and pointed to her phone. “My information is in there. I transmitted it to your address book about thirty seconds ago.”

“I don’t think so.” She pulled up the phone’s address book and scrolled through the entrees. “You’d need my permission, and I still haven’t received any—” She froze as she spotted a new name in her list of contacts.

LYNCH, ADAM. The address and phone number fields were entirely filled in.

She looked up. “How did you do that?”

He smiled. “If it runs on electricity, I can make it do pretty much anything I want. I suppose we all have our special talents, Kendra.” He strode out of the room as he called over his shoulder. “I can help you better secure that thing. Sorry if I’ve invaded your digital space, but like I said, every minute counts.”

She watched the door close behind him. He had invaded more than her digital space. Because of the intensity of the problems she faced every day, she needed serenity and a sense of order in her life away

from the studio. Adam Lynch had marched in and disturbed that serenity within minutes after he'd come into her studio.

Lord, she didn't want to dive into another ugly horror like the ones Jeff had dragged her through.

Yet if Jeff was missing, then he might be in trouble . . .

And was she supposed to go to his rescue? Why, dammit? She had told him the last time he had called her that the split was permanent, and she didn't want to hear from him again. Jeff couldn't accept friendship with her without trying to bend it to suit himself, and she couldn't keep the hurt and anger from upsetting her when he did it. She had desperately wanted to keep him for a friend. She didn't let many people close to her, and there were moments when she had come close to loving Jeff Stedler. She did love his passion for justice, his dedication. Even when she was furious with him for trying to use her, she could understand that he couldn't help himself.

Okay, so she would feel guilty as hell if she didn't try to help Jeff if he was in trouble.

But how did she know that Lynch was telling the truth? What did she know about Adam Lynch?

Zilch.

Then, dammit, find out about him.

She reached for her phone. Jeff had introduced her to a few of his fellow agents on cases, and surely she could find out about Lynch from one of them.

If they'd talk to her. There were times when she'd been very impatient with them.

Jeff had said substitute "rude" for "impatient."

Well, perhaps. But they'd kept arguing with her when she'd known she was right.

She found a name in her directory. Agent Bill Santini. Yeah, she

remembered him. He hadn't seemed to be too antagonistic toward her.

Maybe.

She dialed the number.

He answered the call on the second ring.

"Santini, this is Kendra Michaels. I need some information."

Silence.

"What kind of information?" he asked warily.

"Adam Lynch."

"He contacted you? I'm surprised. We told him it wasn't worth his while."

"I told him the same thing. He doesn't listen. Has Jeff really disappeared?"

"Unless he just decided to take off for the South Seas. No one has seen him for seventy-two hours. We've all been worried as hell."

"And what does Lynch have to do with it?"

"Who the hell knows? Lynch's a secretive bastard. He just showed up and started asking questions."

"And why would you answer them?"

"You must not have been around him long. People usually do what Lynch wants them to do."

"Why? He's not with the Bureau any longer, is he?"

"No, but he has friends in high places." He added impatiently, "Look, why pick on me to question? If you're so smart, why don't you work it out for yourself?"

"It would waste time." She added honestly, "And I chose you because I don't think you dislike me as much as the other guys at the Bureau do."

"Don't count on it." He sighed. "Okay, that was rude. I shouldn't have been that blunt. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

“You didn’t. It was just an error of judgment on my part.”

“Kendra, I don’t really . . . You just manage to piss me off. You made me look like an idiot on the Salvatori case.”

“You were wrong. And you argued with me. I had to show you how foolish that argument was.”

“And you did. You have a tongue like a buzz saw. You embarrassed the hell out of me.”

“Then you shouldn’t have argued with me. It was so clear.”

“To you.” He added resignedly, “But I honestly don’t think there was any malice in you. Though some of the other guys don’t agree with me.”

“Then I was right about your not disliking me as much as they do?”

“Aren’t you always right?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Yeah, I was the right choice. What else do you want to know about Adam Lynch?”

“Everything.”

“I don’t know everything. I wasn’t with the Bureau when he was here. I’ve only heard rumors.”

“Rumors are good.”

“Nothing much good about the rumors about Lynch. He’s notorious. Or maybe it depends on your viewpoint. Some agents think of him as a legend. They call him the Puppetmaster.”

“Absurd. Why?”

“He’s a master manipulator. He had a dislike for the court system and didn’t trust it worth a damn. When he was an agent, there were stories about how he’d manipulate criminals into situations in which they’d bring about their own deaths, forcing them into corners or tricking them into taking lethal chances.” He added, “Probably his most high-profile case was when he went undercover with two different crime families in New York and Philadelphia and pitted

them against each other. They crippled each other's operations and murdered many of each other's top men. It was much easier for us to step in and bring them down entirely. He was a hero for a while until he got into trouble again for disobeying orders and going his own way."

"How long did he get away with it?"

"For a long time. Until Lynch clashed with a new FBI director, and he parted company with the Bureau. He's now a black-ops strategist for U.S. Intelligence agencies."

"Lynch said he met Jeff. How?"

"That I don't know, Kendra."

Kendra was beginning to have an idea of the connection between Jeff and Lynch. Jeff would have been intrigued and enthusiastic about an agent with Lynch's capabilities just as he had been with her gifts.

"Jeff didn't mention Lynch to me when he spoke to me recently. He didn't speak to any of you about him?"

"No, I told you I don't know anything about a connection between them. Is that all?"

"What do you think of Lynch?"

"Are you asking my opinion? Will wonders never cease?"

"I don't have anyone else to ask."

"I'm glad you put me straight. I wouldn't want to get a swelled head. Lynch? I barely know him." He was silent, thinking. "I'm not sure I'd trust him, but I'd be glad to have him in my corner if I was in trouble. We were kind of glad when he showed up after Jeff disappeared." He hesitated. "Look, I know that you cared about Jeff. I want you to know we're doing everything we can."

"Thanks, Santini." He had been helpful. She should probably say something else. "You probably did better than anyone else in the Bureau could have done on the Salvatori case."

He gave a mock groan. “Condescension. That was worse than the verbal slap on the face. Good-bye, Kendra.” He hung up.

She pressed the disconnect and sat there thinking. She shouldn’t really have asked Santini his opinion when she’d probably discard it anyway. He was an okay agent but not particularly brilliant, and Lynch could probably manipulate him if it suited him.

Puppetmaster?

She made a face at the corny term. She could imagine Lynch being just as scornful as she felt. He was much too sophisticated to want to be labeled in any way.

Yet she admitted that she had definitely noticed him trying to pull her strings. She was glad to know where he was coming from and what she could expect.

But that didn’t mean that she wanted to deal with him, even if he was trying to find Jeff. He made her uneasy. She would have to think about it.

And how she felt about being involved in the search for Jeff. If it was trouble, then she—

Her phone rang.

She tensed. Lynch?

No, her friend, Olivia Brandt.

She breathed a sigh of relief. No challenge, just warmth and affection. “Hi, Olivia, how are you doing?”

“Great. How did your day go?” Olivia asked. “Any breakthroughs?”

“A possible with Jimmy.”

“I celebrate possible. Come over to my place and have a drink.”

“I just got home. I need to shower and change.”

“Nope. It’s cocktail hour. I’ll see you in ten minutes.” She hung up.

Kendra shook her head. Olivia could be immovable when she wanted something. Well, maybe she needed to talk.

And maybe Kendra needed to talk instead of brood.

Why not?

Olivia was in a condo in the same complex, and Kendra could be there in five minutes. She'd have a drink and relax, and she could be back in an hour or so.

She grabbed her handbag and headed for the door. It was ridiculous that Lynch had made her this uneasy. She was in control of what she did or did not do.

Why the hell did she feel like she needed that drink?