

NIGHT WATCH

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Big Bear Lake, California

THOSE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE brochures were right on the money, John Jaden thought. It was freezing, and he was practically up to his ass in snow, yet surfers and sunbathers preened on a warm beach less than ninety minutes away. He'd seen them as he'd driven up the highway on his way to Big Bear.

A little longer than ninety minutes, he reminded himself. The highway patrol had made him turn around to buy tire chains before they let him up Bear Mountain. Annoying as hell. He knew how to handle himself on ice and snow, even if these other sunbaked idiots didn't.

It didn't matter. This was going to be the best day he'd had in a long time.

He pulled his jacket tighter around him as the snow fell harder. He'd left his car in a parking lot a mile back. Couldn't risk getting stuck. Not today.

The snowplows hadn't found their way to this cluster of rustic vacation houses on a street called Starvation Flats. He shook his head. What the hell kind of name was that? Probably a story there, but not one he'd care to explore once his business was done. Most of the houses appeared deserted on this Wednesday afternoon, with no fresh footprints

coming or going from any of them. He'd only seen one car since he'd set out on foot, a group of pretty-boy ski bums on their way to the slopes.

Perfect.

He looked ahead to a two-story wood cottage at a bend in the road. The Bavarian-influenced structure reminded him of one of his grandmother's old cuckoo clocks, just as it had when he'd first been shown the photo at dinner the night before.

A bit kitschy for its resident, a man he'd always respected for having taste and intelligence. He smiled as he pushed his white hair back from his forehead. Of course, if Shaw was all that smart, Jaden wouldn't be standing in front of this house right now.

He steadied himself on the path to the front door. His jeans were wet from the snow, and his athletic shoes were better suited for running than protecting him from the elements.

No biggie. In just a couple of hours, he'd be tossing back whiskey shots in front of the fire pit at Gracias Madre.

He rapped on the door and waited.

No answer.

He tried again.

Nada.

Shit. He'd been told that Shaw was always—

Wait. He listened.

Squeaky hinges and hurried crunching footsteps on fresh powder.

Around back.

He bolted around the side of the house and leaped over the short fence. A stocky man was running away from the cabin, slogging through a snowdrift and pulling a long coat over his T-shirt and sweatpants. Jaden ran faster and overtook him.

"Dr. Shaw!"

Shaw stopped and looked up at him. His round face was red and covered with sweat. He was out of breath. "Jaden . . ." He finally wheezed.

"What the hell? Do you know how far I came to see you?" He looked

down at Shaw's bare feet in the snow. "No shoes? You were in that much of a hurry to get away from me?"

He glanced around nervously. "I wasn't sure if you were alone."

"Of course I'm alone. You see anyone else here?" He smiled. "How important do you think you are?"

He shook his head. "I'm not going back to London."

"No one's asking you to."

He studied him for a long moment. "How in the hell did you find me?"

"I had help. It's hard for people to hide and stay hidden these days. No matter how smart you are."

"Does he know where I am?"

"Sure. Who do you think sent me?"

"That's why I ran, Jaden. I don't trust him. I don't trust any of them. If you're smart, you shouldn't, either."

"Stop being paranoid. He just wants to talk. To consult with you occasionally. If it's a matter of money . . ."

"The money was never a problem."

"Then you can stop running. He'll find you wherever you go anyway. He just wants to know that you'll be available when you're needed."

His eyes narrowed on Jaden's face. "That's it? That's why he sent you all the way here?"

He nodded. "He's just looking for assurances. You know how he is."

Shaw stared at him for a moment. Then he nodded, and his fingers ran through his rumpled gray hair. "Okay. But I'll never go back to London. He has to know that."

"He understands. And now I'm glad that you do, too. Thank you." He extended his gloved right hand.

Shaw half smiled as he started to take a step forward to shake his hand. "What would you have done if I'd said no?"

He shrugged. "Same thing."

Two shots fired from his glove, muffled by a silencer.

Shaw dropped to his knees. A bloody stain spread across his chest and drizzled onto the pristine white snow.

His lips moved as if he was trying to speak, but no words came forth. “Shhh.” Jaden put away his gun. “You’re a smart man, Dr. Shaw. You had to know it would end this way.”

Shaw fell facedown into the bloody snow.

As his last breath left him, the wind whipped up and blew fresh powder from the snowdrifts around them.

CHAPTER 1

Pepperdine University
Malibu, California

“ANY QUESTIONS?”

Kendra Michaels looked out at the four-hundred-odd seminar participants at Pepperdine’s Elkins Auditorium. She’d just delivered her latest research paper at a conference on aging, and it had seemed to go well. She’d documented several success stories using music therapy to treat Alzheimer’s patients, but there was still resistance in the medical community. Not as much as there had been only a couple of years ago, when most academics still put her in the alternative-therapies woo-woo column.

She had helped move that needle, one study, one paper, one boring academic conference at a time.

Try not to go on autopilot, she told herself. Stay in the moment.

But how could she, when she knew that the man in the front row was obviously angry with his colleague about something. His pursed lips, narrowed eyes, and clenched fingers told the story as she watched him make small talk before the presentation. And how about that female brain surgeon who clearly hadn’t operated on anyone in months? And, sadly, probably wouldn’t again, if the slight tremor in her left hand was any indication.

Stay in the here and now. Answer the questions with crystal clarity and politeness even as condescending as some of them were. She’d show them.

She looked up toward the back of the auditorium.

She froze.

It couldn't be.

A man stood in the doorway, partially silhouetted by the light from the corridor beyond. She couldn't make out his facial features, but she didn't need to.

His ramrod-straight posture, impeccably tailored suit, crossed arms, and slight tilt of the head told her all she needed to know.

Dr. Charles Waldridge was in the room.

How long had it been since she'd seen him? Four years, maybe five. And then it had only been an accidental meeting at a conference. She felt the usual rush of excitement and intimidation. Suddenly everyone in the room faded but the man in the doorway. No one on earth had changed her life more. Why was he even on this continent?

Concentrate.

Get through with the questions.

She finished the Q & A, and as the participants left the auditorium, Waldridge moved down the aisle toward her.

"Well done, Kendra."

He spoke in his British accent that always sounded distinctly upper-crust to Kendra, though she knew he'd grown up in a working-class neighborhood in South London. Waldridge was in his late forties, and he had a few more lines and gray hairs since she'd last seen him. But his angular good looks hadn't faded, and the added maturity only made his face more intriguing.

And there was that ever-present fierce and intelligent spark in his dark eyes that had held her captive since the first instant she had seen him.

She smiled and came toward him. "Dr. Waldridge . . ."

"Please." He made a face. "I thought we'd moved far beyond that. Why do you keep forgetting? It's Charles."

"Charles . . . I can't help it. I still have trouble being informal with you, dammit. You catch me off guard and I'm that starstruck kid again." She gave him a quick hug. "I didn't see your name on the attendee list."

"Because I'm not an attendee. This is a bit out of my specialty, you know."

“Don’t tell me you’re teaching here?”

“Hardly. I haven’t taught anywhere since I left St. Bartholomew’s.”
He stared deep into her eyes. “Everything okay?”

His stare made her uncomfortable even though she knew he was looking at her clinically. She fought the urge to look away. “Yes. My eyes are fine. No cloudiness, no watering.”

“Good. Have you been examined lately?”

“About a year ago. Still almost twenty-twenty.”

“Excellent.” He looked from right to left and back again, then spoke softly. “Everything I could have hoped for, Kendra.”

“I didn’t think doctors made house calls anymore.”

He smiled. “Only for very special patients. And you’ll always be very special to me.”

Kendra finally forced herself to look away. She’d been born blind and spent her first twenty years in the darkness. She knew she’d still be there had it not been for Waldridge and his experimental stem-cell procedure. She was nineteen when her mother had seen mention of the Night Watch Project in academic journals and brought her, uninvited, to the front door of Saint Bartholomew’s Hospital in London. Her mother had ruthlessly browbeaten Waldridge and his staff until they agreed to see Kendra and eventually grant her a spot in their test group.

“It’s been over nine years,” she said. “But this all still feels new to me. I don’t take it for granted. I never will.”

“Sight, you mean?”

“Yes. I’m still making discoveries. All the time.”

“You have a wonderfully inquisitive mind, Kendra. You always have. I could tell the first time I met you.”

“So why aren’t you in England poking around in that lab? There are a lot of other people in this world who need your help.”

“Oh, it’s the eternal problem. Finances. Research is expensive. There are occasions I have to leave the lab, hat in hand. This time it has brought me to your shores. But when I learned you were here, I knew I had to come see you in action.”

“You’ve seen me work before.”

“I’ve seen you working with your patients, which was miraculous. But here, watching you hold your own against some of the top specialists in the world . . . It’s a side of you I hadn’t seen.” He added quietly, “It made me very proud.”

Her face flushed. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

“I was hoping I could take you to dinner if you know a decent place nearby.”

“We’re in Malibu, California. There are *dozens* of decent places nearby.” She gathered her presentation materials and gestured toward the door. “And, just so you know, I’m taking *you* to dinner.”

WALDRIDGE FOLLOWED KENDRA half a mile up the Pacific Coast Highway to Geoffrey’s, a restaurant offering a large Mediterranean-themed patio and a spectacular view of the ocean. They arrived just in time to enjoy the sunset, a pale orange orb shimmering over calm waves, and an excellent dinner.

They followed the meal with coffee, and, after a few minutes of small talk, Waldridge folded his hands on the tabletop. “Okay, Kendra . . . time for me to say something that’s been on my mind for a long time. I don’t believe I’ve ever given you a proper apology.”

Her eyes narrowed on his face. “Apology for what?”

“For the way I treated you in those first few years after your procedure. I turned you into a show pony, trotting you out for the media, medical conferences, fund-raising dinners . . . I know it couldn’t have been fun for you.”

She looked away from him. “I tried to cooperate. But not always gracefully. I was going through a lot at the time.”

“Of course you were. Your reality changed overnight. And I was too wrapped up in my project’s success to even think about that. I wanted everyone to see what was possible. For someone to go from total blindness to near twenty-twenty vision, that was a dream come true for so many of us who had been working for years. You were our first great success. There have been several since then, but at the time, you were totally

unique. You were the key to showing people that this was the path worthy of all their attention and funding.”

Kendra nodded. She was silent, remembering that time. “I’m sorry I didn’t handle it better. I guess I just kind of . . . rebelled.”

“I didn’t blame you. None of us did. You probably don’t know about the others who came after you, but many of them had a difficult time after gaining their sight. A life-changing experience like this has completely redefined who they are, along with every single one of their relationships. There have been divorces, family estrangements, bouts of severe depression . . .”

“That actually doesn’t surprise me.”

“Because you lived through it yourself. One would think that a gift like this would bring nothing but joy. But as you found out, it doesn’t solve all of life’s problems, and that disappointment can bring some hard feelings.”

“Exactly. It took me awhile to find out who I was. I call those my ‘wild days.’ I wanted to experience everything I could, no matter how risky or dangerous it was. I know I scared the hell out of my friends and family.”

“And me,” he said ruefully.

She shrugged. “I came through okay. I’m grateful for the time and effort you were able to give me while I was fighting my way out of the dark. And I don’t regret those wild days one bit. It helped to make me who I am.”

“Which is an extraordinary young woman. But you always were that.” He leaned forward in his chair. “Since the last time I saw you, you’ve become distinctly more extraordinary.”

She cocked her head. “As much as I enjoy hearing you call me ‘extraordinary’ in that British accent of yours, I don’t know why you would say that.”

“I’m referring to your fascinating sideline, of course.” He smiled teasingly. “You’ve become Kendra Michaels, crime fighter.”

She cringed. “Oh, don’t say it like that. Better still, don’t say it at all.”

“Why not? It’s the truth, isn’t it?”

“I’ve consulted with the FBI and a local police department on a few

cases.” She shook her head emphatically. “Believe me, it’s nothing I’ve ever asked for.”

“Success breeds demand, and from what I understand, you’re very much in demand.”

“Crazy, isn’t it?”

“Not at all. In a way, it makes perfect sense.”

“I’m glad *you* think so.”

“I do. Almost all the vision-impaired people I’ve known have developed their other senses to compensate. They know who’s in a room from the particular sound of each person’s footsteps. From a mere whiff, they can identify one of dozens of colognes, soaps, and even tobacco brands. They make themselves aware of their surroundings in a way that few other people can, just as a survival mechanism. I imagine that gives you quite an edge in the investigative arena.”

Kendra nodded. “I’ve found that most detectives only go by what they can see. They don’t pay enough attention to the sounds, the smells, and the textures. A lot of answers can be found there.”

“But I’m sure you also see things they don’t.”

“Sometimes. Because I didn’t have sight for so long. I now savor the things I see. I try to absorb every detail just because I can. I suppose that helps in the investigative work, too.”

He shook his head. “Like I said, extraordinary. Are you working on anything now?”

“No. I still haven’t quite recovered from my last case. It was a serial killer, probably the worst I’ve ever come across. I spent months trying to find him, and it took a real toll on me. As I said, it’s nothing I’ve ever asked for.”

“Then why do you do it?”

She thought for a moment. “When there’s a killer out there who can and will strike again, it seems wrong to refuse if I know I might be able to help catch him.”

Waldridge nodded. “You have a good heart, but you’re right to take care of yourself, Kendra.” He was silent a moment, gazing out at the ocean. “I’m sorry I even brought it up.”

"It's okay." But she wasn't sure it was okay. There had been something odd about that hesitation. She shifted uneasily in her seat before changing the subject. "So what have you been working on?"

"I'm afraid I can't talk about it."

"Aw, come on. I practically bared my soul to you."

He smiled. "And I felt honored by every word. But I really can't return the favor. I wish I could."

"I heard you abandoned your corneal-regeneration work."

"I keep abreast of the latest developments, but I leave it to others to refine the techniques I pioneered. I get more satisfaction from exploring new frontiers."

"Frontiers you can't tell me about."

"Not right now."

She wrinkled her brow. "Now you have me curious."

"There's an old adage about a cat and curiosity. Drop it, Kendra."

She stiffened. "I'm not a cat, and I'm uneasy about the idea that my being curious about what you're doing now could cause me to be killed."

"Of course it couldn't. I shouldn't have used that term." His smile was full of charm. "I was merely trying to shift you away from interrogating me. You always were persistent. It's really much better for you that we don't discuss it."

"Better for *me*?" Her gaze narrowed on his face. "What in the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." He shook his head. "I suppose I'm just being overly dramatic. It's really not all that interesting."

"Everything you do is interesting. You're a groundbreaker. Look what you did for me. You're one of the finest minds in medicine." Kendra studied him. "I don't believe you. What's going on, Charles?"

"Nothing. Just fund-raising meetings, as I said."

"Where?"

"Downtown, Pasadena, Century City."

"Anywhere else?"

"No."

"Please don't lie to me, Charles," she said quietly.

Waldridge looked as if he was about to protest, but he caught himself. Then he looked away, then back. “Of course. What, exactly, do you know, Kendra?”

“You arrived here from London only in the last couple days. Since then you’ve been in the local mountains. Big Bear or Baldy, I would guess.”

Waldridge cursed under his breath.

“Am I wrong?” she asked.

“What else?”

She shrugged, then continued, “You drove straight from there to see me. You’ve spent a good deal of the day talking on the phone. You’ve been under an incredible amount of stress.”

“You don’t think asking foundations for money is stressful?”

“That isn’t what you were doing. You were telling Porter to stay out of sight until it was safe. Whoever the hell Porter is.”

He stared at her in shock. “How do you know all this?”

“Same way I always do. I pay attention.”

“That’s too vague. I need to know *now*. It’s important.”

He spoke with such desperate urgency that Kendra felt compelled to explain herself quickly. “Fine. Take it easy. Your car has a nice dusting of rock salt all the way around. That may be common in other parts of the country at this time of year, but it’s extremely rare in Southern California. The San Bernardino Mountains have had record snowfall this week, and it’s probably the only place within hundreds of miles that has been salting the roads. You also have some on your shoes and the cuffs of your slacks. If you hadn’t come straight here, I know you well enough to know that you would have changed clothes or at least tried to wipe it off.”

Waldridge looked down at his shoes. “I didn’t think that it was that noticeable.”

“It isn’t. And I know you were just in London from your haircut. You’re very particular about the cut, and your stylist also has a specific way of sculpting the eyebrows. I can tell it’s just been cut. Within days of each of your haircuts, a stray lash or two appears between your eye-

brows. There are none there. You've been in London in the past three or four days."

"What about my phone calls?"

She could tell that was really bothering him. She hadn't realized that it would upset him. She had known him so long, she had felt as if she could trust him to understand. "The opening of your right ear is red and slightly chafed. It's a small area, just about the size of an earbud. If you had been listening to music, you probably would have been using both earphones, not just one. You pretty much confirmed it when I looked in my rearview mirror on the way here and saw you talking on it at a stop-light."

"How did you know what I was talking about?"

She said simply, "I read your lips."

He gazed at her in disbelief. "You can do that?"

"I guess I never told you. When I got my sight, I was amazed to discover the visual aspect of human speech, the whole interplay of tongue, lips, and teeth. It was fascinating to see what caused the sounds I'd been hearing my entire life. I just paid attention to what movements caused what sounds. After a couple years of studying that, I was pretty good at lipreading. It's nothing I planned to do. It just happened."

"Pretty good is right, but you're not infallible," Waldridge said sourly.

"I never said I was. Did I get a word wrong?"

Waldridge stared at her for a long moment. "Clever as always, Kendra. You're always a surprise and experience for me. But you could get yourself into trouble."

She grinned at him. "Well, I'm *always* doing that."

"I'm serious. I shouldn't have come. This was a bad idea."

Her smile faded. "*Talk* to me. What's going on?"

He shook his head. "Drop it please. It was a mistake."

"I know you have a right to say that this is none of my business." She was silent a moment, then she said with sudden passion, "But you're wrong. You became my business when you gave me my sight. Nothing can ever change that. But if you don't feel comfortable talking to me about this, so be it. I'll try to back away."

He pulled the napkin from his lap and tossed it onto the table. “Things aren’t as simple as they once were, Kendra. I wish they were, believe me. I think that’s why I wanted to see you. Seeing you takes me back to a happier time, when things were more clear-cut, black-and-white.”

“They were never that black-and-white for me.”

“Of course not. But from a purely scientific point of view, we saw a problem that needed to be solved, and we fixed it. You’re my greatest success, Kendra, and I will always feel good about that.”

“Even if you don’t feel good about what you’re working on now.”

“You’re guessing, and I’m not confirming.” He made a face. “I’ve said too much. Perhaps we should call it a night.”

She didn’t want to let him go. She felt frustrated, and the uneasiness was growing by the minute. But she could see by his guarded expression that he wasn’t going to tell her anything more. “Perhaps we should.”

Kendra paid the check, and they walked out to the valet stand in silence. After they handed their tickets to the attendant, Waldridge turned toward her. “Things aren’t always what they seem, Kendra. The Night Watch Project was formed to do great things, but there was more going on than any of us were aware. Even I didn’t know until much later that I couldn’t take pride in all of it. I hope you can forgive me.”

“Enough, Charles. *Forgive* you? You gave me the greatest gift anyone could ever give me.” She took a step closer, her eyes holding his own. “You have to talk to me about this.”

“I’m afraid I can’t.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m afraid it’s not. This was a mistake.” His rental car rolled to a stop in front of them. Waldridge embraced Kendra and kissed her gently on the forehead. “I’m sorry. I know I must be driving you mad, but it’s for your own good. Trust me. It’s better for you.”

“That’s my decision. You don’t call the shots any longer in our relationship, Charles.” She gripped his arm. “Whatever is going on, I can help. *Try* me.”

“All that intensity. How I’ve missed it.” Waldridge pulled away and

looked down at her for a long moment. “No, Kendra. You can’t help. I can’t let you.”

He climbed into his car and drove away.

JADEN STOOD AT HIS HOTEL room’s floor-to-ceiling windows and stared out at the twinkling lights of West Hollywood. His mobile phone was on speaker while he finished changing his clothes.

“No problems?” Hutchinson asked. His voice on the phone had a slight echo.

“No problems,” he replied. “The snow will melt off before anyone finds him. There will be no footprints, no trace I was ever there.”

“Good.”

“I’ll be out on the early flight tomorrow. I’ll be back with the team by early afternoon.”

“That’s what I wanted to discuss with you. He needs you to stay a few more days.”

“It was supposed to be in and out. He promised me.”

“I know, but there’s been a development. Dr. Waldridge has reached out to an old friend. We’re still not sure why, but we’d be foolish to ignore it. Sit tight until we can check it out.”

Jaden muttered a curse as he turned from the window. “I don’t like this.”

“Nothing to worry about. Just a precaution. You haven’t asked me who the friend is.”

“I didn’t ask because I don’t give a damn.”

“You will.”

“I doubt that.”

“It’s Kendra Michaels.”

Jaden froze. “Are you sure?”

“They were having dinner together less than an hour ago.”

“Kendra Michaels . . . That’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time. I really hate unfinished business.” Jaden sat on the edge of the bed and smiled. “Okay. I’ll stay. This just got interesting . . .”

CHAPTER

2

St. Bartholomew's Hospital
London
Nine Years Earlier

"IT'S NICE TO MEET YOU, Kendra. I'm—"

"Dr. Charles Waldridge." Kendra crossed her arms before her and placed them on the small conference table. "I know. How do you do, Dr. Waldridge."

Waldridge closed the door behind him. "How do you know who I am? We've never met before, have we?"

"No. I listened to one of your lectures on YouTube. Even before you just spoke, I recognized you from your footsteps. And from the jingle of keys in your pocket. You have some kind of charm on your key ring that makes a tinkling sound when you walk."

"Very good. It's a little souvenir dolphin my niece brought me from Grand Cayman."

"You also like to rock back on your heels every time you make a major point."

"You could hear that on the video?" he asked, amused.

Kendra adjusted her Ray-Ban sunglasses. "Yes. You did it eight times in a fifty-minute lecture."

He sat in a chair on the other side of the desk from her. "Hmm. I didn't realize I did that. Is it effective?"

"I'm not sure what it looks like, but those pauses work for you. It gives your students time to think about what you've just told them."

“Good. Anything else?”

“I know you’re British, but I’m not familiar enough with the various accents to know exactly from where. It’s my first time in England. But I do know you have a small dog.”

“You’re wrong about that I’m afraid.”

“Really?”

“You’re not accustomed to being wrong, are you?”

“It happens.”

“Well, you’re not that far off. I’m looking after a colleague’s dog this week. Am I giving off an offending canine odor?”

“No, it’s nice. Oster flea and tick shampoo.”

“And how did you know the dog was small?”

“Mandarin Violet scent. I’m sure there are owners who use that on big dogs, but I’ve never met one.”

He chuckled. “It’s a poodle.”

“That sounds about right.”

He opened a file folder and turned the pages. “So . . . You’re nineteen years old?”

“Twenty next week.”

“And you’ve been blind since birth.” He spent another moment flipping through the file pages before resuming. “Just so you know, I’m meeting with you as a courtesy. Our pilot program is filled. We had thousands of applicants. If you had called or e-mailed, I could have saved you and your mother an awfully long trip.”

“My mother called and e-mailed. She already knew it was full.”

“Then why are you here?”

“My mother never takes no for an answer.”

“I got that impression. I know she wants this, but I’m not sure you want it, Kendra.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Your tone. Most people I interviewed for this program practically begged to be part of it. You seem as if it’s an inconvenience.”

“Wanting it and believing it are two different things. Do you want me to beg? I’ll do it, if that’s my role in making this work. But don’t expect

me not to take this with a grain of salt. My entire life I've met a lot of doctors, scientists, and con artists who promised to make me see. My mother has been on a mission."

"How does that make you feel?"

Kendra bit her lower lip.

Waldridge leaned forward, and asked quietly, "Like you're not good enough for her the way you are?"

Kendra recoiled. "No. Why would you think that?"

"I've seen it a lot in the past few months."

"Well, that's not the case here. My mother's just trying to help. She's the one who is going to be hurt the most if she can't pull this off. She doesn't care if she ruffles a few feathers as long as she's doing everything she can for me. Me," she repeated fiercely. "It's all for me. She wants the best for me. Nothing for herself."

"Did your father feel the same way?"

"No. I never knew him. He left before I was two. He wasn't prepared to care for a special-needs child."

"That's also more common than you might think."

"It doesn't matter. My mother and I have always gotten along fine without him."

"I believe that." Waldridge paused. "I'm not promising anything to anyone. Anyone who does is either a con artist or a fool. I'm neither. But I do think I offer the best hope you've had so far." He paused. "If I were standing, I suppose this would be one of those moments where I lean back on my heels for emphasis."

She found herself smiling. She hadn't expected him to have a sense of humor. Most of the specialists who had examined her before had tended to have a God complex.

He turned more pages of the file. "You're actually just the type of test subject we were looking for. Your corneas degenerated due to a disease you contracted in the womb. We're experimenting with a technique to help corneas regenerate."

"How?"

"It's fairly simple. We combine stem cells with cells that we harvest

from healthy parts of the subject's own eyes. We implant them in the corneas and we have hopes that the corneas will regenerate themselves based on the genetic blueprint provided by your own cells."

"Cool."

He was silent for a long moment. "If you participate in our study, you would have to stay here at least two months. No air travel. The pressurized cabin is a variable we don't want to contend with right now."

She went still. "You're talking like . . . you might actually let me in your program."

He closed the file. "That depends on you, Kendra. Depends if you'd be willing to join us here for the next few months."

She couldn't breathe. She was suddenly dizzy with hope. She hadn't expected this abrupt turnaround. "Does my mother know?"

"No. If you're not interested, we'll step outside, and I'll incur her wrath by telling her again that the program is full. It's entirely up to you. What do you say, Kendra Michaels? Would you like to join us?"

Kendra smiled shakily even as she felt her throat tighten, surprised into a sudden flood of emotion. "Yeah." Her voice was unsteady. "Sure."

"Good. Then I'll go and discuss details of the procedure with your mother. It was nice to meet you, Kendra." He stood up and leaned toward her. He said softly, "And here's to not taking no for an answer."

"EARTH TO KENDRA?" Olivia said quizzically. "Hello?"

Kendra snapped out of her daze. She and Olivia Moore were on their morning jog on the embarcadero in Marina Park, overlooking San Diego Bay. They had stopped to cool off when Kendra had checked out for a few moments.

"Sorry about that." She grimaced. "I was just thinking about Dr. Waldridge again."

"You haven't thought of anything else since you came back to the condo last night," Olivia said dryly. "And I might as well have been exercising with a sleepwalker this morning."

"I know. I know. It's just that the man I saw last night was so different than the man I remember."

"Different how?"

"He was . . . unsettled. Evasive. I don't know . . . The Waldridge I've always known has always been supremely confident and at the top of his game. Something was definitely wrong."

"You said he was out here for some fund-raising. Maybe it hasn't been going well."

"No, it was more than that. I think he wanted to tell me something, but for some reason he changed his mind. He kept saying it was for my own good."

"That's strange. You know, I've been getting e-mails from him once or twice a year ever since you introduced me to him. Every time he runs across research that he thinks could one day be promising for me, he sends a link." She shook her head. "I think he feels guilty that he couldn't help me with *my* eyesight."

Kendra gazed at her friend and didn't state the obvious, that she felt guilty, too. She and Olivia had met as children at the Woodston School for the Blind in nearby Oceanside, and one of the great pains of Kendra's life had been leaving her friend behind in the darkness. Olivia, who had lost her sight in a childhood auto accident, sustained optic nerve injuries beyond the reach of even Waldridge's revolutionary techniques. He had graciously met with her and reviewed her medical case files and seemed genuinely regretful when he was unable to help her. Kendra wasn't surprised that he'd kept in touch with her even though years had passed. Olivia was a very special person, and he must have recognized that fact. "Maybe not guilty as much as frustrated. He's something of a genius, and he doesn't like to admit defeat."

"Believe me, I would have been ecstatic to be one of his successes." The wind from the bay blew Olivia's long brown hair up and around, gently caressing her beautiful, olive-toned face. Never once had she expressed a single iota of jealousy over Kendra's amazing transformation, but she did harbor hopes of one day regaining the eyesight that had been taken from her.

“He really did want to help you,” Kendra said gently.

“I know. He’s a good man.” She smiled. “You know, the way you always talked about him, I’m surprised nothing ever happened between the two of you.”

Kendra’s eyes widened. “What? You mean in a romantic sense?”

“Why not?”

“There’s twenty years and eight thousand miles between us. I never thought about him that way.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Kendra found her tone getting defensive.

“The twenty years wouldn’t have bothered me,” Olivia said. “Mature men are more experienced, and that makes them sexier. The eight thousand miles are an obstacle that can melt away in a heartbeat. Did you ever hear about jet planes?”

“I’ve *never* described Waldridge as sexy to you.”

“I’ve heard you describe him as brilliant at least a hundred times. And refer to him as good-looking on at least half a dozen occasions. I know you, Kendra. The intelligence alone is a big draw for you. Put those two descriptions together, and you come up with sexy.”

“He *is* good-looking. It doesn’t mean I want to jump him. And it doesn’t take a schoolgirl crush to know that he’s a brilliant guy.”

“Of course. It’s just a vibe you put off.”

“No vibe. The man changed my life in a profound way, so naturally I’m going to feel a certain amount of . . .”

“Awe?”

Trust Olivia to zero in and strike home. How could Kendra help but feel a certain amount of hero worship toward Waldridge, who had not only given her a fantastic gift, but had been the only man in that first year to teach her, work with her, and chase away all the fear and uncertainty. Even Olivia would never realize what he had meant to her during that time. So don’t try to explain the unexplainable. “I was going to say gratitude.”

“Well, I’d sure feel awe.” Olivia felt the face of her Bradley touch-capable wristwatch. “We should start back. I have Reddit online chat in less than an hour.”

Olivia's online Web destination, Outasite, featured articles, interviews, and product reviews, all geared to a vision-impaired audience who accessed the content via audio-reader software. Outasite had quickly become a very successful business for Olivia, and she spent many of her waking hours generating material for the site.

"Okay," Kendra said. She looked down the sidewalk. "Clear!"

She had developed a verbal shorthand for guiding Olivia through a variety of terrain and conditions on their frequent runs together.

"Side!"

Olivia ran beside her as they continued their conversation.

"Will you see him again before he leaves?" Olivia asked.

"That may be up to him. I tried to call his cell phone this morning, but he didn't answer."

"Try him again."

"I will." She had no intention of letting Waldridge fly out of her life again and leave her with this feeling of uneasiness. He'd had a reason for contacting her yesterday, then had backed away. She couldn't just let it go. "As soon as we get back."

They ran through the Gaslamp District and cut down Fifth toward the five-story building that housed both of their condominiums. But as they neared the building, Kendra saw a police car double-parked outside with flashers on.

"What the hell?" she murmured.

Two uniformed officers stood on the sidewalk. One of them turned toward Kendra as she put her key in the front door. "Dr. Michaels?"

"Police," she said to Olivia. She looked from one officer to the other. "You're here for me?"

"Yes. Lieutenant Ortiz would like to see you at the station."

"I'm not doing police consulting work right now. He usually calls me."

"He did. There was no answer."

"I never bring my phone with me when I run." She stared at him quizzically. "So he sent a squad car to lasso me in?"

"He was concerned for your safety."

“My safety? Why would he—?” Her brow furrowed. “What’s this about?”

“If you’ll come with us, Lieutenant Ortiz will—”

“Tell me now,” she said flatly. “Or I’m not going anywhere.”

The cop sighed and glanced at his partner before turning back. “Do you know a Dr. Charles Waldrige?”

Kendra felt herself tense. “Of course I do. What’s happened?”

“He’s missing under suspicious circumstances. And you may have been the last person to see him.”

“**DR. MICHAELS, GLAD** you could join us.”

Lieutenant Mark Ortiz entered the police-headquarters lobby and gestured toward the detective walking a few paces behind. “Detective Vince Halderman, Kendra Michaels.”

Halderman nodded his greeting, but Kendra ignored him and launched immediately into attack mode. “What happened to Charles Waldrige?”

“We were hoping you could help us with that. When was the last time you saw him?”

“We had dinner together last night. At Geoffrey’s, in Malibu. We left around 8 P.M., each in our own cars. So what’s the story?”

“Be patient. I have a few more questions.”

“No. I answer some, then you answer some. That’s how this will work. What happened to him?”

Ortiz turned toward his partner with a pained expression that Kendra knew she’d given a lot of other cops in her time. Then he turned back to her. “Dr. Michaels, I’m afraid the answer is that we don’t know. He was staying at the Huntley Hotel in Santa Monica. There was some kind of disturbance in his room, a lot of noise. Other guests complained, but by the time security arrived, no one was in the room. The lamp was broken, and the television screen was shattered. But all of Waldrige’s belongings, including his phone and wallet, were still there.”

Not good. Kendra cursed under her breath. *What have you gotten yourself into, Charles?*

“You were in a relationship with him?”

Kendra shook her head. First Olivia, now this clown. But she knew that the detective was merely fishing, straight out of the cop playbook.

“No, we’re good friends. We’ve known each other a long time. We hadn’t seen each other for a while and he met me at Pepperdine, where I was presenting at an academic conference, and we had dinner afterward.” She went on the attack. “How did you know I had any connection with him?”

“He had your Pepperdine seminar page still up on his laptop, and we found your name and number in his telephone address book. Google told me a bit more about your medical history together.”

She raised her eyebrows in approval. “Wow. Good cop.”

“Now it’s my turn. He was a long way from home. What brought him to California?”

“He was fund-raising for a project. He’s a research scientist.”

The detectives shared a quick glance.

Kendra caught that look of doubt between them. “Now what?”

“We’ve been in touch with his colleagues in England,” Halderman said. “They didn’t even know he’d left the country. They had no idea why he would have come here.”

Kendra let that sink in for a moment. “Are you absolutely certain?”

Ortiz nodded. “As far as they knew, he was just taking a few personal days. What did he say to you?”

“Just what I said. He told me he was raising money for a medical-research project.”

“And yet none of his colleagues knew anything about it.”

“It doesn’t sound right to me, either. But a lot of what he said didn’t sound right.”

“Like what?”

Kendra told them about Waldrige’s evasiveness, general uneasiness, and cryptic statement about wanting to protect her.

Ortiz jotted down some notes in a notebook as she spoke. He glanced

up. "Protect you? Were you under the impression that he felt he was in any kind of physical danger?"

"No, I didn't get that vibe from him. I'm not sure what he meant, and he wasn't in any mood to explain himself. I was planning to call him today."

"And you had no idea what he was working on?"

"No." She leaned back in her chair, wishing desperately that she'd pressed Walldridge to talk to her. Then maybe whatever mess he'd managed to get himself into wouldn't have escalated to this degree.

Ortiz pushed a legal pad across the table. "We need a list of Dr. Walldridge's friends and associates in the area."

Kendra pushed the pad back. "There's only one. Me. At least, as far as I know. Walldridge doesn't like California. It's too laid-back for him. The few times he's come here since I've known him, he did his business and got away as quickly as he could. There may be some professional contacts here, but you'd have to ask his colleagues about that."

"We have. They said you were the only one."

"Well, there you go. Have you been to Walldridge's hotel room yourself?"

"No. Santa Monica PD is working the scene."

"Don't let them break it down. I'm going down there right now."

Halderman scowled. "Why? You think you'll see something all those cops missed?"

Ortiz shrugged. "Actually . . . she might. I'll tell you about Dr. Michaels later." He turned back to her, and offered, "I can make a call."

Kendra stood. "Thanks, Ortiz. It might make things easier when I get there."

"You're not even going to wait and see if they're willing to let you in?"

"I'll keep my phone on while I'm driving down. Let me know what they say." She was heading for the door. "But, one way or another, I'm going to take a look at that room."

SHE DIDN'T WAIT TO HEAR from Ortiz whether he'd been able to get her into the crime scene. She decided it was time to take out insurance.

Before she was even on the I-5 freeway, Kendra voice-dialed a number she hadn't called in months. She had hoped it would be a good while longer. After hurdling the jittery receptionist, she was finally patched through.

"Special Agent Griffin."

"Hello, Griffin."

"Kendra, will you please go easy on my assistant," he said testily. "She's already terrified of you for telling her that her sister married a guy just so he could get a green card."

"Did she disagree? Call me a liar?"

"She's not talking, and to tell you the truth, I don't want to know anything more about it."

"Then tell your assistant she should remove the photo in the lower-right side of her cubicle. I'll leave it at that."

"The lower-right side . . . ?" His voice trailed off. "Never mind. Surely you have something more pertinent to talk to me about."

"I'm on my way to Santa Monica. It's a case the FBI may have some interest in."

He paused for a long moment. "Okaay . . . In that case, perhaps you should be talking to the Bureau's Los Angeles office."

"Not yet. It's about someone I know, Griffin." She told him about Waldridge and his disappearance.

Griffin clicked his tongue. "So what do you want from me?"

"Access. I want to get in there and look around."

"And you want me to grease the wheels for you."

"Yes. Tell them I'm a consultant."

"But you're not. At least not on this case."

"Not yet."

Silence. "Does that mean you're ready to come back and do some more work for us?"

Kendra had known this was coming. "Do this for me, and we'll talk about it. I have to get in that room, Griffin."

“Believe it or not, most big-city police departments employ very competent investigators. Is there anything that leads you to believe they’re not doing their jobs?”

“No. But they can always use an extra set of eyes.”

“Especially yours?”

“Yes. That’s what you always told me when you wanted my help.”

“But Santa Monica PD hasn’t asked for your help. Or the FBI’s help.”

Griffin was playing with her, trying to manipulate her as he usually did. He hadn’t liked it that she had opted to stay away from the Bureau this long. Put up with it. She needed him at the moment. “Waldridge isn’t just a British citizen. He’s an internationally renowned medical researcher. We may want to get a head start on this.”

“So now it’s ‘we.’ I know this doctor means something to you, Kendra, but you—”

“Then make the call. Get me in there.”

Griffin sighed. “Okay, I’ll see what I can do. The Huntley Hotel?”

“Yes. Thanks, Griffin.”

“Don’t thank me yet. And if I do get you in there, do me a favor and don’t treat them like they’re total idiots. Okay?”

“But what if they are total idiots?”

“Keep it to yourself.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“That’s not very comforting. Good-bye, Kendra.”

DESPITE A TRAFFIC SNARL-UP in Irvine, Kendra reached the Huntley Hotel in less than two hours. She stepped off the elevator on the eighth floor and immediately spotted a uniformed officer at the end of the corridor. As she walked toward him, he quickly sprang into intercept mode.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I’ll have to ask you to—”

“It’s okay, Officer,” a voice called from the end of the hall. “Let her through.”

Kendra looked up to see a stocky detective with close-cropped blond

hair and a bright red face. It wasn't a sunburn, she decided. He was probably just of Irish descent.

She extended her hand. "I'm Kendra Michaels."

"Tommy Shea, Santa Monica PD." He shook her hand. "In the past couple hours, I've heard from both the FBI and the San Diego PD about you, Dr. Michaels. They seemed to think it was extremely important that you take a look at this crime scene."

"I appreciate it."

"I'm the one who helped piece together your connection with Waldridge. After I couldn't get hold of you, just to be safe, I called San Diego PD and had them make contact."

"Which they did. That'll teach me to go running without my phone. Have you found anyone who might have seen him after I did last night?"

"He popped up on security cams in the lobby and parking garage around 9 P.M. After that . . . nothing."

"That's strange. No sign of him leaving?"

"No. And no sign of anyone suspicious around him. I looked at the video myself."

"Is his rental car still here?"

"Yes, but it doesn't appear to have been disturbed. The keys were in the room next to his wallet and phone. We're having it towed in."

She glanced inside the room. "You're not about to break the scene down, are you?"

"Actually, we are. We've got what we needed. Fingerprints, photos . . ."

"DNA?" she asked.

"They took a few swabs, but you probably know what disgusting Petri dishes hotel rooms are."

She grimaced as she recalled the few times she'd seen a hotel-room comforter illuminated by a UV light. "Gotcha."

"Besides, we're not even sure there was a crime committed here. Except maybe a little property damage. So if you want to take a look, knock yourself out. But after that, we're packing up his belongings, and the hotel will send up their handyman to get the place back in circulation. There might be someone else in that bed tonight."

“Great. Well, guess I better get to it before someone else obliterates whatever evidence might be left.”

Shea smiled and shook his head. “Naturally, you’re assuming there’s evidence we’ve missed. Detective Ortiz told me about you.”

“And still you’re letting me in.”

He gestured toward the open door. “Chalk it up to curiosity.”

“Anything that gets me inside.”

“Knock yourself out.”

She entered and stopped short inside the door. One side of the room looked as if Waldridge had merely stepped out for a bucket of ice, with his wallet, rental-car keys, and hotel-parking-garage ticket on an end table next to the unmade bed.

The other side, however, was a mess. The flat-screen TV was shattered, with weblike cracks emanating from the center. Fresh dings played over the pressed-wood white chest of drawers below, obviously struck by the overturned chair. Kendra looked at the desk, where the smashed phone had been knocked on the floor and a long ethernet cable had been stretched taut, halfway to the bed.

Kendra felt a sickening chill as she looked at the cord. “This cable was used as a weapon.”

Shea crossed his arms. “What makes you say that?”

“It’s pinched in two places about two feet apart, as if it had been gripped and wrapped around a pair of hands. Then it was stretched. Just the way it would look if had been used to . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“Strangle someone?” Shea finished.

Hearing him say it was like getting a punch to the gut. “Yes,” she whispered.

“For the record, I saw it the same way. I’ve already had it swabbed.”

“It probably won’t help. Whoever handled it was using gloves.”

Shea glanced back at the cable. “How do you figure that?”

“That cable has a soft sheaf. Soft enough to show ridges on the spots where it was gripped. Ridges from hard rubber grips on a pair of gloves. With some time, your forensic people might be able to tell you the brand of gloves. It’s worth a shot.”

Shea nodded, looking closer at the cable. “That I didn’t see. Not that it makes a lot of difference. Hundreds of people probably pawed that cable in the past few weeks. In any case, I’ll be bagging it and sending it to the lab.”

Kendra turned away. She didn’t want to look at that cable any longer. She was having trouble keeping from shaking. *What in hell happened here, Waldridge?*

“Dr. Michaels?”

She forced herself to look back. This was no time to fall apart, not when Waldridge might need her. She cleared her throat. “Was there luggage?”

“Yeah. In the closet. But we checked it, and he’d totally unpacked.”

“I’ll take a look anyway.”

Shea produced a pair of latex evidence gloves from his jacket pocket. “If you wouldn’t mind.”

“Of course.”

Kendra pulled on the gloves and moved to the open closet door. Hanging there were a pair of slacks, three shirts, and the jacket Waldridge had worn the previous night. His rolling suitcase was on the floor.

Kendra knelt beside it. A small blue-and-white tag was affixed to the handle, imprinted with the code L35. She angled the tag toward Shea. “Any idea what this means?”

“No. Only that it wasn’t put on here by a bellman. I asked.”

She dragged out the suitcase, unzipped it, and looked inside. As Shea had indicated, it was empty.

“Satisfied?” He crossed his arms, watching her.

“No.” She shoved the suitcase back into the closet, then stood up and walked into the bathroom. Waldridge’s toiletries were neatly arranged on a hand towel next to the sink, perfectly spaced with the same precision that Waldridge demonstrated in everything he said or did.

“A little OCD if you ask me,” Shea said.

“He’s a surgeon. It’s exactly what I’d expect.” She looked closer. “There was medication here. Did you or your officers take anything away?”

He gazed at her quizzically. “Medication? No.”

“There are two faint impressions on this hand towel. See?” She pointed to a pair of round indentions on the towel’s surface. “Most likely put there by low-to-medium-quantity prescription bottles. Did you find bottles this size here or in his car?”

Shea shook his head no.

“People steal meds, but since his wallet wasn’t touched, I doubt that’s what happened here.”

“It could be a good sign.”

“Yes. If someone did take him, it might mean that they wanted to keep him alive and well. You should check and see what his prescriptions are.”

He was already scribbling in his notebook. “I’m on it. Anything else?”

She looked around the bathroom for a moment longer. “That’s all in here.”

She followed Shea out of the bathroom. “I’ll check the drawers and under the bed, but that’s all I’ll probably—”

She froze.

He turned toward her. “What is it?”

“I just heard something.”

He gestured toward the window. “From outside?”

“No.” She looked down at the floor. “Could you please retrace your steps?”

“You’re kidding.”

“I *don’t* kid. It may be important.”

He stared at her in disbelief. “Okay. I’m trying to cooperate. Do you want me to retrace my steps since I got here this morning, or—”

“The last six steps you’ve taken.”

He shook his head and stepped backward. Kendra cocked her head and listened as he walked.

Thump. Thump. Thump. *Squish*.

“There.” She pointed down. “Did you hear that?”

He stopped and looked around. “Not really.”

“Sure you did,” she said impatiently. “You heard it, but you didn’t listen.” She knelt and pressed her gloved hand over the spot where he had

just walked. "The carpet is damp here, all the way down to the pad. It squished a bit when you stepped on it. So unless one of your officers spilled something . . ."

"Your faith in my department is overwhelming. No spills."

She sniffed the liquid on her glove. "This needs to be analyzed. It's very faint, almost odorless. That's why I didn't pick up on it before."

Shea rubbed his glove over the spot and sniffed it. "Unusual smell."

She closed her eyes and tried to make some connection with the odor. "It's a little tarry, a bit like citrus . . . But neither, really. I'm sure I've never smelled it before, whatever it is."

Shea dropped a fluorescent yellow evidence tag on the spot. "I'll get forensics back here to sop up a sample."

"Thank you."

Shea nodded. "Just doing my job. You surprised me. I like to be surprised. That FBI guy told me that you were born blind and you'd still probably be that way if it wasn't for Waldridge."

"That's right."

"In that case, I'd be doing everything in my power to help him, too." He nodded thoughtfully. "He's lucky to have you in his corner, Dr. Michaels."

AFTER A QUICK ONCE-OVER in Waldridge's rental car that turned up absolutely nothing, Kendra gave her card to Shea and walked out to her car on Second Street. She leaned against her car for a long moment.

What now?

Everyone involved would probably prefer that she just sit back and wait for a call.

Dammit, Waldridge deserved better than that. But with no clear sign that a crime had occurred, it would be days before the police treated the case with any kind of urgency.

By then, it could be too late. She had been uneasy as hell at what she'd seen at that crime scene. So what could she do to make sure Waldridge received the same single-minded dedication from her that he'd

given her all those years ago? She knew the answer. She'd known it all along. As much as she hated to admit it, she needed help. She needed the big guns.

And she had one of the biggest guns of all on her speed dial.

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