Regrets

by Mousedm

Summary

Summary: In the aftermath of Carol’s death, Steve regrets involving Mark in one of his cases.

Notes

Disclaimer: “Diagnosis Murder” and the characters in it are owned by CBS and Viacom and are merely being borrowed for recreational and non-profit purposes. I promise to return them unhar... OK, mostly unharmed.

I never really liked “Town Without Pity” so no one could be more surprised than me when this turned into a...well, sequel is too strong a word, perhaps a followup to that episode. If you aren’t a fan of that episode or haven’t watched it, please don’t let that put you off. It is relevant only in that Carol has died.

This was previously posted on Fanfiction.net, but they messed up my formatting, so I wanted a copy that people could actually read!
Chapter 1

Steve crouched down to inspect a glint in the shag carpet, doing his best to ignore the bare, size 7 feet with chipped, crimson nail polish that dangled in his peripheral vision. The scrap of paper that had caught his attention probably meant nothing, just an insignificant part of the general detritus of life, but he called over a member of the CSU to have it bagged anyway.

Serena Trenton was no housekeeper, although it was rumoured she had a brilliant mind, and the general state of disarray in the room would make gathering meaningful evidence harder. But, whatever her strengths and shortcomings when alive, she was now indisputably dead, her lifeless body a ghastly centerpiece to the disorganised room.

It seemed callous in the extreme to leave her hanging, but crime scene protocol dictated that, unless there was a chance of resuscitation, a body could not be cut down until the CSU and medical examiner had completed their necessary investigations. Photographs had been taken, and diagrams and measurements of articles on the floor nearby were almost completed, so now there was a general lull in activity as everyone waited for the arrival of the ME and the consultant Steve had called in.

They arrived together, a study in contrasts, chatting amiably and Steve strode to greet them. Although the detective was long inured to the grisly presence of death, the pitiful corpse cast a long shadow in the subdued atmosphere thus imbuing Steve’s welcome with more than typical warmth. “Dad, Amanda, thanks for coming.”

He caught the identical, and almost synchronous, grimaces as they took in the situation, an expression not of distaste or revulsion, but of sorrow, the instinctive regret of people who valued life and fought everyday to preserve it.

As Amanda moved to talk to the photographer, Mark skirted the room to join his son.

“Who is she?” His eyes roamed the scene, assessing and cataloging the surroundings automatically.

“Serena Trenton, only daughter and eldest child of Maxwell Trenton.”

The name caught Mark’s attention and he looked back alertly from his clinical appraisal of the body. “The ‘Pharmaceutical King’?”

“That’s the one.” Steve kept his voice studiously neutral, but Mark had no difficulty picking up on the undercurrents of that observation. He knew that Steve worked each homicide case allocated to him with equal tenacity and purpose, believing in justice for the victim irrespective of wealth and fame. Yet, he was not so naive as to suppose that political pressure from above did not increase exponentially with the income level of the deceased’s family.

He met his son’s eyes with a commiserating nod. “So, what do you think -- murder or suicide?”

Steve cocked his head slightly to one side, his grim expression melting into a mischievous smile like a ray of sunshine breaking through the dark clouds. The twinkle in his eyes was a duplicate of his father’s trademark grin.

“Why do you think I asked you here?”

“My good looks and inestimable charm?” Mark hazarded brightly.
“Oh, that too,” Steve amended hastily.

Mark quirked an eyebrow in appreciation of the patently spurious agreement. Little escaped his father, but Steve hoped that the familiar byplay had disguised his ulterior motive for inviting Mark to join the investigation. His father had always seemed to have a light inside, that sparkled from his eyes and glowed in his smile, but Steve hadn't seen that light very often in the last few months, not since Carol had died. Mark put on a good show that fooled nearly everybody, but Steve could sense the extinguishing of his father’s special energy. Compared to his normal self, Mark was bereft of enthusiasm, empty and dull. Through accident or design, he had also avoided involvement in his son’s work, but Steve was hoping that an intriguing mystery might kick-start his father’s love of a challenge and pull him out of his inertia.

Mark was surveying the scene again with a professional eye.

“No suicide note?” he queried.

“We haven’t found one yet. You think that’s significant?” Steve asked dubiously.

Mark shrugged. “Statistically, people who hang themselves are more likely to leave a suicide note than people who use other methods.” He threw Steve an apologetic smile. “Not exactly definitive, I’m afraid. Keep looking; often they’re found in unexpected places, like the glove compartment of a car or a coat pocket.”

Steve never tired of watching his father investigate a crime scene. In his mind, it could almost be labeled a spectator sport and he joined Amanda for better enjoyment of the proceedings. It contained similar elements to the magic shows which Mark loved to frequent - surprise results after incomprehensible actions, genuine thaumaturgics.

“Who found her?” Amanda’s mellifluous tones distracted Steve from his alarmed contemplation of his father’s ascent onto a rickety-looking table, for what purpose Steve wasn’t entirely sure.

“When she didn’t show up at an important meeting first thing in the morning, Trenton sent someone to fetch her.” Steve half-rose in alarm as Mark teetered uncertainly on the table then sank back as his father gained the security of the floor.

“She looks so young,” Amanda commented sadly.

“Twenty-eight,” Steve returned briefly, not sure how she could tell from the distorted features, and preferring to keep his gaze on Mark instead of the corpse.

“What on earth could be so tragic at that age that could have impelled her to commit suicide?” Amanda wondered.

“Maybe nothing.” Not wanting to prejudice his father’s findings, Steve had not mentioned that his own instincts insisted that this was not a suicide. He could find nothing to substantiate that gut feeling, but the lingering atmosphere somehow spoke to him more of violence than despair. He could feel Amanda’s gaze on him, but chose not to elaborate on his comment, and at that point Mark returned, dusting his hands off thoughtfully.

“Anything?” Amanda asked hopefully.

“Not a thing -- literally,” Mark answered emphatically. “And that very lack of evidence is making me uneasy. There are no drag marks that would lead to the assumption of murder, but nor are there any foot prints at all. You’d expect at least a visible mark from the ball of her foot as she pushed off to stand on the chair, but there’s nothing. It’s as if the carpet has been smoothed clean.”
He gazed around pensively. “You know, if you subscribe to the theory that a clean desk denotes a sick mind, and if the converse is true, then this lady was eminently sane. Yet this death was obsessively tidy, almost textbook immaculate, and it’s raising the hackles on my neck. Have you finished with the photographs?”

At Steve’s nod of assent, Mark continued, “Then I’d like to look at that chair.” He moved over to the finely carved, oak kitchen chair from which Serena had presumably launched herself to her death, and lifted it carefully, studying the indentations it had left in the carpet. Meticulously, he marked the depths on a piece of paper before shifting the chair to an adjacent space and asking Amanda if she would mind climbing on board.

Quickly catching on to his intent, she accepted the hand Steve gallantly offered and clambered up, moving around as if throwing a rope over the beam and eventually jumping off. Mark measured the results on the same piece of paper and held it up to show the discrepancy. He raised his eyebrows but made no comment. Although appearing to be of a comparable weight to the dead woman, Amanda’s efforts had not caused the chair to bite nearly so deeply into the pile.

It wasn’t particularly scientific, and wouldn’t hold up in a court, but it was enough to increase suspicion. If a killer had lifted Serena onto the chair, it was the one indication that he couldn’t erase.

“Let’s bring her down, but don’t cut through the knot,” Mark instructed. “The best place is on the back of the beam.”

They laid her in a body bag gently, both out of respect, and also so as not to dislodge or destroy trace evidence. Additional marks and injuries at this stage would merely confuse the autopsy.

“Is there any chance she was strangled and then hung up?” Steve hazarded.

“Almost none. Look here.” Mark pointed to a white furrow around the neck with a congested looking red rim. “This inverted V, which moves upwards towards the point of the knot, is a dead giveaway - no pun intended.”

Amanda joined the discussion. “You see these tiny, ruptured blood vessels here on the skin? They mean she was alive at the time of the hanging.”

Steve winced at that clinical piece of information.

“She was definitely hanged,” Mark confirmed. “But what is suspicious to me is the lack of violence at the scene. Her feet were in easy reach of the chair, but there are no signs she kicked it. There are no scratches on her neck.”

Steve stared, puzzled. “But if it was suicide...?”

“Grabbing at the ligature is entirely involuntary, an instinctive move that can even happen after the loss of consciousness. I think the greatest likelihood is that she was drugged to keep her pliant.”

“That should show up in the tox screen,” Amanda announced briskly.

“How soon can you have some results?” Steve asked with his most hopeful expression.

“I can have a preliminary report by this evening, but it’ll take longer for the official lab results to come in.”

Amanda departed with the coroner’s wagon, leaving the two Sloans to search through the house for
any clues that would shed light on the fate of its occupant.

Mark investigated the bathroom to rule out the possibility of self-medication with tranquilizers. He found no prescription medicines, only over-the-counter analgesics and cold remedies. Foraging through the trash can, however, he uncovered an interesting item in the form of an empty pregnancy kit, but he was unable to find the urine stick itself and, try as he might, he could find no trace of the man who might have necessitated the use of such a procedure. He rejoined Steve who, after a search of the kitchen, reported only that Serena was a health food nut.

Uniformed officers were canvassing neighbours for information and, until the autopsy results were out, it was unclear how much else could be accomplished at their present location, so, by mutual agreement, they left the house.

Emerging from the warmth of the building, they paused, hit by the cool blast of wet air that had characterised the recent winter weather. The clouds did little to help dispel the gloomy aura of premature death that clung to them.

“Lunch?” Steve suggested with forced brightness.

“You buying?”

Steve affected a hurt expression at the amicable skepticism in his father’s voice. “Sure I am. I know this great little place called Bob’s that…”

“I’ll tell you what,” Mark interrupted him hastily. “It’s my treat.”

Steve knew that Mark’s reluctance to dine at Bob’s was no slur on the establishment that they co-owned with Jesse, but merely a reflection of the fact that they’d dined there three times already that week, and Mark’s palate, more refined than his own, was yearning for more sophisticated cuisine, so he took no offense. “I know a pretty good seafood place nearby,” he offered helpfully.

Mark brightened. “Seafood - that sounds just right.”

Steve smiled mischievously. “They also do great ribs.”

The level of conversation during the meal ranged from comfortable silence to intense discussion as to the relative merits of river fishing versus ocean fishing with the fluidity of two people totally at ease in each other’s company. Neither wanted to mar the enjoyment of good food and companionship by introducing the topic of the investigation, so it wasn’t until after they’d finished eating and Mark was trying to flag down their bustling waitress that he asked. “So what’s your next move?”

Steve toyed with his water glass, the flaw in his plans suddenly apparent, and he felt an unexpected urge to prevaricate. “I need to talk to Maxwell Trenton,” he replied eventually, hoping his father would put his palpable reluctance to answer down to the unpleasantness of the task.

The detective watched one cool trickle of condensation race another down the glass before meeting together and speeding down to be lost in the coaster. But despite his fascination with the laws of physics, he could still feel the intensity of Mark’s gaze on him and the sheer force of that regard drew his eyes up to meet his father’s.

“Would you like me to come with you?” Mark’s voice was gentle, but Steve could not sense any emotion, although he searched his father’s face desperately for some clue as to how to proceed.
Despite anticipating the question, Steve was at a loss as to how best to answer, impaled on the horns of a dilemma. He would like Mark’s assistance in the forthcoming interview, knowing that his father could contribute considerably to a case that was politically sensitive and criminally complex, but Steve was also concerned that it would be personally distressing for Mark. Moreover, the concept of questioning the father of a murdered daughter in the presence of his own bereaved father made him queasy, a hard knot of tension coiling uncomfortably in his stomach.

It had been nearly four months since Carol had died, but the memory still festered, an aching sense of loss compounded by a profound sense of failure. Perhaps because she had played little part in their lives in the decade before her death, this grief did not intrude now on a daily basis, but boiled up unexpectedly catching him by surprise.

Since scattering Carol’s ashes, Mark had never mentioned his daughter’s name or the circumstances surrounding her death and, unsure of the reasons for this reticence, but presuming the memories were too difficult for his father to revisit, Steve had followed his lead. A silence had built up between them on this issue, brick by brick, becoming an almost tangible presence, a wall by now impossible to breach.

The resulting completeness with which she’d vanished from their lives made her death seem even more cruel, yet Steve felt incapable of protesting, partly out of respect for his father’s grief and partly out of his own sense of guilt.

He knew that logically he was not to blame, but he still felt he had failed his sister and by extension his father. Even as a young child, his protective instincts had enshrouded Carol, shielding her from bullying and the natural hazards of childhood. Yet Carol had been killed while he celebrated his birthday and commented sarcastically on her failure to commit, and he couldn’t forgive himself for that.

He could no longer help Carol, but he could shield his father from the gruesome reminder of her death. However, he had left his response too late as Mark took advantage of the delay and inserted a slightly more assertive opinion.

“I’d like to come,” he commented softly, dropping his gaze to the plastic, checkered tablecloth.

“OK,” Steve accepted with resignation, offering his father a tentative smile in the hopes of dispelling the unaccustomed awkwardness that suddenly sat between them, and ignoring the misgivings in his gut that swelled uncomfortably to apprehension. He wasn't sure why but, with that simple decision, he felt as if he’d stepped off familiar ground and was sliding inexorably down a precarious slope towards an uncertain and uncharted future. With an effort, he attempted to shovel all his negative thoughts to the back of his mind, burying them deep and dismissing them with a final pat of the spade.

Wiping his mouth with the napkin, he got to his feet briskly. “Let’s go.”
Maxwell Trenton’s house could more accurately be called a mansion, and it befitted his status as a billionaire, although the architectural emphasis seemed to be more on the protection of privacy than on reckless ostentation. Albeit more a chemist by trade than a businessman, he’d taken over the small, independent pharmaceutical company his family had started in 1903 and dragged it to financial glory with the discovery and subsequent manufacturing of monoclonal antibodies in the 70’s.

He still controlled all the company’s business dealings with an iron fist, usually bereft of a velvet glove or any form of compromise, but his daughter was an up and coming star in the research department and widely slated to be his successor.

The Sloans were greeted in hushed accents by Trenton’s personal assistant, her eyes wide with the magnitude of disaster confronting her employer’s family. She introduced herself as Judy Carrera and led them through plush halls that swallowed up the sound of their passage, to the magnate’s office. Amidst the rich, musty smell of leather and similar trappings of privilege, Trenton was standing, ramrod straight, staring out of a window, but even from behind he was surrounded by a palpable aura of grief. His large frame was still well-muscled, although his hair was more salt than pepper, and, as he turned, Steve got the impression of fires only temporarily banked, red-rimmed eyes his sole concession to heartache.

“Dr. Trenton, I’m so sorry for your loss. I’m Lieutenant Steve Sloan and this is my father, Dr. Mark Sloan, who is a consultant with the police department.”

Steel-gray eyes switched abruptly to Mark as the detective completed the introductions. “I’ve heard of you.” Trenton’s voice was as commanding as his appearance. “You solve murders.”

The intensity of the tycoon’s gaze on Mark disturbed Steve, perhaps all the more because his father seemed to both absorb and return it, forging a sense of connection. That silent communication snaked unease down Steve’s back, stirring his protective instincts, and he moved forward casually breaking their eye contact. He steered his father bodily towards a chair, hoping the civilised act of sitting would help to diminish the turbulence of emotion swirling around the room.

“Dr. Trenton, I hope you understand that, while we are investigating all aspects of your daughter’s death, there’s nothing at present to indicate your daughter was murdered. The autopsy results might well confirm it was suicide.” Dealing with bereaved families was not Steve’s forte, but he knew the words had come out rougher than he’d intended. It had the desired effect of refocusing Trenton’s focus back on himself, but he also felt the impact of Mark’s reproachful gaze, and with an deep and unobtrusive breath he struggled to regain a sense of professional detachment.

“Rena didn’t kill herself.” Trenton’s voice was harsh, and he thumped the desk with a clenched fist for emphasis. “She...I...” He stopped, clearly attempting to marshal logical arguments to bolster his instinctive emotional reaction.

“I talked to her just last night.” Disbelief cracked his voice painfully, and Steve was agonizingly aware of his father shifting uncomfortably beside him. “We talked about the latest trial results, and she was excited about her most recent project. I would have known if anything was wrong, if she was ready to go straight home to end her life. That’s not what happened.”

Steve knew from experience that no parent believed that his child was on the brink of self-
destruction, but he didn’t express this skepticism, merely nodding in response.

“Yes, sir, I understand and, for now, we are treating this as a murder investigation. Can you tell me if you know of any reason someone might have to kill her?”

It was clear from Trenton’s expression that imagining the brutality of such an attack on his daughter was as impossible as imagining the despair that would have led her to suicide. Steve wasn’t surprised when Mark cut in. His father had sat silent for longer than Steve had expected.

“It could be personal or professional. Let’s start at work.” His voice was gentle and helped strip some of the immediacy from the other man’s pain as he led him through the situation logically. “Has anyone ever threatened her?”

“Not specifically. We get the usual threats from animal right’s groups,” the magnate offered doubtfully. “We keep animal testing to a minimum, but it’s necessary and we’ve attracted attention from some of the more radical groups.”

“OK,” Mark nodded encouragingly, although he knew the answer didn’t lie there. If Serena’s death were indeed murder, it was no random act of violence but a carefully orchestrated crime, and there was nothing a protest group would gain from murdering in such a fashion. It had been committed by someone close to her, he would bet on that. However, it was important to keep Trenton focused on the external factors concerning his daughter’s death rather than the agonising details of the act itself. “Is that documented anywhere?”

“We file any such correspondence. I’ll get my assistant to pull it up for you.”

Steve could see how this line of questioning had steadied Trenton, pulling him back into his familiar role as company director. With a sigh of resignation, he caught his father’s eye, silently relinquishing control of the interview to him, then he watched with a mixture of trepidation and admiration as Mark effortlessly took over, his gentle sympathy and dignified bearing instilling an automatic trust. Steve could see Trenton relax into the intimate bubble of security that Mark established between them, allowing him to concentrate on the problem that Mark posed.

“Who in the company might benefit from this situation?” Mark phrased it as tactfully as he could.

“There are no obvious successors to her position. I’ll have to find someone to promote, but I’ve no idea who at the moment. She’s truly irreplaceable. She is brilliant, you know.” His lips tightened as he fought back a fresh wave of grief, finding comfort in Mark’s steady eyes. “She was brilliant,” he corrected himself in quiet tones. “She was everything I could have hoped for in a daughter. When her mother and I divorced, the kids went to live with her for several years, but Elizabeth couldn’t cope with Rena as a teenager so she came to live with me. All she really needed was encouragement. She was bored in her high school.”

“Like father, like daughter, huh?” Mark encouraged the other man’s need to reminisce for a while about his daughter, realising he made the perfect audience. It was not wasted time since it gave him the opportunity to learn more about the murdered woman.

As the conversation veered off the specifics of the case, Steve felt not only superfluous, but also uncomfortable as if he were eavesdropping on something intensely personal between the two fathers. He was about as useful as the dust motes he watched dancing in a shaft of sunlight, and he didn’t think the older men would notice his presence even if he got up and performed a jig on the exquisitely carved coffee table to his right.

However, he had rarely felt less like dancing as he surreptitiously observed his father. He could
only see Mark’s profile but, although the doctor’s expression showed nothing except calm support, Steve could almost feel the unnatural tension that gripped him, and awareness of his father’s pain crawled tightly across Steve’s skin like a spreading blight. It hurt on a visceral level to see Mark subsuming his own grief in the other man’s fresher anguish.

He was belatedly pulled back into the interview by Mark’s next comment of, “Carol was like that too,” and his eyes snapped up abruptly, staring at his father in disbelief, but Mark seemed oblivious to his scrutiny. Steve realised it was an innocuous response to Trenton’s comment about his daughter’s economic self-sufficiency, but he was staggered that Mark had introduced her into the conversation at all. He tried to ignore the slight edge of hurt he couldn’t explain, but the sharpness of that emotion pricked the protective bubble he placed around his own grief and, for a moment, he was swamped by the strength of conflicting feelings he’d successfully suppressed for months.

With the ease of long practice, he enclosed his grief back into its shielded coating and focused on his father. He could rationalise that it was easier for Mark to talk to a stranger, especially with one who shared this bond of loss. He even allowed himself to hope that the experience might be cathartic for Mark, a necessary step in coming to terms with Carol’s death. However, he doubted it, given the circumstances. Just as he was considering stepping back into the conversation, it proved unnecessary as Mark deftly steered the meeting back into more professional channels.

“Did she have a boyfriend?” It was a natural sequitur to the personal reminiscing, and didn’t disturb Trenton’s more composed state.

“She was engaged ‘till six weeks or so ago and then she broke it off.”

Steve pricked up his ears at the sounds of a promising lead at last. He gave himself a mental shake like a labrador shedding excess water after a swim, the final flick of the tail an admonition that this wasn’t the time to indulge in his own emotions.

“Why did they break it off?” Mark prodded gently.

“I’m not really sure. You know, we work...worked together and I tried to stay out of her private life. My impression was, she just got cold feet. I was a little relieved to be honest; I never felt that Owen was good enough for her, but now...” His voice trailed off, but Mark nodded in understanding, comprehending only too well the regret of missed opportunities, of grandchildren that would never be.

A spurned boyfriend would normally constitute an excellent lead in a murder case, but this was no crime of passion, it was too cold-blooded and meticulous. If it were indeed murder, there had to be more to it than met the eye. If it were a murder. Steve began to consider whether his crime scene intuition could not be dismissed as a fanciful reaction to the gloomy atmosphere of the death scene. He’d wanted a neat little puzzle to distract Mark from his grief, but that plan had clearly backfired in the worst possible way. The best thing now would be for Serena’s death to be proved a suicide.

“Dr. Trenton,” Mark continued carefully. “I know this is a hard question to consider, but the most common motive for murder is greed, and obviously your family has a lot of money. Who would benefit financially from Serena’s death?”

The industrialist clearly floundered on that question, the implications too close to home, so Mark made the question easier and more specific. “Who was the beneficiary of Serena’s will?”

“To the best of my knowledge, she doesn’t have one. She’s only twenty-eight.” The unfairness of her youth momentarily stripped him of control, but he rallied quickly. “Who at that age thinks about death? She didn’t have anyone to support, so I don’t think she ever gave it any thought. It’s
not like she had a lot of money, anyway. She paid her own way through grad school, and I don’t play favourites with salary. She’s not poor, but there’s nothing to kill over.”

“What about your money? She would have inherited a considerable amount from you.”

“Eventually, I suppose, it will all go to my son, Neal.” Trenton didn’t look thrilled at the prospect. “He’s twenty-four, and not the slightest bit interested in the company, not the slightest bit interested in anything, actually. I agreed to support both the kids until they graduated, so he’s determined to drag the experience out as long as he can - the perpetual student.”

Since Neal Trenton was now the sole heir to his father’s fortune, he benefited from his sister’s death to the tune of hundreds of millions, so he had to be considered a suspect even if the possibility had clearly not occurred to the executive.

It was a theory that Steve himself would like to have discounted since the very thought made him slightly queasy.

Rather than dwell on the ramifications of that issue, Mark moved on. “I have one last question for you. Do you yourself have any enemies?”

Trenton paled slightly, and it was clear that the implication were not lost on him. “You mean someone who might try to get revenge on me through my children?”

Mark didn’t think it was worth mentioning even less palatable possibilities such as it might have been intended merely as a distraction at a pivotal point in a business deal.

“Dr. Sloan, a man doesn't make it to my position without making enemies, but I can’t think of one that would commit such a horrendous....” Words failed him, but after a moment’s pause he continued grimly.

“Since I took control of this company, I have been responsible for several competing firms going under. I am currently involved in a hostile takeover of Devlin Pharmaceuticals, and I’m sure there are several rivals who would happily see me dead.” He rubbed his head wearily with his hand. “There are also many labor leaders who don’t like me very much, and last month I fired Peter Langton, my accountant, when I suspected him of doctoring the books.”

“Did you bring him up on charges?” Mark queried, pleased to have unearthed another promising lead.

Trenton shook his head wearily. “I didn’t want the negative publicity for the company, but he was furious anyway.”

This recitation seemed to exhaust him; the possibility that his own behaviour could have impacted so lethally on his daughter was obviously devastating. “Look, the list is extensive, but I’ll give it some thought and contact you later. Now, I just need some time alone.” The dismissal was abrupt, but it was obvious that the trauma of his daughter’s death was catching up with the businessman.

Steve got to his feet, surprising to find every muscle heavy and aching as if he had pushed too hard in the weight room. He was drained; speaking with bereaved relatives was never easy, but this had been tortuous. His awareness of Mark’s presence had undermined all efforts to maintain a professional equanimity. His father was always so empathic in his communication with others, and the interview must have forced him to relive the agony of his daughter’s death in detail, an emotional flaying he didn’t deserve.

Mark wavered as he rose to his feet, the transition from emotional and mental focus to physical
exertion too abrupt. Steve stepped forward quickly, one strong arm supporting his father and steadying him. The rigidity of the muscles under Steve’s hand spoke volumes to him of the stress Mark was experiencing.

Steve’s sense of frustration burnt higher, as he blamed himself for not only failing to protect his father from this ordeal, but also for actually leading him into it. He stood there for a long moment trying to convey some sense of comfort through the physical contact. However, the delay, while giving Mark a chance to recover, also gave Trenton the opportunity to advance around his desk.

The tycoon’s eyes were curiously bright, not with a healthy glow, but with an unnatural fever of intensity, and Steve again felt the impulse to step in front of his father to shield him.

“Your daughter was murdered recently.”

The media coverage surrounding Carol’s death had been extensive, engendered both by the political relevance of the motivation behind the murder and by Mark’s own reputation. For someone who preferred to deal with his grief privately, such publicity had been painfully intrusive, and obviously the depths of its negative repercussions had not been plumbed.

Steve stiffened in outrage, his sympathy for the other man rapidly disintegrating. He was shocked as much by the tone as the words. There was no compassion or affinity expressed in the blunt comment, it was merely a statement needing confirmation. If Steve hadn’t known the other man was grieving too, he would have been tempted to deck him, but, as it was, there was nothing he could do to stave off the inevitable as Mark nodded.

“Find the man who killed my daughter.” It was a strange combination of command and poignant plea, and Mark met it not as a subordinate, but as an equal accepting a sacred trust.

“I will,” he replied softly, but there was an implacable vow underneath those quiet words.

Steve ushered his father out of the room and out of the house, helpless rage, all the more destructive both for its impotence and scope, stealing the oxygen from his muscles. He was furious at himself as the instigator of the whole disaster, at Trenton for his lack of sensitivity and even, most pathetically, at Carol for dying.

There was also a portion of his anger that was reserved for Mark, although he didn’t care to examine that too closely. He knew that, in large part, it was actuated by fear. Despite his boundless amiability, Mark was stubborn to the core. Even in regular circumstances, he was unlikely to relinquish his hold once he’d sunk his teeth into the meat of a case. However, this was a commitment beyond the commonplace, and one that could destroy him.

Steve would usually throw himself wholeheartedly behind his father’s endeavors but, this time, concern for the older man’s welfare prevented him. This unaccustomed rift between his loyalty towards his father and his desire to protect him, exacerbated his already foul mood, and the silence in the car was heavy and oppressive as they drove to Community General.

Mark sat very still, staring blankly out of the window and, for once, Steve was unsure what was going through his father’s head, whether he was ruminating on the facts of the case or reliving the aftermath of Carol’s murder. Either way, what Steve could see of his expression was grim. Afraid that any attempt at conversation on his part would end in words he’d regret, Steve made no attempt to break into his father’s reverie, concentrating instead on the comfortingly familiar act of driving on the steep and twisting roads, and allowing the car's lulling motion to seep into his aching body. He was startled when Mark spoke.
“I should have asked for a list of her friends, people she might have talked to about her personal life.”

Somehow the confirmation that Mark was still concentrating on the case grated on Steve’s already raw nerves, and he had to work to keep the irritation out of his voice as he replied reassuringly. “It doesn’t matter. We can get that later if we need it.”

Evidently, Steve was not as successful in concealing his aggravation from his father as he’d hoped since, despite his preoccupation, Mark responded to a stiffness in the words by peering across at him, puzzled.

“What’s wrong?”

For a moment, Steve was tempted to prevaricate, to deflect the query with a casual response, but a lifetime’s habit of openness and trust between them was hard to break. Feeling inadequate to the challenge of carrying on a serious discussion while driving on the narrow roads, he checked in the rearview mirror and pulled off abruptly into a conveniently located layout.

Impatient at the feeling of restraint, he also undid his safety belt, turning in his seat to regard Mark squarely. His father watched him with a strange mixture of guileless bemusement and watchful concern, and for once Steve suspected that Mark was oblivious to the turmoil rampaging within his son. This realisation twisted his insides with the sickening lurch of a rock climber who unexpectedly feels his surest hold give way, leaving nothing but the heart-stopping void of air beneath him. He cleared his throat uneasily, unsure where to start. “It’s just that I think... well... that this case has become too personal for you.”

Mark smiled deprecatingly, trying to keep the tone of the conversation light. “I don’t know anyone involved in the case, so it could scarcely be called personal.”

It was an opportunity to let the topic die a natural death, but although Steve had little desire to confront the issue, he felt it was too important to dismiss, and he persevered grimly. “You know what I mean. I just think a case of this nature will take too much of a toll on you right now.”

“You invited me in on it, remember?” Mark commented quietly. He sounded too reasonable, and the calm statement did nothing to soothe Steve’s frayed nerves. He also remembered why he hated having this type of conversation with his father -- he plodded along ponderously while Mark effortlessly tap-danced merry rings around him.

Steve’s own emotions were snarled up in a Gordian knot so tangled he wouldn’t know where to start unraveling them, and his muscles were coiled tighter than a drawn bow. Wisdom would dictate a period to cool down, but Steve pushed on stubbornly, wanting the matter settled to his satisfaction.

“I know, but I think it would be best if I took it from here.”

Mark shook his head resolutely. “It’s too late now; I’m committed. I made that man a promise, and I have no intention of breaking it.”

“I don’t think you can be objective about this case,” Steve insisted.

Mark regarded him steadily. “Are you sure this is about me? You were already mad when you started talking to Trenton, and you’ve been steaming ever since.”

With an effort, Steve swallowed back the retort that rose to his lips, partly because it would have confirmed his father’s accusation, but also because sniping was foreign to their relationship. They
indulged in good-natured teasing all the time, but this exchange contained an sting that burnt deep, especially since neither had any protection against the other. Mark’s face was expressionless, but his stance and rigid spine, told Steve that his father was on the edge, a brittle tension replacing his usual equanimity.

As he wiped a trickle of sweat from his forehead, Steve realised for the first time how hot it had become in the car. The windows were steaming up with the heat. He turned the key enough to enable the windows to open, hoping that some fresh air and an interruption in the argument would cool his temper which was sliding from his grasp like a greased rope with a ton weight at the end.

They sat quietly for a moment, listening as the whisper of tires announced someone was driving by. Steve’s back was damp with sweat, yet ice trickled down his spine as the hard obsession in his father’s eyes -- a match to the intense preoccupation in Trenton’s -- momentarily blurred his usually genial features into unfathomable unfamiliarity.

It reminded Steve that he couldn’t imagine the devastation of losing a child. His certainty that he knew the right solution for his father dissolved as he noticed the fatigue settling on Mark's features, the line deepening between his brows. Steve’s fingers worked nervously on the steering wheel and he cleared his throat.

“Look, Dad. Let’s just drop it.”

“Do you mean this case or this conversation.” There was no compromise in Mark’s tone.

“Both... either.” Steve took a deep breath to try to steady his unsettled temper. “At least wait until we’ve got the results of the autopsy. There’s a good chance it was really suicide.”

“No, it was murder,” Mark asserted confidently.

“Because you want it to be?” Another thread of patience snapped. “This fixation isn’t doing anyone any good.”

“That’s not true,” Mark refuted hotly. “Her family deserve to know that justice has been done, and the killer should not be allowed to go free.”

“Finding her killer is not going to bring Carol back!”

The words were out before he could bite them back and, for a second, he stared as his father, truly horrified by the irresponsible cruelty of his remark. Mark flinched as if he’d been stuck, the words as lethal as bullets Steve fired from his gun.

“Dad, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...”

All the anger had bleached from Steve’s face, leaving only white anxiety and an aching heart as he took in the pain in his father’s vulnerable eyes.

Emotions took him by storm; an overwhelming need to protect was pursued by a strange fear of loss that slammed into him. All his feelings felt too large for his chest and Steve could hardly breathe in the suffocating, claustrophobic heat of the car. He scrambled for the door handle, throwing himself out into the fresh air, needing to move or explode.

The sudden burst of energy dissipated as quickly as it had arrived, and he sat down abruptly on the curb looking over the hillside towards the ocean, scrabbling for control of his wayward feelings.

He was not used to navigating solo through the murky waters of emotional turmoil, since normally
in such circumstances Mark was there to steady him and guide him, his humour, compassion and love a beacon in the maelstrom. This time, Mark was as lost as he was and Steve felt rudderless, without a compass, and he didn’t know where to go or how to get there.

He wasn’t sure how the situation had deteriorated so fast. When Carol was alive, she had always known how to push his buttons, possessing a sibling’s ability to shred his temper in record time. He still remembered with shame her final visit home, and he could hear the echoes of his sarcastic responses -- “What I am supposed to do -- applaud?” He’d known at the time that his surly attitude was hurting Mark but he’d been unable to control it, choosing retreat over apology.

He didn’t turn around as the car door opened behind him, but he was preternaturally aware of his father’s movements -- a speculative stillness followed by the rustling of clothes as he approached, then Mark joined him on the curb, the warmth of his long legs touching his son’s as he seated himself.

“I’m sorry,” Steve repeated remorsefully.

“I know. Me too.”

As Steve glanced at his father, Mark offered him a strained but sincere smile.

Forgiveness had been extended and accepted in both directions, but Steve knew that it was merely a band aid, a temporary patch on grief too acute for either of them to handle alone. He was reminded of the stressful period after his mother had died when each member of the family had withdrawn into a separate sphere of grief. It seemed that now the shock and violence of Carol’s death had forced them back into old, destructive patterns of behaviour. Steve had learnt his lesson and wanted to reach out and help his father, but he was just too tired and too emotionally defenseless to explain what he needed or to figure out how make Mark talk. Everything seemed cosmically wrong and imbalanced somehow, as if the planets were slipping out of alignment.

As if reading his thoughts, Mark murmured softly, “We’ll figure it out...I promise.” Then even quieter, almost a whisper, “You need to give me more time.”

Steve had to grant him what he needed, unable to ignore that subdued plea and afraid that any attempt to force Mark to open up would merely increase the distance between them. For now, he had to trust his father and acknowledge that he was merely along for the ride, bobbing with the current, trying to ignore the sound of the waterfall getting louder and louder.

“I can do that.” His voice felt scratchy in his throat. He reached out and squeezed his father’s knee, needing the simple touch to complete the sense of connection.

Silence settled back over them, heavy as a shroud.
Chapter 3

Amanda absently hugged the file containing the preliminary autopsy report to her chest as she meandered down the halls of Community General, her legs carrying her instinctively to the doctor’s lounge where she’d asked the Sloans to meet her, while her mind remained preoccupied with replaying the autopsy for something she might have missed.

She paused at the door to the lounge, initially because she needed a moment to rehearse the delivery of her findings, but the words fled unheeding from her mind as she took in the scenario inside the room and was struck by a strong sense of something off-kilter, although for a moment she couldn’t pinpoint what exactly she felt was wrong. Mark was sitting in an armchair to the right of the door, intently nursing a cup of coffee while Steve sat opposite, seemingly absorbed in examining the floor. They were both unnaturally still and quiet, each a study in solitude and, with a jolt of concern, Amanda realised there was something missing.

The two Sloans had always exuded a sense of connectedness, an intangible link tempered and forged to a fine purity under the stressful conditions of Steve’s work and the life-and-death situations that all too often engulfed them. They worked together, lived together and enjoyed spending their spare time together, two lives tightly entwined not just by blood but by choice.

That imperceptible bond between them was lacking today and their joint misery was palpable. The lines of strain on Steve’s face seemed almost chiseled into his handsome features, and Mark looked oddly brittle as though an ill-timed blow would shatter him.

Amanda tried to imagine what could have happened in the intervening hours since she left them. At the crime scene, nothing had struck her as abnormal; she remembered the unmistakable pride shining in Steve’s eyes as he watched his father investigating and the answering affection in Mark’s face as they conferred.

Now the sense of profound isolation wrapped round each man disturbed Amanda more than she could say. They were still oblivious to her presence, so she withdrew slightly before bustling in. “Hey guys,” she greeted them breezily, aiming for the coffee container to give them a moment to gather themselves.

Mark accepted her offer of a refill with a tired smile, but his expression revealed little of the turmoil she sensed inside whereas Steve, for once, proved the easier to read, an odd trepidation darkening his eyes as he glanced at the file tucked under her arm. It was her first clue that it was something connected to the case that was the problem. She might not know the particulars, but she could guess it was related to Carol. She knew Mark was struggling to come to terms with his daughter’s death. As a fellow parent, she had a unique insight into the horror of such a loss, and at times she had tried to draw him out on the subject. However, he had on the whole deflected her efforts with kind but firm courtesy, offering only superficial glimpses of a pain he buried in an exhaustive work schedule.

This hectic schedule had prevented him from becoming involved in any of Steve’s subsequent cases and, when Amanda had challenged him on this avoidance, he’d admitted that, with Carol’s death, his fears for his son’s safety were magnified, and he preferred not to be confronted with first-hand evidence of the danger Steve faced everyday.

It had appeared to be a sign of progress that Mark had accepted Steve’s invitation to consult on the Trenton case, but now Amanda wondered if it might not prove to be the trigger that exploded the thin veneer of normality they had regained.
Unsure how to best help her friends, she decided to give them the autopsy results and see what transpired. She had just opened the file when Jesse bounded into the room.

“Hey, guys, what’s going on? What did I miss?”

He was oblivious to the undercurrents swirling around the room, and his irrepressible sparkle seemed to increase the overall energy in the enclosed space.

Since neither of the Sloans seemed eager to answer the young doctor’s questions, Amanda dove in with a description of the morning’s activities. Jesse looked inappropriately thrilled at the mention of a murder, though he hastily explained his excitement. “This is great. I’ve missed this. I mean...not that emergency medicine isn’t exciting, but working together again on a case, well...” Seeing that nobody looked particularly sympathetic to his point of view, he subsided, edging his enthusiasm down one notch and perching himself on the arm of Steve’s chair, swinging a leg.

“Go on,” he urged Amanda.

“Well, I would place the time of death between 8 and 10 p.m. last night, and the official cause of death is cerebral oximia caused by hanging. The ligature round her neck was the...”

“We expected that,” Mark interrupted. “Was she drugged?”

“The preliminary tox screen came back negative,” Amanda stated bluntly. “I could find no trace of drugs in her system. There was also no sign of bruising or anything to make me suspect she didn’t take her own life. We’ll have to wait for the official blood tests before making an announcement but, based on these findings, I’d have to rule her death a suicide.”

She tried to keep an eye on both Sloans as she delivered this verdict, wanting to gauge their reactions. Steve looked unabashedly relieved, squeezing his eyes closed for a moment and taking a deep breath before relaxing back into his chair, although he ventured no opinion. Out of the corner of her eye, she also noticed Jesse’s disappointment and visible deflation.

Mark’s only overt response was a slight frown of concentration. “Did you find anything else anomalous?” He leaned forward, watching her intently.

“You’re welcome to read the report and see what you can find,” she offered. “There were two things of note. First and foremost, she was ten weeks pregnant.”

From the nod she received from Mark, it was obvious he wasn’t surprised by the information. “What’s the second?” he asked impatiently.

“The only other thing that struck me as strange was that she’d eaten a large meal shortly before she died.”

“The condemned woman ate a hearty meal,” Jesse piped in irreverently.

“Well, that’s it.” Amanda cast him an irritated look. “It just doesn’t seem like a suicidal thing to do.”

Mark turned to Steve. “I don’t remember seeing any signs of a meal in the kitchen.”

“No, it was clean, considerably cleaner than the rest of the house.”

“So, either she’d come home, cooked and eaten a large meal, tidied up that one part of her house in a totally uncharacteristic way and then killed herself, or she went out for a meal, returned home,
and with scarcely a pause, strung herself up. Neither scenario seems particularly plausible to me. We need a more detailed account of her movements to figure out if she ate out and if so with whom.”

Steve was disturbed by his father’s enthusiasm. “Look, Dad, I’m not trying to be difficult…”

"No, it comes naturally to you." Jesse smirked, expecting a friendly scathing look or sardonic comment in response. However, his jibe was ignored and not in a deliberate refusal to acknowledge his contribution, but as if the other men were too intent to even hear anything irrelevant to the case. For the first time, he clenched in to the unnatural tension reverberating dully around the room. He shot a puzzled look at Amanda who volleyed it with her best ‘not now, I’ll explain later’ expression.

For once choosing to opt for discretion, Jesse subsided. Now alerted to his friends’ anomalous behaviour, he noticed other inconsistencies. Steve was unusually tentative as he questioned his father’s assumption. Few parent-child relationships were graced with the equality that characterised Mark and Steve’s partnership; trust was the staunch centerpiece of their relationship encircled by a mutual loyalty that went beyond… anything. Yet mutual respect did not preclude the questioning of each other’s theories in the privacy of their gatherings, and Jesse found it unsettling to see Steve so diffident.

“Isn’t it possible that the fact that she was pregnant actually supports the theory that she committed suicide?” Steve continued. “After all, she wasn’t married.”

“Women nowadays don’t commit suicide over pregnancy. They get an abortion,” Amanda demurred.

“However, there are boyfriends who would kill rather than pay child-support, and jealous boyfriends who might see it as evidence of unfaithfulness - a multitude of motives for murder.” The alliteration rolled sonorously from Mark’s mouth, but the confidence of the assertion was at odds with the uncertainty in his expression as he caught his son’s eyes, offering the pronouncement with a crisp of challenge between the melted layers of apprehension and entreaty. “It was murder.”

Blue eyes held blue, and it was as if the room itself held its breath suspended, a sense of anticipation keeping their friends immobile as if the slightest movement would topple an invisible but delicate balance. Even Jesse recognised that there was more at stake here than simple acquiescence to a statement, although Steve’s face held nothing that would account for such a conviction.

Steve didn’t speak for a long moment. Everything he was feeling, all the fear and confusion, was trapped in a tight knot in his throat making speech impossible even if he’d known what he wanted to say. He knew that if he expressed his opposition to the continuation of their involvement in the investigation, Amanda and Jesse would abide by his decision and Mark would desist at least his official enquiries, but there was a hopefulness in his father’s expression that Steve was powerless to ignore. To deny it would be a betrayal, and he was incapable of inflicting that additional hurt. He would just have to work harder to protect Mark from the consequences of his choice.

Decision made, he gave Mark a crooked grin, and saw relief in the answering smile.

“I think your past record of success has earned you more than a little leeway. I have the feeling that if I backed the suicide theory, I’d only end up eating crow later. However, there’s only so long I can keep an investigation open without some proof of murder. For now, I’ll work on interviewing her colleagues and friends and try to flush out the murderer, but I’d appreciate it if you guys concentrate on finding me some concrete evidence, either from the body or the scene, that she didn’t kill herself.”
Amanda and Jesse didn’t look too thrilled at their allotted task, but accepted the logic of Steve’s plan. To his surprise, Mark seemed unfazed by his de facto exclusion from further interviews and was already one step, or a giant leap, ahead of all of them.

“Actually, I have some ideas about that.” He turned to Amanda. “I’m presuming you ran the standard blood tests, checking for tranquilizers and sedatives?”

“Of course.” Amanda was too familiar with Mark’s investigative techniques to take offense, understanding that he was merely confirming something for his own mental processing. “I ran the usual tox screen.”

“Did you test any of the necrotic tissue?” Mark asked eagerly.

“No, with the cause of death clear, I didn’t do anything elaborate.” She paused, working through the implications of her friend’s question. It was clear when inspiration struck. “You think...?”

“It’s possible.” Mark regarded her with bright expectation as she nodded thoughtfully.

“But where...? This time Jesse chimed in, obviously having also clued in to Mark’s hunch.

Mark switched his gaze over. “We’re talking about pharmaceutical companies here. It wouldn’t be too hard.”

As Steve watched the exchange of what he thought of as “medi-speak”, any frustration he might have felt at his complete lack of comprehension of the half-sentences being merrily tossed between the others was buried under the warmth of familiarity. He’d missed this too, the companionship of this unlikely band of detectives. He cleared his throat meaningfully.

“When you guys have finished this fascinating conversation, maybe you’d like to fill me in.” His smile robbed the sarcasm of its sting.

Realising how incomprehensible their reasoning must have been to a layman, Amanda hastily explained. “There are a large number of poisons that aren’t detected in the body after death, and a tox screen tests only for those substances that are most likely to be there. Mark just suggested testing for a neuro-muscular blocking agent that wouldn’t show up under normal conditions.”

“That sounds promising. When will you have something definite?” Steve knew he had to concentrate on the facts of the case rather than on dodging the explosions in his personal minefield.

Amanda mentally calculated her workload, but capitulated with a sigh. “If I set it up now, I’ll be able to give you an idea tomorrow. Obviously the official results will take much longer.”

“Hey, we’ve almost got this case wrapped up already.” Jesse’s insouciant comment earned him the scathing look he’d been angling for, the one that told him things were returning to what passed for normal.

“There’s the little matter of finding the actual murderer,” Steve reminded him gently.

“That’s the easy part.” Jesse waved a dismissive hand in the air.

Seeing how much more relaxed the two Sloans were looking, Amanda hastily cut in before Jesse inadvertently said something that might squash the camaraderie that had reestablished itself. “Why don’t we all go out to eat? It’s been too long since we all sat down for a meal together.”

Steve smiled at her gratefully. “Sounds good.” There was a touch of anxiety as he looked over at
his father. “Dad?”

“Just what the doctor ordered. Why don’t we...” He was interrupted by the insistent sound of ringing.

With a grimace of apology, Steve pulled out his cell phone. “Sloan here...uh-huh...yes...I’ll be right there.”

“Sorry, guys. Cheryl’s back, and the Captain wants to see us.” His regret was palpable. “You go out and have fun. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Mark got to his feet as Steve did, disappointment clear in the older man’s face. As Steve moved to leave the room, he paused, bringing his right hand up to rest on his father’s nearest shoulder. Amanda didn’t think he said anything, but something passed between them that lightened Mark’s expression momentarily, then with a final squeeze, Steve left. Mark watched him depart, then turned to his friends, his smile forced. “So, where should we go?”

After the meal with Jesse and Amanda, Mark returned to the hospital to complete some paperwork he’d been neglecting, needing something to distract him from his own thoughts. It was early morning by the time he returned home. The house was quiet and dark, an empty coffee cup in the sink the only sign of Steve’s recent presence and, feeling the need to connect with his son, Mark walked quietly down the stairs, pausing at the door between their apartments. Muted sounds and the irregular flicker of light peculiar to television showed in the gap at the bottom, but there was nothing to indicate Steve was still awake so he pushed open the door gently, without knocking.

Steve was lying asleep on the couch, his hair mussed and sticking up at odd angles. His arm was thrown up over his eyes to protect them from the light but, from the uncomfortable position into which his son had slipped, Mark guessed that he had been waiting up, hoping to talk to his father when exhaustion had crept up and shanghaied him. A wave of shame rippled caustically through Mark at the realisation that, subconsciously at least, he’d delayed his return to avoid another encounter without the leavening influence of their friends.

He turned aside to switch off the television, the abrupt cessation of movement and sound allowing his thoughts to ricochet uninterrupted around his brain. He found they made uncomfortable company.

A soft snore from the man lying still on the couch drew his attention and he wandered back to gaze down at his son, examining him as if he hadn’t seen him for a long time, which in a way was true. He’d been so wrapped up in his pain, he’d been heedless of the fact that his son was grieving too. For now, Steve’s face was relaxed in sleep, the tribulations and concerns of daily life all but erased from his features, the dark smudges that had recently shadowed his eyes hidden from view.

Mark’s gaze slid off his son’s sleeping features, pulled by a familiar object on the coffee table close by. He leaned forward and carefully picked up the neatly-framed photograph that had clearly been the object of his son’s attention that evening. Just one glance was enough to remind him of the gaping holes torn in his carefully constructed universe. It was one of the last pictures taken of them all together, a few months prior to Kathryn’s death, and the ravages of the cancer that would eventually take her life had started to show. His fingertip traced lovingly over her image before he focused on their two children, standing with their arms flung casually round each other. Both had longer hair back then, and the family resemblance was clear in their identical grins as they hammed it up for the camera.

Mark touched his daughter’s face reverently, the now familiar ache of loss twisting deep in his heart. He knew from experience that this grief would never really heal, but that, given time, it
would scab over enough to become bearable. He shifted his contemplation to the image of his son, comparing it to the older man on the couch and noting that the hint of boyish looseness still visible there had vanished, muscle and skin drawn in tighter to the bone, hardening the planes on his face.

He replaced the picture with a heavy sigh and glanced over guiltily at Steve, a notoriously light sleeper, surprised that the intrusion into his son’s space hadn’t already woken him. Either Steve was truly exhausted or, at some level, even when asleep, he recognised the security of his father’s presence. Mark didn’t particularly want his son to wake up. In the quietness there were no distractions for the path his thoughts were taking. It was what he’d needed, a time to himself to get things straight in his head, but he also wanted to bask in the reality of his son’s continued existence and the knowledge that Steve was, for now, safe without the need to apologise for his actions earlier that day.

Mark knew he’d behaved intractably, rebuffing Steve’s attempts to open a dialogue between them and ignoring his son’s genuine concern. The truth was that it was only Steve’s supportive presence that had allowed him to maintain a pretense at equanimity when Trenton’s shocked grief brought back intense memories of those hideous moments following the discovery of Carol’s body.

Absently, Mark also noticed that his son had changed into a tanktop, now rumpled and creased, and an indication that Steve had been running on the beach, a predictable response to emotional turmoil. The shirt didn’t conceal the faint white scar tracing the length of his bicep, inflicted by a staple gun several years before. It did cloak the ragged amorphous scars on his torso left by Oz Tatum’s bullets and the precise linear scars of the surgeon’s scalpel wielded to save his life but, even obscured, the marks spoke eloquently to Mark of the dangerous career that could snatch his son from him any day.

The bleak awareness of the fragility of the life contained within Steve’s strong frame shuddered through Mark, pain radiating from his heart and stabbing in his chest. Losing his daughter had been well-nigh unbearable but losing his son, whose life was entwined so intricately and inextricably with his own...he couldn’t survive that. There would be anodyne for that pain, no cauterising a wound that immense and severe.

Tension was humming through him like current through a wire and his emotions were jumbled in a molotov cocktail of confusion, poised on the brink of explosion; the ever-present sense of devastation colliding with the haunting fear of additional loss. He knew that the turmoil he felt was a natural part of grief. In fact, he could quote chapter and verse on the process of grieving, which was one of the reasons he had refused Amanda’s offer to arrange counseling -- it seemed so pointless when he knew what would be said. Yet the intellectual knowledge did little to temper the fierce sense of anguish.

Self-delusion wasn’t one of his weaknesses, and he knew he’d been avoiding the necessary task of facing his emotions, deliberately burying them in the daily exhaustion of overwork. But now, he also realised that he’d been subconsciously distancing himself slightly from his son, either in a fruitless attempt to spare himself more grief, or maybe as a way of punishing himself for his inability to save his daughter.

Mark’s hands clenched tightly on his knees and he bent forward as if trying to contain some inner pain as suppressed reflections fought their way thickly to the surface. Separation came to all families sooner or later, death severing even the closest of ties between parent and child, but Carol had left voluntarily many years before and Mark wasn’t sure where his greatest failure lay: in allowing the breach between them to persist for so long, or not somehow arriving in time to prevent her death.
Another reason he’d shied away from Steve’s homicide investigations was that it had suddenly seemed so futile; punishing the guilty did not bring back those lost. In contrast, his medical practice provided the affirmation of life or at least the possibility of prolonging it.

Yet, faced that day with another grieving father, he realised that no sense of closure was possible until those responsible had been brought to justice and an explanation for the senseless loss provided, and in some way comprehended, and for some reason he had to do that -- had to provide at least that much for Trenton. Steve was right, it wouldn’t bring Carol back, but it would ease something inside, something he had yet to fully decipher that was stretched so tight that it rendered him incapable of reaching back to his son.

Hopefully, the case could be quickly resolved, leaving him free to make amends and spend time with his one remaining family member, to fully appreciate the priceless gift he still possessed.

He reached over Steve for the afghan on the back of the couch and draped it along the lean form, making sure it covered the long-legged sprawl and as far up the top arm as the cloth would go. It didn’t reach all the way up to the shoulder and, for a moment, he held the edge of the afghan between his fingers, not quite touching the edge of his son’s shirt. Then he released it gently and went to bed with that warmth still in his fingertips serving to thaw part of the ice that he’d been carrying in his heart.
Chapter 4

Mark’s emotions were in too turbulent a disarray to easily subside and so precluded an easy descent into sleep. This temporary insomnia resulted in him sleeping long past his son’s departure for work in the morning. Steve had thoughtfully left some coffee for him, and a box of cereal had been placed next to a clean bowl and spoon, obviously intended as an aid to his memory since his appetite had been lacking recently.

Obedient to his son’s unspoken directive, Mark poured himself a reasonable helping and spooned it into his mouth absentmindedly while he read through Amanda’s autopsy result again. The printed words marched relentlessly across his mind, describing in merciless detail the final indignity perpetrated on Serena Trenton, but Mark was unable to find further inspiration in its pages, although he was struck again by the consummate tidiness of her death.

Amanda had estimated that Serena had died within half an hour of eating, so if they could pin down her last meal, they would have a closer estimate of her time of death which would prove useful later when they narrowed down a list of suspects. Mark read through the short inventory of her stomach contents again; the meal consisted of a garden salad and mangosteens -- a healthy meal very much in keeping with her food proclivities, packed with anti-oxidants. A memory twitched in the back of his mind, edging forward but remaining tantalisingly out of reach, and before Mark could pin it down, the phone rang. With a sigh, he mentally ear-marked the context and moved to pick up the phone.

It was Amanda, and he could tell instantly from the excitement in her voice that they’d hit paydirt. “You were right, Mark, it was Tubarine. It was mixed with another chemical that I haven’t identified yet, not scoline, which I half-expected. I also found the injection site after a lot of searching, hidden by the rope marks on the neck. It was definitely murder.”

“That’s great, honey. Good job,” Mark congratulated her warmly. “Have you told Steve yet?”

“No, I thought you’d like to be the one to tell him.” There was an innocence in her voice that hinted at ulterior motives for this suggestion.

With a smile and a last word of thanks, Mark disconnected and immediately called Steve.

“Lieutenant Sloan here.” Mark thought he could detect an element of uncharacteristic strain in his son’s voice even in the delivery of those three words.

“Hey Steve, it’s me. Sorry I missed you last night.”

There was a slight pause as if Steve had moved somewhere more private. “Yeah, me too. So...did you sleep well?”

Mark grimaced at the slight awkwardness that had sprung up between them, understanding that his son was trying to frame his concern in a way that wouldn’t earn him another rebuff.

“Eventually, I suppose,” he responded, offering the gift of honesty. He wanted to do more, to apologise for the times in the past months when he’d dismissed that concern, even from his son, with polite lies, but a telephone conversation did not offer the right intimacy to attempt a complex mending of fences and, reluctantly, he continued the exchange by explaining the purpose of his call.

“Amanda just phoned. Our hunch paid off and now it’s officially a murder investigation.”
There was a long moment of silence at the other end, and Mark wasn’t sure if his son had been
distracted by events in the station or if the shift in topic had thrown his son and he was mentally
shifting gears. He feared that it wasn’t the result Steve had hoped for.

He suddenly wished he’d gone to the station to tell Steve in person; it would have been easier to
read his son’s reaction. The pause bothered him and Mark hurried to fill the gap with an attempt at
humour. “You know how I hate to say ‘I told you so!’”

To his relief, Steve picked up the olive branch. “Oh, you do, you really do...at least more than once
a day.”

Mark chuckled. “I’m not that bad, am I?”

“No,” Steve retorted. “You’re that good. That’s great work, Dad. What’ve you got?”

“I’d be looking for someone in the pharmaceutical business with this one. She was injected with
tubarine, a derivative of curare. It blocks neuromuscular transmission, effectively causing
paralysis. It’s not exactly an over-the-counter prescription, but it’s used in hospitals as an aid to
anesthesia. Interestingly enough, it’s also been used in the intelligence community as a method of
murder. It’s probably most notorious for its use in South Africa where the military would inject it
into SWAPO fighters they’d captured and wanted to get rid off. Once paralyzed, they’d load them
up on a plane, fly out to sea and push them out of the aircraft over the ocean.”

“Nasty.” The grimness in his son’s voice reinforced the sentiment.

“Very nasty. Steve, that poor girl was probably conscious throughout the whole thing. Conscious,
and aware of everything that was going to happen to her, but unable to move a muscle to save
herself or even plead for her life.”

Mark heard the indrawn breath as the brutal picture he drew took root graphically in his son’s
imagination and when Steve spoke, Mark could sense an infusion of new determination. “Well,
he’s not going to get away with it, thanks to you.” There was a slight pause then, “Dad, I’m really
sorry about yesterday. You were right in more ways than one. Serena and her family deserve your
full commitment.”

Mark knew that if he had been right, it had been for the wrong reasons and he wanted to inform his
son of his mistake, but his usual facility with words had deserted him, and before he could find the
precise phrases that would convey the apology he wanted to make, Steve continued. “Dad, I have
to go. Cheryl and I are going to interview Owen Russell, her ex-fiancée, and this information is
really going to help. He seems our most likely suspect at the moment.”

Mark swallowed back the ‘be careful’ that rose involuntarily to his lips, but the knowledge that his
son was going to face a potential murderer could not be so easily suppressed. “Bye, son, I’ll see
you later,” he offered. Only a strong hunch that the ex-boyfriend was not the offender enabled him
to manage that much.

He sat back down at the autopsy report, hoping to pin down the stray thought that had eluded him
earlier but it was hard to concentrate. He rubbed his forehead wearily. He’d always worried about
his son’s safety, but now that anxiety was reaching paranoiac proportions, a dread, a cancer that
was eating him mercilessly from inside. It wasn’t logical to assume that because he’d lost one child
to a premature, hideous death it was inevitable that the other would share a similar fate. But Steve
confronted danger on nearly a daily basis, so the likelihood that he would meet a violent end was
far greater, looming to almost certainty in Mark’s anxious mind.
He knew he had to find a way to muster at least a semblance of peace before he mentally imploded. Unfortunately, the only consideration vying for space in his mind was the horror of Serena’s death which bought his thoughts inexorably back to Carol and if she had...he cut off the end of that image hurriedly, knowing that to contemplate the details of her death encouraged madness.

He threw down his pen in frustration. Throughout his life, his mind had responded quickly and efficiently to any problem that confronted him: schoolwork had never posed much of a challenge, and in medicine his thoughts had leapt from symptoms to diagnosis with comparative ease. Now, instead of serving him, his thoughts seemed to control him, spinning obsessively down well-worn paths of fear and pain.

A knock on the door extricated him from his morbid thoughts. Answering the summons, he was surprised to find a young man, whose uniform identified him as an employee of T&R Biotech Research Corporation, bearing a large box.

“Dr. Sloan, a doctor at the hospital said I could find you here. Dr. Trenton asked me to deliver this to you personally.”

At Mark’s direction, he placed the package on the kitchen table then departed, refusing the offer of a tip.

Mark stared at the box meditatively for a moment then slowly removed the lid and started unpacking the files, sorting them into piles. Trenton had clearly had his secretarial staff working non-stop. There were folders on employee disputes dating back ten years, files on all the competing companies he’d forced under or taken over, several folders of hate mail received, and also a series of files wrapped with red tape and marked ‘confidential’ which contained employee information on all the staff in Serena’s department and the research in which they were engaged.

Once he’d neatly categorised all the paperwork, Mark stood up abruptly and walked over to the coffee pot. He spent an inordinate amount of time pouring the coffee, sprinkling a bit of sugar and adding a touch of cream. He knew he was stalling; the task ahead suddenly looming ponderously over him. He felt a sudden urge, at odds with his impulses earlier, to pack everything back in the box, but the can of worms was already opened.

He sat down heavily in the chair, but after he started to read, any initial reluctance was soon lost in a welcome absorption which drove everything else from his mind. Some pages he skimmed through quickly, but others he perused several times and as he read, he discarded some information and resorted others, building a complex picture of the Trentons’ business and family life.

Eventually, Mark leaned back and rotated his neck to the accompaniment of audible pops, estimating the elapsed time by the stiffness of his back. What was left of his coffee was now cold, and he got to his feet with a luxurious stretch to refresh his cup. He felt like a gourmand, replete with half-digested details: names and motives, culled from the feast of information spread on the table. But now it was time to disconnect from the facts. In his not inconsiderable experience, every murder had a unique ‘feel’, the proportion of premeditation, the technique chosen, the efficiency of the execution, all combining to provide an emotional signature that was often a better indication of the culprit that cold, hard facts.

The calculating precision of Serena Trenton’s murder, the chilly premeditation, the ruthless performance, all spoke to Mark of financial gain. This wasn’t a murder of passion, of revenge or hatred, it was one of profit. With these considerations in mind, Mark moved with new purpose, reshuffling the papers in an almost subconscious dance of inspiration, until only one file sat isolated in front of him. A square fingernail tapped the cardboard cover thoughtfully for a few moments, then, with a final rap of decision, he pulled out his cell phone to run his quarry to earth.
Once provided with a destination to continue this promising line of enquiry, Mark grabbed his car keys and was heading out the door when it occurred to him that it would be best to keep Steve apprised of his plans. He paused, thumbing the on-switch of his phone absentely. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Steve would be less than thrilled with the prospect of his father conducting an interview alone, and the last thing Mark wanted was a renewal of the tension between them. However, Steve would be more upset if he discovered belatedly that his father had attempted to keep him in the dark.

Reluctantly, Mark hit his speed dial and discovered the best of both worlds as he heard the message, “The customer you’re trying to reach is either out of the area or unable to take your call right now.” Feeling the glow of virtue for attempting the contact, Mark scribbled a quick note, ‘Tried to reach you. Going to Devlin’s house. Back soon.’ He hesitated, then before he lost his nerve added, ‘We need to talk.’

He drove up PCH, crossing the Hilton Head Bridge, then heading up into the canyons. His journey up the winding road was eerily reminiscent of his drive several years before to Jerry Grayle’s house, and he couldn’t help occasionally glancing up at the sky, fearing the lurid orange glow that had accompanied him then. Steve had undoubtedly saved his life that day, despite his injuries, acting swiftly and resourcefully in an extreme situation to devise a way to extricate his father from the advancing flames.

Judging by the amount of rain they’d had recently, he was presently in more danger from mudslides than fire. It was ironic that this area, rife with natural disasters waiting to happen -- wildfires, flood and earthquake, was still considered prime real estate, and he was sure than Devlin had paid a pretty penny for his isolated corner of it.

Despite the fact that it was several miles to the nearest neighbour, Devlin had a large wall topped with barbed wire surrounding his property and a wrought-iron gate blocking the driveway. It created the picture of a curmudgeonly misanthrope in Mark’s mind. There was no security guard, and Mark depressed the button marked ‘speak’ on the intercom system, waiting for some acknowledgment of his arrival. The long delay would have discouraged most people, but Mark was abnormally persistent, and eventually his patience was rewarded. A male voice answered in a discouraging monosyllable, “Yes?”

“Mark Sloan here to see Mr. Devlin.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Devlin isn’t seeing anyone at the moment.”

The voice sounded more dismissive than apologetic, and before he could be cut off, Mark added hastily, “It’s about the murder of Serena Trenton.”

There was a pause then, “Just a minute.” No further attempt was made at communication, but after several minutes, the lock disengaged with a click and the gates swung creakily open. Taking that as a grudging invitation, Mark drove through.

The road curved round several times, gratuitously in Mark’s opinion, before approaching a house that was extensive, but paled in comparison to Trenton’s and not only in size. The two men were long term business rivals and the recent shift in their fortunes was reflected in their houses, for whereas Trenton’s mansion held an understated opulence, this building, on closer inspection, had a shabby, rundown appearance, with paint peeling off some sagging boards.

Mark marched up the steps, and the front door opened as he reached out a hand to ring the rust-flecked bell. A stocky young man stood back to let him in, his apparel more suited to that of a male nurse than a butler, a mystery that was soon explained as Mark was shown in to the sitting room.
Devlin was clearly not much longer for this world. He was sitting in a wheelchair, a blanket wrapped round his legs, although swollen ankles peaked out at the bottom. His lips held a bluish tinge, and behind his seat Mark could spot the portable oxygen cylinder that led to the nasal cannula worn under his nostrils.

His face was twisted in slightly malicious amusement as he caught sight of Mark’s surprise. “Dr. Sloan, I wasn’t expecting a house call. Doctors are so rarely accommodating these days.” His voice was hoarse, and it was possible to see his chest heaving with the effort of talking.

Mark smiled politely. “I would diagnose lung cancer and emphysema.”

The older man shrugged. “They warned me about the dangers of smoking, but I didn’t listen. Who doesn’t think they’re indestructible when they’re younger? My doctor says I have less than six months to live. Would you concur?”

Mark grimaced apologetically. “Without an examination it would be impossible to say, but it sounds likely. I’m sorry to disturb you.”

Devlin gave a short laugh which turned into a prolonged coughing fit, the dry cough shaking his thin shoulders. “You’re not here to discuss my health. You said the Trenton girl was murdered, but the newspapers reported it as a suicide.”

“The autopsy proved otherwise,” Mark stated carefully.

Devlin wiped the corner of his mouth. “Poor old Maxwell. This must be very difficult for him.”

“That’s very kind of you since I understand T&R Pharmaceuticals is driving you out of business,” Mark commented.

The old man looked at him sharply. “I don’t suppose the girl’s death will change that.”

“Perhaps not,” Mark admitted easily.

“You think I had something to do with her death?” He didn’t seem offended by the idea, merely curious, yet in that instant, Mark sensed the enquiry held more than casual interest and that he was not the only man fishing for information.

“It’s a possibility that had to be ruled out,” he answered readily.

“Well, you can see that I’m too weak to even stand on my own, never mind struggle with a healthy young woman.”

“That’s true.” Mark let the acknowledgement lie between them before continuing with a seeming non-sequitur. “I believe you have three sons.”

“Ah!” The old man’s shoulders drooped slightly and he sighed heavily, a noise of indecision. “Do you have any children?”

Mark’s breath caught at the unintentional parry as it grated against the already festering wound.

“Yes, I have a son,” he elaborated. He wanted to mention Carol; it felt wrong not to acknowledge her existence, but he couldn’t face the lengthy explanation that would accompany her inclusion.

“Did he follow you into medicine?” the dying man asked absently, staring through Mark into a time only he could see.
“I’m not sure who followed who,” Mark admitted with a chuckle. “He’s a detective, in charge of this investigation actually.”

“I was so proud when all my boys followed me into the family business. This company is my legacy and their heritage.” His eyes were misty and Mark allowed him his reverie, startled when Devlin suddenly refocused on him. “What would you do if your son had done something wrong? Would you protect him whatever he’d done, or would you turn him in?”

The question was clearly anything but rhetorical, and Mark’s heart bounded at its implication, then lurched downward as empathy forced him to actually consider his answer. What would he do if the unimaginable happened and his sense of justice was placed against his need to protect his son? It was a dilemma of heart-breaking proportions for any parent. Mark remembered a case many years before when a mother, dying of cancer, had claimed responsibility for a murder her daughter had committed. When Mark forced the truth out, Betty Manning had appealed to him. “Wouldn’t you do this for your son, wouldn’t any parent?” He remembered feeling guilty afterwards; maybe her sacrifice had not been his to expose, but Steve had instantly recognised his discomfort and reminded him gently of his belief that everyone had to accept responsibility for their own actions.

Could he really betray Steve even if ultimately he believed it was for Steve’s own good? The cost of such a decision would be his very soul. No, he had no easy answer for the other father, but in the deepest fibre of his being lay the conviction that he would never be required to make such a decision. His son’s integrity was as boundless as his courage and strength. If he ever lost his son it would be to death, not prison, and he would never be anything but proud of him. Normally that was a cold consolation, but now Mark wondered if he’d underestimated its comfort. He was immensely fortunate to have such a fine son, who had remained not only uncorrupted amidst the depravity and degradation he worked with on a daily basis, but also caring and honourable. It shouldn’t have taken this case to remind him of that.

He looked into the troubled countenance opposite and honesty forced him to confess, “I don’t know what I’d do.” It seemed impolitic to add that his son would never give him cause to force that decision.

The rheumy eyes grew hooded, and Mark realised that he’d failed some obscure test as Devlin straightened in his wheelchair. “I appreciate your interest, Dr. Sloan, but as I said before, no one in my family had anything to gain by killing Serena.” It was a dismissal, but Mark had a few more weapons left in his arsenal.

“Your company is fighting for its life. You’re in direct competition with Trenton’s company to develop new anti-microbials to combat the new drug-resistant bacteria and Serena was close to success. If you could market that drug first, it might have saved your company.”

“I would never have sanctioned anything illegal,” the old man argued stubbornly.

“I believe you,” Mark responded sincerely, leaning forward in an effort to reestablish more open communication, “but I also believe that at least one of your sons had different ideas -- after all, it was to save their birthright.” A flicker of dismay in the other man’s expression confirmed his suspicion.

“I can’t help you,” he stated heavily, not meeting Mark’s eyes, his breathing shallow and harsh.

Mark pushed on relentlessly, the image of the girl’s suspended body obscuring the reality of pain and confusion in the man opposite. “Do you know how she died? She was injected with tubarine, she...”
He broke off at Devlin’s choking gasp, the struggle for air degenerating into a paroxysm of coughing, flecks of phlegm decorating his blue lips. The tremor in his hands was pronounced as he searched frantically for something amid the folds of the blanket. Mark quickly reached in and located a nebulizer, holding it securely for the old man to take as deep a breath as possible of the bronchodilator.

“Is there anything else you’re taking,” he asked, falling automatically into professional mode. The rasping cough finally eased.

“In the kitchen,” Devlin whispered shakily, waving a trembling hand towards the hallway.

Mark hurried down the well-worn carpet to the kitchen, feeling vaguely disgusted with his own behaviour -- bullying a dying man to betray his sons, even to serve the cause of justice was sinking to a new low. He had allowed his obsession with this case to override his sense of compassion. Well, it wasn’t going to happen again. Proof must exist somewhere else, and he would find it.

Mark located the medicine with no difficulty, automatically checking the label. He poured a drink of water then, as he was turning back to the door, his gaze fell on a bowl of fruit placed in the middle of the table. Slowly, he set down the glass and bottle of pills and leaned over to pick up a round, smooth, dark-purple fruit.

Several years ago, Mark had gleefully wasted many a happy hour on video games, quickly mastering the strategies and skills necessary to win at Pacman, Space Invaders and others, but his favourite had been Tetris. The elemental satisfaction he’d received from fitting the shapes together was matched now by a more metaphorical dropping of pieces into place as he rotated the mangosteen slowly in his palm, the tangible object snagging the information that had eluded him earlier from the recesses of his memory.

Although mangosteen puree was available in up-market stores and by mail-order, the whole fruit was banned in the United States because of fear of pests. Any whole mangosteens in the country had been illegally imported and how many stashes of smuggled fruit could there be locally? It was circumstantial evidence but a link nonetheless between Serena and the Devlin family. Looking around the kitchen, he could see many of the same wholesome food products that Serena had favoured, and he guessed that she had met one of the brothers at a health food store or club. It was possible that....

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Mark spun around guilty at the sound of the strident and unfamiliar voice. A tall, well-built man in his early 40’s stood in the doorway, his black brows beetled together in a scowl. The relationship between him and the elderly man in the other room was unmistakable and Mark quickly recovered his composure, gracing the newcomer with his most innocent smile. “I’m Dr. Sloan. I’m treating your father.” He picked the medicine back up and waved it ingratiatingly.

The other man’s dark gaze was on the mangosteen still in Mark’s hand, and the doctor had to fight the childish urge to hide it behind his back.

“My father is a sick old man, and you’ve got no business in this house bothering him with questions.”

“Then I’ll give him this medicine and be on my way,” Mark replied with equanimity, stepping round the younger man and proceeding along the hall, the back of his neck tickling with the presentiment of danger. He moved quickly, his eyes alert for any sudden movement from behind and eager to reach the restraining presence of the older Devlin. However, his steps faltered as he
entered the sitting room. Two other men were hovering around the invalid in the wheelchair and, at Mark’s entrance, they raised faces distorted by identical expressions of anger and fear.

Mark’s breath caught painfully in his throat as he realised the magnitude of his folly. He’d come to the house to beard one old lion in his den, now he was confronted by three males in their prime and he could sense that any weakness on his part would see him torn to shreds by the ravening pride. It was essential to retain a strong bluff even though every instinct insisted on flight, but with one brother behind and two in front, he was trapped, encircled.

“Medicine, Mr. Devlin,” he announced brightly, thrusting the glass into the old man’s bony, trembling hand.

The stocky young man on his left darted round him to hiss in a clearly audible voice, “Jack, he knows!”

“Shut up, you idiot,” his older brother growled, and Mark heartily endorsed the sentiment. As long as the topic remained unvoiced, their individual suspicions would not meet the critical mass needed to overcome civilised behaviour. However, his wish was to go unheeded as the younger man persisted in militant tones.

“But Dad says he knows everything.”

The eldest Devlin sibling jerked his head, “Jeff.” The third brother obeyed Jack’s unspoken command and disappeared out of Mark’s peripheral vision.

“I’m leaving now,” Mark announced carefully, but his exit was blocked and to force his way through would instigate the violence he was desperately trying to avoid.

“What exactly do you know, Dr. Sloan?” Jack asked silkily, his dark gaze flat and unblinking as a shark.

“He knows about the Tubarine and the development of the anti-microbials,” the youngest brother piped in maliciously -- Mark’s own personal harbinger of doom.

“Don’t worry, Dad. We’ll handle it.” Jack’s words were conciliatory, but his tone left no doubt as to who was in charge.

Mark’s heart was racing, pulsing strongly against his chest wall as if trying to enact the escape that was looking increasingly impossible for Mark himself. He summoned his considerable authority to stare levelly at the man blocking his path. “I’m leaving now,” he repeated quietly.

Billy Devlin shifted uncomfortably, glancing over at his brother for direction and, for a moment, Mark’s life trembled on a knife-edge of decision. The stalemate was broken by the sound of heavy footsteps running up the hall, but any hopes Mark might have entertained of imminent rescue were summarily dashed as the missing brother appeared in the doorway. His stomach plunged as if he’d just dropped thirty stories in a runaway elevator, and he stepped back involuntarily in horror as his eyes were drawn irresistibly to the object in Jeff’s hand -- a hypodermic syringe -- and his gaze was riveted to the liquid drop glistening at its tip.
As all three brothers advanced towards him, Mark was forced to fall back, trying to buy extra
seconds to appeal to reason. “Listen, the police know I’m here; my son is in charge of the
investigation.”

“Then we’ll have to do something to distract them.” Jack was icy cool, displaying a dispassionate
control that Mark could correlate to the ruthless indifference behind Serena’s murder.

“Jack, this isn’t the way to do it.” The elder Devlin tried again to intervene, his voice louder and
more vigorous, and Mark hoped his words of wisdom would prevail, but the siblings didn’t even
acknowledge his interruption.

Mark searched desperately for the right words to stave off the inevitable, but they remained
elusive, slipping formlessly through his grasp. He swallowed painfully, cursing his stupidity for
coming alone to this place. Steve wouldn’t even know where to start looking for him until it was
too late, yet his son would blame himself for not arriving in time, would always believe he had
failed his father. Even worse, if the Devlin’s disposed of his body efficiently and it was never
found, Steve would never know peace.

Oh God, Steve! Mark nearly groaned aloud as despair washed over him. He couldn’t even begin to
imagine the grief his son would experience at this additional loss, father and sister in a few short
months, but it would be devastating. He shut his eyes momentarily in anguish. He knew his son too
well to fear that Steve would eat his gun, but the life expectancy of a cop who cared little about
survival was short. It was a useless time to be struck by an epiphany, but with blinding clarity he
realised how foolish he’d been in the last few months. He should have been enjoying every minute
he could with his son, instead of pulling away to grieve privately. Carol’s death should have taught
him the inestimably precious worth of each second.

Fueled with new and desperate intent, Mark backed up a few steps. “Listen to your father,” he
urged. “This won’t help at all. If I don’t make contact with my son soon, this place will be
swarming with cops. You’re just making matters worse. Besides, even your father’s nurse knows
I’m here.”

“Who do you think called us?” Jack responded calmly, his advance all the more menacing for its
impassiveness.

Mark’s heel hit something solid and, with a start of terror, he realised that no further retreat was
possible, his back was literally against the wall. The blood drained from his head, pooling in leaden
feet, leaving him dizzy and ponderous, but he braced himself for a last futile struggle as the
piercing needle advanced.
Chapter 5

Steve awoke in the dark, his neck stiff from lying in an awkward position. It wasn’t the first time he’d fallen asleep on the sofa, but it was more unusual to find himself covered by a blanket, and it didn’t take extraordinary detective skills to recognise his father’s handiwork. He was disappointed to have missed Mark, having waited up until after 1:00 a.m. in the hopes of talking to him. It wasn’t often that the two of them exchanged angry words, and even if his father wasn’t yet ready to discuss anything of import, Steve hoped at least to re-establish their usual easy rapport.

Since it was still several hours before he needed to get up, he relocated to the comfort of his bed, but his thoughts, now active, refused to settle and sleep eluded him. He merely lay looking at the shadows dancing on the ceiling and listening to the tiny motor in his clock radio until he finally surrendered to the inevitable and headed for the shower.

He lingered over his coffee in the vague hope that Mark might emerge, but there was no sound of movement from deeper inside the house. Feeling slightly hypocritical since his breakfast had consisted of nothing more nourishing than caffeine, he placed a box of cereal in a conspicuous place for his father to eat. Mark’s usual healthy enthusiasm for food had waned recently. He’d been skipping meals in his preoccupation with other matters, and his weight loss was evident in the way his clothes hung loosely from his frame.

Lacking other distractions and feeling uncharacteristically edgy, Steve decided to go to work early. In the briefing the evening before, the Captain had assigned the Trenton case the highest priority, since Steve had omitted to mention Amanda’s preliminary autopsy findings, but it wasn’t his only case and he busied himself with paperwork. However, he was more engrossed in his own thoughts than the reports when a cup of steaming coffee appeared under his nose. He sniffed appreciatively and glanced up at Cheryl, who hitched a seat on the corner of his desk.

“Hey partner,” he greeted her, throwing down his pen in relief.

“So, what’s so fascinating about the ficus?” she asked him brightly by way of greeting.

“Huh?”

She twitched an eyebrow at the plant next to the filing cabinet that he been absently staring at for the last five minutes. “Oh that’s what it’s called,” he nodded gravely. “Well, you know my fascination with horticulture.”

She considered that. “No.”

“Well, that’s what happens when you go away on vacation. You miss all the exciting new developments.”

“So if it wasn’t the greenery, what kept you entranced for so long?” she said lightly, not pushing but giving him the opportunity to talk.

“You know me, just thinking deep thoughts as usual.” That earned him a snort.

He gave her a grin, knowing she wouldn’t force the issue any further. Cheryl was a good friend as well as a dependable partner and had provided a harbour of sanity in the last few months, allowing him the haven of normality at work by behaving no differently to him. However, he had no intention of explaining that, for the twelfth time in as many hours, he had been pondering the wisdom of his decision to encourage Mark’s involvement.
Saying no to his father was an aptitude he was aware he lacked -- the habit of trust between them was too deeply ingrained. However, he knew that the reverse was true also, that Mark would bend over backwards to accommodate his wishes. With a private smile, he remembered the time Mark had serenaded a witness in an effort to gain an audience to persuade her to meet with his son.

Noticing that Cheryl was still watching him curiously, he pushed his personal concerns aside and concentrated on bringing his partner up to date with the case, including the conversation the previous night at Community General.

“So your Dad’s back.” Cheryl looked around with comical furtiveness, making sure that there was no one within earshot. “I never thought I’d say this, and if you dare quote me I’ll tell the whole station what the call girl on 10th said about you, but it’s not been the same without him. He has a way of livening things up, you know.”

Steve smiled at her obvious delight, unable to match her enthusiasm concerning Mark’s involvement, but disguising it under his pleasure at her acceptance. Few people would be as tolerant of their partner’s old man hanging around and, most annoyingly of all, almost always being right.

Cheryl wanted to visit Serena’s apartment to get a feel for the crime scene and, while they were in the area, they also checked the local restaurants to try to discover where the murdered girl had eaten her last meal, but no one remembered seeing her. They took the opportunity to snack on a quick lunch and while they were eating, Steve received the call from Mark. He wasn’t surprised to discover that his father’s hunch had paid off and they had a bona fide homicide on their hands. Hearing about the pitiless cruelty behind Serena’s death imbued him with a new determination to find her killer, and he hoped that they would narrow the search at their next destination -- the T&R Pharmaceuticals complex itself.

Steve remained preoccupied on the drive over, and Cheryl snuck several surreptitious glances across the car attempting to gauge the disposition of her silent partner. The last few months had been difficult for both of them; her usually good-natured partner had been uncharacteristically moody, wrapping his grief round himself in an impenetrable cloak of silence.

However, he’d never allowed the reservoir of anger she sensed smouldering inside him to spill over with either his colleagues or with criminals and had kept his personal life strictly separate from his work. She appreciated his professionalism and matched it, giving him the space he’d needed. Although she’d hinted at a sympathetic ear nearby, he’d never availed himself of the opportunity. She hoped he was talking to some of his other friends though she doubted it. She had a feeling that Mark was the only one he ever truly opened up to, but the Doc had been conspicuous by his absence. She knew she was lucky to have Steve for a partner and had learnt a lot from him, both in terms of procedure and investigational techniques, but perhaps most importantly, he’d taught her, by example, how to retain an emotional equanimity and to still care while maintaining enough professional distance not to burn out at the innumerable injustices, frustrations and brutality they witnessed every day.

Their partnership also existed on terms of remarkable equality, still a rare thing in the male-dominated world of law enforcement. In a dangerous situation he could be over-protective, but she’d learnt that that was one of his more endearing qualities, that he was overly protective of all the people he cared for regardless of gender.

The research facility for T&R Pharmaceuticals was immense, situated on drained marshlands near Irvine. There was a long driveway sweeping up a causeway raised above the flat, now dry, plain which was presently covered with trees. They passed the security gates with no problems and it
was clear that all employees had been given orders to fully cooperate with the investigation. Maxwell Trenton wasn’t present, but they were greeted by Judy Carrera, his personal assistant, who showed them into an office set aside as a base for their operations. They had to switch off their cell phones because of the sensitive electronic equipment in the building, but they called their location through to headquarters before entering.

Steve still placed his money on the fiance so, on the theory that anticipation would increase the pressure, they left his interview to last and started with Serena’s co-workers. They learnt that, on the whole, she was well liked and highly respected, but also was regarded as being slightly distant probably because of her family’s position, and no one socialised with her outside of work. Everyone expressed shock and regret and could think of no reason why anyone would want to kill her.

Steve’s hopes of a speedy resolution were dampened when Owen Hogan entered the room. Serena Trenton’s ex-fiance was a stereotypical scientist. Weak, pale-blue eyes blinked at them owlishly from behind glasses with lenses so thick that they must require a special prescription and, taking in his unimpressive physique, Steve couldn’t imagine him hauling 143 pounds - Serena Trenton’s dead weight - up onto a chair.

However, he was forced to reappraise his initial impression as he received a firm, brisk handshake in response to his introduction of himself and Cheryl.

“Dr. Hogan, thank you for seeing us. I know this must be a difficult time for you.”

“Yes.” Owen ducked his head, pushing his glasses further up his nose, but then he met Steve’s eyes unflinchingly. “Let’s not beat around the bush, Lieutenant. I presume from your presence here and from the fact that Serena would never have killed herself, that this is a murder investigation and, considering my relationship with her, I am probably one of your main suspects.” He paused, looking inquiringly at the two police officers for confirmation.

“The jilted lover is a traditional suspect.” Cheryl smiled to take the sting out of her words.

Owen nodded pensively, shifting slightly in his chair. “I understand that, and the only thing I can tell you is that I loved her very much and would never have hurt her. I also hoped that, given time, we could have re-established our relationship.”

Steve kept his voice neutral. “Can you tell me why the two of you broke up?”

“She wasn’t very specific, just that she was really confused about things and wanted some space.” His face was bleak and set as he added with painful honesty. “However, I got the impression there was another man involved.”

“Do you have any idea who?” This was the first they’d heard of a rival for Serena’s affections and it could prove a useful lead.

“None at all.” Owen’s answer was immediate, yet Steve got the impression that this was a matter to which the young scientist had devoted some thought. “There was no gossip circulating, which is remarkable in a closed working environment like this, so she was very discreet.”

Steve was frustrated by yet another dead end. “Was there anybody who might know? Any girlfriend she might have confided in?”

The scientist rubbed his palm with the thumb of his other hand, a gesture more thoughtful than nervous. “It may sound clichéd, lieutenant, but I was her best friend. That’s how our relationship
began. We would hang out and chat. We had a lot in common and not just work. Did you know that she loved to roller skate?"

Steve shook his head with a smile. “Do you have an alibi for Tuesday night?”

“What time exactly?”

They hadn’t pinpointed the exact time of death so Steve threw in an extra half an hour around Amanda’s estimate. “Let’s say, 7:30-10:30.”

The young man’s shoulders sagged slightly. “I was working in the lab till around seven, but after that I just went home. I met my landlady in the hall and exchanged a few words, but then I spent the rest of the night in my apartment. I haven’t felt very sociable recently.”

Cheryl felt that his self-possession was somewhat at odds with his profession of grief and decided to throw in a curveball to provoke a reaction. “Did you know she was pregnant?” She succeeded beyond her expectations. The young man’s already pallid face turned a sickly white, an accomplishment beyond the grasp of even the most talented actor.

“Mine?” he faltered tremulously, pressing his palms against the arms of his chair as if he were about to jump to his feet.

“I don’t know,” Steve answered with compassion, seeing the misery in the scientist’s expression, “but I’m sure paternity could be established if you wanted. She was about ten weeks along.”

“Oh, God!” Owen collapsed back in the chair and buried his face in his hands. Cheryl caught Steve’s eye with a slight grimace. One thing was obvious, if Serena had been killed by her fiance, he hadn’t known about the baby, although the extremity of emotion could be accounted for by guilt if he had killed her and thus also his child unknowingly, but Steve doubted it.

He still didn’t think the man was physically capable of the act, although an accomplice was within the bounds of possibility. Anyone capable of lifting Serena’s inert weight without leaving evidence of such manhandling must be immensely strong or have had help.

The young man raised his face, mute testimony to his grief and shock staining his face. “I’m sorry,” he said dully. “Is there anything else you need to know?”

“One more question,” Steve continued reluctantly. “Do you have access to Tubarine?”

“Tubarine?” The surprise seemed unfeigned. “We’re working on antibiotics in my department, not neuromuscular blocking agents. However, there are other departments that are, I think.”

Steve had witnessed too much exhaustive grief recently to mistake its presence, and he allowed the young man to leave without further questions.

Cheryl gave him a quizzical look. “Well, what do you think?”

He shrugged, striving for an appearance of nonchalance. “We can’t remove him from the list of suspects, but I don’t believe he’s the murderer. I think he truly didn’t know about the baby and I’m struggling now to even find a decent motive for him. He had a lot more to gain if she came back to him as an inheritor of Trenton’s fortune and, if it was a crime of passion, I can’t quite see him choosing that method of killing.”

“So what now?”
Steve leant back in his chair, trying to decide on the most effective line of enquiry. From everything they’d heard that day, there was little reason for anyone to want Serena Trenton dead. A memory from the previous day’s interview with her father echoed in his head and he jumped to his feet and poked his head out the door to locate Judy Carrera.

“Yesterday your boss promised to compile a list of people who might hold a grudge against him. Do you know if he ever got round to working on that?”

She nodded efficiently. “Sure, he kept me and half a dozen of the secretaries working through the night, pulling files and digging through old papers. We gathered a whole box of stuff that might be relevant. Then I had a messenger take it over to Dr. Sloan early this afternoon.”

“What?” Steve felt a frisson of unease snake coldly down his spine.

Judy looked flustered, her competent demeanor ruffled for the first time. “Those were Dr. Trenton’s orders,” she defended herself against the sudden wrath darkening the detective’s blue eyes.

“I see,” Steve responded icily, fighting back the anger that sprang from a sudden presentiment of disaster. “I need to use a phone.”

“Please use the one in the room. Just dial nine for an outside line,” she responded primly.

Steve strode back into the room and across to the desk, oblivious to his partner’s startled gaze. He punched the numbers with more force than necessary then drummed his fingers impatiently on the desktop, waiting for an answer. As the answering machine at the Beach House kicked in, he disconnected and, without a pause, dialed Mark’s cell phone. He tried to tell himself that he was overreacting, that there was no reason to assume the worst, but some instinct, born of profound insight into his father’s ratiocinations, insisted Mark was in danger.

Even under normal circumstances, Mark was unequaled at unearthing trouble; his curiosity and passion for justice outweighing his sense of self-preservation, but now, with his usual common sense suppressed by grief and the urgency of the new crusade he’d adopted, trouble was inevitable.

“Damn,” he swore as a mechanical voice interrupted the dial tone instead of the familiar tones he was hoping for. He took a deep breath, attempting to suppress the burgeoning panic that swelled within. Before he could try another number, his partner’s hand on his arm distracted him.

“Steve, what’s wrong?”

He gave her an unconvincing smile. “Perhaps nothing. Wait a minute.” He punched in one more number. “Can you page Mark Sloan for me?” He turned back to Cheryl, rubbing his forehead in a futile effort to dispel the expanding headache, trying to recapture his thoughts on the investigation. “Our next step is to try to track down the Tubarine. It will tell us if we’re looking at someone from within the company...” He missed Cheryl’s reply as the operator came back. “Then please get Jesse Travis. It’s urgent.”

To his relief, it wasn’t long before Jesse’s cheerful voice responded. “Dr. Travis here.”

“Jess, do you know where Dad is?” Steve asked without preamble.

“He’s not due in today. Is there a problem?”

“I can’t find him. He’s not at home and he’s not answering his cell phone.”
There was a slight pause as if Jesse was wondering why this was a cause for such worry, but when he spoke his voice was businesslike. “What do you want me to do?”

Steve was grateful for his friend’s dependability. It was a bit premature to put APB’s out, Mark could be at the grocery store or taking a walk along the beach, but Steve couldn’t ignore his premonition. “It’s going to take me over an hour to get home. Just call around and see if you can locate him.”

Steve hung up, feeling mildly more sanguine for having instigated some positive action. He turned to his partner with an apologetic grimace, wondering how to explain his erratic behaviour. He needn’t have worried as she was regarding him with a sympathetic frown.

“So, we’ll take a rain check on the Tubarine.”

Steve hesitated, knowing that a delay might enable the killer to cover his tracks. His priorities were unequivocally clear -- police work could not compete with his father’s safety. He’d always known that. When Mark had been kidnapped by an escaped felon and another officer adjured him to, “Think like a cop,” his immediate response had been, “I’m a son first.” Now, he had only the most unsubstantiated hunch that Mark was in danger, but even if there was just the slightest possibility he had to act on it.

“I’ll take your rain check and raise you a dinner at BBQ Bobs,” he teased, appreciating her unquestioning support.

She waggled her eyebrows. “Hey, big-spender!”

They gathered up their notes and assured Judy that they’d be back the next day.

“It’s getting dark, I hadn’t realised it was so late,” Cheryl observed.

“Yeah, time really flies when you’re having fun,” Steve commented with mild sarcasm.

The last rays of the setting sun were shining directly in his eyes as Steve sped down the long road that connected the pharmaceutical complex with the main LA arteries. Squinting against the blinding light, Steve was reaching out to adjust the visor when the windscreen in front of him suddenly splintered into a spider’s web of shattered glass with long tendrils splintering off from a tightly woven centre, and an unseen force slammed him back in his seat, wrenching his right hand off the wheel.

The car swerved violently, and Steve fought to regain control as it skidded on the loose gravel bordering the road, but his right arm was numb to his commands and the strength was draining with exponential speed from his left. Light sparkled in a dizzying kaleidoscope of broken glass around a hole like buffeting winds around the eye of a hurricane. He’d seen similar designs often enough to recognise it as a bullet hole, but couldn’t quite make the connection between that and the numbness radiating from his chest towards his extremities. There was no sense of pain, just the shock of impact.

Cheryl was shouting something, but she seemed a long way away and he couldn’t distinguish the words. The periphery of his vision was darkening and closing in as if he were reversing into a unlit tunnel, but he didn’t miss the large tree looming ahead and he yanked the wheel desperately to avoid it. The car skidded round, hit the barrier then somersaulted down the incline of the causeway. The scenery dissolved in a whirling vortex that sucked in his consciousness just as the impact of his head on the roof completed the process.
The vehicle slid to a stop, and only an ominous sizzling noise broke the sudden silence. A limp arm swung back and forth out of the passenger window before coming to a rest.
Chapter 6

Steve was adrift, cushioned in a velvet darkness that washed him languidly around the shores of consciousness on the whim of its tides, oblivious to the passage of time. Floating passively on an infrequent incoming current, he had vaguely recognised the nocturnal rhythms of a hospital, and that comforting familiarity tranquillised his inchoate concerns enough to blunt his struggle against the waves that then swept him insistently deeper into a drug-induced sleep.

Eventually, it was voices that dragged him, more piecemeal than comprehensively, from submersion -- whispered words, sibilant, indistinguishable, yet with an undertone of anguish that pulled at his cop’s soul like iron filings to a magnet.

“I can’t...” This time the distress was sharper, in a feminine voice he knew well and it impelled Steve’s eyes to open, gummy lids parting reluctantly to offer him a hazy look around.

“’manda?” He wasn’t sure if the mumbled croak that emanated from his dry mouth qualified as speech, but it was sufficient to attract the attention of the room’s other occupants. As someone moved towards him, he struggled to sit up, the stabbing pain that resulted robbing him of breath but also helping to clear his mind.

“Lie still, Steve. You’re going to be fine, but it’s important that you take it easy.” Steve tuned out the content of the familiar lecture, concentrating instead on the strain in Jesse’s voice which disguised it almost to the point of non-recognition.

A further glance showed him Amanda at the window. She was facing away, but her body language broadcast distress even to his blurred vision.

“Jesse, what..?” he demanded hoarsely, pulling urgently on his friend’s arm. That action twisted Jesse round, and for the first time Steve caught a glimpse of the young doctor’s expression and his heart stuttered in anguish at the red-rimmed eyes still averted from his own which starkly contrasted with the chalk-white set of Jesse’s face. It was bad, whatever it was.

The blood rushed through his veins and his heart was suddenly pounding so loudly that he couldn't hear beyond its thunderous roar, but he shied away from contemplating the worst, trying frantically to retrieve the memories. He’d been in a car accident, and there had been someone in the car with him...Dad...no...Cheryl. He remembered his partner shouting something as the car veered out of his control.

“Cheryl?” he faltered. He knew that wasn’t the answer even before his intuition was confirmed by the slight relaxation of Jesse’s face at the moment’s reprieve, and by the fact that, for the first time, his friend met his eyes squarely even while nervously shifting his weight as he responded mechanically.

“Um... she suffered a severe head injury and is still in ICU, but we’re hopeful that she’ll make a full recovery in time.”

That wasn’t it and, despite his refusal to acknowledge the fact, there was only one thing he could think of that would cause such a dramatic reaction in both his friends.

“Jesse, please.” He didn’t know if he was begging for the truth or pleading to be spared it. He felt like a tunnel was expanding out in front of him, separating him from reality.

Jesse cast a last desperate glance at Amanda, but there was no help from that quarter. Shaking with
the effort needed to maintain his composure sufficiently to coherently deliver the news that had
devastated him and would destroy his best friend, he took a deep breath, his hands opening and
closing convulsively. “Steve...” The words were tight and halting. “There was an... accident.
Mark...” His voice broke and he couldn’t continue, the words strangling in his throat. It wasn’t
necessary.

Steve froze; for a split second the concept hovered like an abstract idea with no bearing on him at
all, then the words seared into his mind with indelible agony, and in stark, sick horror the sudden
 crushing torrent of realization poured through him and he grasped the truth of what had happened.

"No," he grated in vain protest and desperate denial. "God, no..."

Amanda suddenly appeared beside the bed, tears, clearly not the first she’d shed, streaming down
her beautiful face. “Steve, I’m so sorry...”

His father was dead. Mark was never coming back and he would never enjoy his companionship
ever again. The unquestioning trust, the exuberant laughter, the unfailing support and love were
gone. He was on his own. The thought robbed the breath from his chest and the strength from his
muscles and he collapsed back in the bed, throwing up an arm to cover his eyes in an instinctive
effort to conceal his emotions and block out the outside world, consumed by a raw, gnawing ache
that went soul-deep.

His whole body was rigid, every cell locked in violent rejection of the pain that was physical in its
intensity, piercing his heart like a knife. He was utterly silent, but the depth of his agitation was
betrayed by the trip-hammer beating of his heart that registered in frantic beeps on the monitor to
which he was attached.

Jesse eyed the mounting figures worriedly, though almost grateful for the professional concern
which temporarily pushed aside his private heartache. This was a terrible time to break such
horrible news, not that any time was good, but Jesse had hoped to delay its delivery until Steve was
in a better condition physically to withstand the stress. He knew that he couldn't have hurt his
friend more if he'd thrust his fist through his chest cavity and ripped out his still-beating heart.

However, he wasn’t utterly surprised that it had proved impossible to conceal his distress from
Steve, and he had been prepared for the eventuality. He placed a hand on his friend’s uninjured
shoulder. “Steve, I’m going to give you a sedative. You’ve just come out of surgery and you also
have a concussion. Your body needs to relax to heal.”

He half-expected a protest, and would have welcomed it as a sign of normality since Steve
disdained the use of drugs as an escape, but there was no response and no softening in the rock-
hard muscles bunched beneath his hand. If it were not for the heat radiating upwards, the
recumbent body could have been carved out of marble, and Jesse realised that Steve was lost in a
haze of grief and shock so profound that nothing else registered or mattered a damn.

The young doctor injected the sedative into Steve’s IV line, noting with detached interest that his
hands were shaking slightly as he performed the routine operation. It seemed like the drug took an
eternity to kick in -- Steve subconsciously refusing to surrender to the temporary reprieve of sleep -
- but gradually, almost imperceptibly, his pulse rate slackened, easing to a more acceptable level.
Despite the relaxing effect of the sedative, however, the tension that gripped him never fully
dissipated, as if even in unconsciousness his whole being rebelled against the immensity of his
loss.

Without exchanging any words, Jesse and Amanda worked efficiently around the body of their
friend, ensuring he’d suffered no physical setbacks from the shock he’d sustained and making him
as comfortable as possible. Then, in one accord, they moved out of the room seeking an area of privacy. The corridor offered no refuge. The news of Mark’s death had spread rapidly through the hospital, and in the subdued atmosphere that prevailed, it felt like the whole building held its breath in mourning.

Mark had been more than just professionally respected at Community General, he was something of an icon within its halls. He was a confidant to those in trouble, a trusted mediator of conflicts, and his idiosyncrasies, coupled as they were with the best bed-side manner this side of the Mississippi, fostered a light-hearted work environment that enhanced patient care. He would be missed by many, but there was a recognition of the deeper loss suffered by those closest to him, and no one tried to detain Jesse and Amanda as they hurried down the corridor and into the nearest doctor’s lounge.

Amanda collapsed on the couch, burying her face in her hands while Jesse hastily pulled the blinds down before sitting down heavily beside her. Her shoulders were shaking with silent grief, and he pulled her gently down to rest in the crook of his shoulder, providing a safe haven for her tears. His own eyes burnt with the same anguish, but he refused to allow the moisture to fall. With a strange mixture of despair and determination, he realised that he had to be the strong one in this crisis despite the fact that he wanted nothing more than to indulge his own misery. Mark had been the father he’d always wanted, a source of enduring strength and encouragement and, under his wing, Jesse had not only been given the chance to achieve his professional goals but also to experience the familial stability he’d craved.

However, Amanda had been Mark’s friend for many years before he’d even entered the picture and as for Steve... well, he didn’t know how his friend would hold that much despair inside without breaking apart. So, the last thing Jesse could do for his friend and mentor was to help Steve survive this crushing blow. He just wasn’t sure how.

Amanda straightened with a wet snuffle beside him, and he leant over to snatch a tissue from the box on the coffee table, handing it to her with a final squeeze of comfort. He wished there was something he could say that would help, but since there were no words that could possibly alleviate either of their feelings, he remained quiet as she blew her nose with a complete lack of inhibition. One tissue was insufficient to absorb all the evidence of her sorrow and she plucked several more to complete the job, taking her time patting and wiping her face as she attempted to gather her thoughts.

“What’ll we do?” There was an edge of desperation in her voice.

Jesse wasn’t sure if the question was rhetorical, but he had no answer if it wasn’t, so he merely shook his head miserably as he stared blindly at the blank TV opposite.

“How’s he going to cope with this, especially so soon after Carol?” she continued softly.

Jesse knew he shouldn’t be surprised that her thoughts were paralleling his, but he’d seen how badly the news of Mark’s death had hit her and he could only be impressed by the generosity of a character that could put another’s needs ahead of her own at such a time. It didn’t occur to Jesse that the same could be said of him.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. He tried to find something positive to reassure them both. “He’s strong.” He could hear the lack of conviction in his own voice and tried to warm to his topic. “I don’t know anyone stronger. He’s survived everything from forest fires to temporary blindness to three bullets in the chest to...” He trailed off, unable to complete the litany of disasters Steve had overcome since it was impossible to contemplate them without seeing the figure of Mark beside his son, supporting, worrying, carrying him through by sheer strength of will if necessary. Would
Steve have actually survived several of those experiences without Mark’s help?

“This is different.” Again Amanda’s quiet voice of reason broke through Jesse’s tumbling thoughts and he deflated. Of course it wasn’t the same, it was so different it wasn’t on the same planet. Steve was the master of physical action, but when it came to confronting his own emotions, he hid behind a wall of stoic control that only Mark was able to infiltrate.

“He’ll shut us out, he’ll shut everyone out,” Jesse predicted gloomily.

“We’ll have to show him he’s not alone, that he’s still got friends that love him.” Amanda’s fingers were slowly shredding some of the drier pieces of tissue to shreds, and she watched absently as the tiny pieces fell like ersatz confetti to the ground.

Jesse swallowed back his instinctive comment of, ‘It’s not going to be easy,” refusing to give in to the pessimism of such thoughts. After being up all night, he had moved past exhaustion into a waking stupor, and it was hard to wrap his mind around any feasible plans while fatigue scored every inch of his body.

“You know what I keep thinking?” Amanda asked suddenly, just as he started drifting towards a light level of sleep. He shook his head, incapable of the effort of speech. “That Mark will know what to do. Isn’t that stupid?” Her face crumpled in an unavailing attempt to hold back the tears which again spilled down her cheeks as she continued brokenly. “Mark’s the only one who can fix this and the only one who can’t.”

Jesse gathered her into his arms again, resting his cheek against her hair until the worst of her sorrow had run its course, enyoying her free expression and trying to empty his own mind of the tearing grief that threatened to break free. “We’re too tired to think straight right now,” he murmured soothingly. “We both need some rest. Steve is going to need us in the morning, and we’re going to be no help if we’re stumbling around from exhaustion. You lie down here on the sofa. I’ll take the chair.”

He tucked a cushion under her head and found a blanket to cover her, then turned off the light with a sigh of relief, welcoming the darkness that could hide the cracks in his facade of control.

There was silence for a few minutes as Jesse, with the ease of experience, curled up in the armchair, both body and mind craving the oblivion of sleep, then Amanda started speaking again with the compulsion of someone who has to talk to relieve the overflow of painful emotions welling inside even though her words were slurred with grief and exhaustion.

“I always imagined it would be the other way round, that one day I would be trying to find the words to comfort Mark after Steve had been killed in the line of duty. I thought the worst thing possible would be to tell a parent that they’d lost a child. Parents aren’t supposed to outlive their children, yet somehow this seems just as unnatural. When two people are as close as Mark and Steve, I don’t suppose it matters who goes first, the other will be just as devastated, but somehow I just find myself thinking that this would be easier if it were Mark.”

For a moment Jesse didn’t understand what she was saying, but then he was struck by the challenging logistics of keeping a man safe who carried a gun and was confronted by potentially lethal situations on a daily basis.

There was a pause, then in a subdued voice Amanda asked, “Jesse, are you alright?”

They were simple words yet, with the precision of an engineer’s tools, they undermined the dam that held back Jesse’s overwrought emotions and for a minute he could scarcely breathe, never
mind talk as he struggled against the onslaught of awareness of loss. ‘I have to be strong,’” he repeated the mantra to himself as he rebuilt a makeshift bulwark to contain his feelings and he realised he hadn’t responded to Amanda’s question. Too many things fought for expression but most would cost him too much to utter, and finally only one battled its way free in tones of desolation.

“Nothing will ever be the same.”
“Dr. Travis...Dr. Travis.” A gentle hand shaking his shoulder woke Jesse from the dark abyss of exhausted slumber. For a moment he was back in his sleep-deprived internship days, flailing automatically to abrupt consciousness, but as memory swept back with depressing clarity, he wished he was back in that stressful period.

“What it is?” He stretched out cramped limbs and arched his back to straighten his contorted spine. A quick glance showed him Amanda rubbing her eyes, the despondent slump to her shoulders evidence of her perfect recall of the last day’s events.

Stephanie Morris, the nurse, stepped back to give him more space. “I thought you’d like to know that Lieutenant Sloan is waking up.”

Her words banished his residual drowsiness as effectively as a dash of icy water to the face and he was on his feet instantly, swaying slightly at the abrupt shift of blood pressure. He cast an instinctive eye on his watch to check how much time had elapsed, mentally computing the progress of the sedative he’d administered.

“I’d hoped he’d be out for longer,” he muttered absently. He summoned up a weak smile. “Thanks, Steph. I’ll be there in a minute.” He slipped on his shoes and looked across to where Amanda was mirroring his actions, her usual immaculate hair mussed and her makeup streaky and faded.

“Why don’t you go home? You’ll have some time to see the boys before they go off to school,” he suggested gently.

She threw her hands up in a despairing gesture. “I’d have to break the news to them too. I can’t even hold it together myself; there’s no way I can tell them at the moment. Besides, Steve needs both of us.” She pulled a comb out of a pocket and started straightening her hair. “There’s just a couple of things I need to do. I’ll catch up with you in a minute.”

Jesse dredged up a smile for her too, although it felt artificial on his face as if any movement would shatter the brittle mask of control he’d constructed. He moved stiffly out of the room, every joint aching as if battered through every cycle in a washing machine then rinsed, spun, and wrung again, yet after the benefit of rest, he also felt a kind of detached calmness that derived from traumatized disbelief, from the unreality that the illumination of daylight provided. It had to be just a nightmare, born in the hellish hours of darkness, because his mind just couldn’t encompass the enormity of their loss.

He stopped in front of Steve’s room, picking up and perusing his chart, allowing the familiar format to ease his transition back from distraught friend to professional doctor. Nurse Morris approached him again, looking harried. “Dr. Travis, you should also know that he’s removed the monitor -- gave me quite a shock when the alarm went off.”

Jesse sighed, not surprised by the report. “What about the IV?”

“He hadn’t touched that when I last went in.” The hesitation in the words seemed to indicate that she wouldn’t be the slightest bit astonished if Steve had torn down every shred of medical apparatus in the room.

Jesse thanked her again in dismissal and reached out to open the door, but his hand wavered uncertainly before completing the movement as sudden dread weakened his resolve. Telling Steve
about his father the night before had been the hardest thing the young doctor had ever done in his life, but the thought of facing his friend again when Steve wasn’t drugged and semi-conscious was even more daunting. Suddenly, Amanda was back beside him, squeezing his shoulder in understanding, and that encouragement enabled him to enter the room.

Steve appeared ashen even against the stark-white hospital sheets, his granite-hewn features pain-etched with deep striations that made him look far older than his years. His face was turned slightly away and although his eyes were open, he didn’t turn to acknowledge his visitors.

“Steve?” Jesse’s exclamation was an involuntary reaction to the haggard lines and harsh angles and plains, but as his friend lifted his gaze, the young doctor almost wished for a return of the masking shadows to hide the bleak despair embedded in those eyes.

He approached the bed awkwardly, his mouth dry as he suddenly realised he had no idea what to say. Every possible opening sounded irrelevant or too trite for serious consideration. He couldn’t tell Steve the one thing he’d want to hear. He was moistening his lips and was searching in the vacuous cavern his mind had become for inspiration when a soft voice issued over his shoulder.

“Steve, I thought you’d like to know that Cheryl came through surgery well and had a good night. It’ll be a while before she’s fit enough to go back to work, but the prognosis is good.”

Clearly, Amanda’s brief absence had been utilized for more than availing herself of the facilities and Jesse blessed her natural common sense. At first he thought Steve was oblivious to her words, but after a moment, the detective nodded briefly in acknowledgement. The familiar medical terminology had broken through Jesse’s momentary paralysis and he started his examination, explaining the extent of Steve’s injuries as he proceeded.

“The airbag protected you from the worst of the impact, but as the car rolled, you were thrown about violently and you’ve collected some nasty contusions on your side and your head here.”

Steve obediently breathed deeply on command and tracked fingers moving across his vision, but he made no other response even when Jesse probed the stitched wound over his left temple and the doctor found this quiet compliance more worrying than outright recalcitrance. Concealing his growing concern, he removed the dressing from Steve’s shoulder.

“Our main concern was this bullet wound. You’d lost a lot of blood by the time medical help arrived, but in every other way you were lucky.” He felt Steve flinch, his first overt reaction, and for a moment thought it was his own clumsiness in replacing the bandage. It took him a moment to realise that it was his choice of words that had been insensitive, not his hands. Steve must feel the complete antithesis of lucky right now. Stricken, he glanced up at Amanda for help, but she merely nodded encouragingly, so he cleared his throat before soldiering gamely on.

“The bullet entered just under the clavicle, missed the lung and ended up against your shoulder blade. With greater force it would have shattered the bone, but it appears to have lost most of its velocity by that point and the scapula was left intact. There was no bullet fragmentation, so the tissue damage is relatively minimal. However, there is of course, severe bruising, but the tissue will recover. After some physical therapy, you’ll be...” This time Jesse caught himself before committing another faux pas, “...your shoulder will be as good as new.”

He was replacing the dressing when Steve grabbed his hand and startled, Jesse looked down into a face pale and bleached of all emotion except the pain of loss which was etched around his eyes and mouth.

“Jesse... how?”
The young doctor couldn’t pretend to misunderstand the question despite the hoarseness in the voice that asked it, and he cast another silent plea for advice in Amanda’s direction. This time she accepted the baton, sitting down on the bed, and although her expression was remarkably composed, her fingers were absently bunching the blankets into pleated knots.

“We don’t have all the details yet. The only thing we really know is that there was some kind of accident. Mark’s car…” She swallowed, unable to look away from the dread and haunting anguish in the eyes that were fixed on her with burning intensity. “…It went off the Hilton Heights Bridge into the river.”

Although braced for the worst, the words still hit Steve like a physical blow and his eyes widened in shock. “How? Why? Was his car shot at as well?”

Jesse decided to rejoin the conversation as Amanda hesitated. “There’s no information on that so far. I’m sure we’ll hear something today.”

“But what happened to Dad? Did he drown or…?” Steve’s voice cracked and he had to clench his jaw for control, a faint sheen of sweat filming on his skin.

Amanda knew that this was going to be the hardest part. “Steve, they didn’t find the body.”

“What?” Steve pushed himself upright, despite the hands that tried to restrain him, a tiny thread of hope trying to wrap around his heart. “Then you don’t know for sure he’s dead, he could have survived…”

“Steve, please don’t!” A tear slid forlornly down Amanda’s cheek. “He didn’t have a chance. After the car went over, it quickly sank and was carried downstream by the force of the water. People were watching from the bridge by that point, but no one emerged even for a second. He’s gone.”

The spiteful little ray of hope shattered into tiny, jagged shards, the edges slicing painfully deep, yet something inside Steve refused to give up. “We need to check the area, perhaps he’s just hurt.” He swung his legs round to the side of the bed opposite Amanda, sending Jesse scuttling round the bed to prevent the disaster he deduced would follow. Steve’s feet touched the ground, but that didn’t halt his downward momentum as his knees buckled under the sudden weight. Jesse caught him before he could hit the floor, slipping an arm around his waist to steady him.

“Were you listening to me?” he scolded. “You’re in no condition to go anywhere. There’s a Search and Rescue team there who’ll do what’s necessary.”

“Yes, I heard you.” Steve wearily pushed away from the bed and Jesse, his balance more steady. “You said the bullet hadn’t hit anything vital and I’ll be fine.”

“Will be fine’ being the operative phrase, as in will be if you don’t do anything stupid like try and leave the hospital.” An exasperation born of worry and grief was clear in the doctor’s tone.

“Just get me my clothes, Jesse.” The bleak monotone of this command irritated Jesse further.

“Let me see if I can make this clearer for you. Shoulder wounds are never simple; the proximity of vascular, neural, osseous, and muscular structures make gunshots to this area particularly challenging. And you know as well as anyone that any gunshot injury is prone to infection from the foreign material forced into the wound.”

Steve ignored this spate of medical wisdom, looking around for clothes with grim determination but not even seeming capable of summoning up any anger to match Jesse’s frustration. “I’m going. I’ll sign myself out AMA if you want so you’ll not be responsible.”
“Do you think that’s what I’m worried about?” There was hurt as well as irritation in the young doctor’s open face and Amanda hastily stepped between them, literally and figuratively.

“Steve, please sit back down on the bed. We’ll help you get to the river, but if you want to be of any use at all when you get there, we need to strap your your shoulder up better and get you a walking stick of some kind.” She could feel the imminent protest welling forth from Jesse and quelled him with a glare. Steve was regarding her doubtfully but eventually eased himself down with some reluctance.

Amanda rewarded him with a small smile of reassurance. “Your clothes were damaged in the accident, but we’ll go and rustle up some more for you. Please try and relax while we’re gone. Save your energy.”

She bustled out of the room, Jesse dragged helplessly in her confident wake although the scowl on his face hadn’t dimmed. He managed to contain the explosion until they were out of earshot, but that suppression only made the inevitable outburst more vociferous. “What do you think you’re doing?” Suddenly aware of curious stares from the nursing staff, he turned and marched back to the lounge which had provided them with sanctuary the night before. This time Amanda trailed behind, the facade of quiet confidence she’d conveyed in Steve’s room dissolving to reveal her true weariness.

As the door closed behind her, she held up a hand to forestall the next harangue. “I know this goes against the grain, but we have to help him. You know what Steve’s like -- his first response to any crisis is action. Unless you plan to keep him drugged or have him committed he will go.”

“He’s going to kill himself,” Jesse argued bitterly.

Amanda didn’t deny the possibility. “That’s why we need to go with him. Face it, he’s going to go whether we go or not, but if we’re there we can at least try to ensure that he doesn’t overdo it or at least patch him up when he does.”

“We shouldn’t be collaborating in this lunacy,” Jesse insisted stubbornly.

“Jesse, at this point, it’s about more than his physical health; I’m more worried about his emotional well-being. For him to pull through this, it’s important that he feels he did everything he could and participating in the search might, at least in part, satisfy that need.”

Jesse was starting to look reluctantly convinced so she pressed her advantage. “Jesse, I know you’re worried about him and just want to help, but I truly think he needs you as a friend right now. He needs to feel he can rely on us for support or he really will shut us out.”

Although Jesse’s medical instincts still objected, he couldn’t argue with her common sense, and he capitulated unwillingly.

“I want to run another blood test and then I’ll start the paperwork.”

“I know Mark keeps...” she paused uncertainly for a moment, but made a conscious decision not to change the tense, “... some spare clothes for Steve in his office.”

She didn’t look happy at the prospect of venturing into a domain that would conjure up so many mental images of her friend, and Jesse felt obliged to offer to accompany her. She refused with a wry smile. “I think we need to accomplish as much as we can as fast as we can or we’ll return to an empty room.”

“You think he’ll leave without his clothes?” Jesse asked incredulously.
“I think he’s quite capable of jury-rigging something out of sheets,” Amanda replied. “Once he’s decided to go, nothing’s going to stop him.”

Thinking back on other examples of his friend’s stubbornness, Jesse couldn’t disagree. “OK, I’ll meet you back at his room asap.”

Jesse collared a lab technician and sent him to draw blood as a temporary delaying tactic, which proved to be a good idea as he was diverted by a crisis in the emergency room. When he finally re-entered Steve’s room, there was no sign of Amanda but his patient was fully dressed, a pristine sling restraining his right arm and his left hand braced against the window where he stood, gazing out blindly at the nearby rooftops.

Jesse took in Steve’s motionless profile, like some life-like statue carved from marble, the profound pain in his expression the only sign of animation. Not wanting to contemplate the reasons behind that despair, Jesse hurried forward, waving the papers. “If you come and sit down and sign all these, we can get out of here. Where’s Amanda?”

“Wheelchair.” Steve’s monosyllabic response was sufficient to impart understanding. With an unsteady hand, he scrawled his name carelessly wherever Jesse pointed, without bothering to read any of the documents. By the time they’d finished, Amanda had returned and Steve sat in the wheelchair without a murmur of protest.

The journey through the halls was an ordeal for all of them, but especially for Steve. The sympathetic gazes from the personnel in the corridors seared him to the bone even when he tried to avoid them by keeping his eyes lowered. He couldn’t help but remember a previous time when they had faked Mark’s death to protect him from an assassin. He had felt horribly awkward receiving the messages of condolence from so many members of the staff, uncomfortable with the deception and in feigning grief in the face of such obvious sincerity.

Now, he simply refused to acknowledge the stares, shutting his eyes and rubbing his temple as pain pulsed dully just underneath his skull. He pulled the blanket Amanda had placed on his knees more firmly around him even though it was an exercise in futility. He couldn’t seem to get warm no matter what he did, which wasn’t surprising since the cold didn’t stem from an external source, it was welling up from inside the hole in his soul.

Once in Amanda’s car, he stared out of the window, noticing only that everything was touched with a dull hue. He felt empty, drained physically and emotionally. His drugged sleep had not been restful, disturbed as it was, not by specific images, but just by a sense of darkness, a vortex of swirling gloom, black and gray with streaks of blood red, then he’d awakened to an overwhelming ache that left him gasping for breath. The vacant chair next to his bed seemed to mock him. His father’s absence was a physical rent in his life, an emptiness that was tangible and a silence that was deafening.

He shifted slightly in the car seat, but it was impossible to find a comfortable position. His throat was tight, and every part of his body ached unrelentingly. Occasionally, nausea would spike, but he forced the bile back down. He just wanted everything to stop; to stop feeling, to stop thinking, but his mind was locked in an endless whirl of memories that ripped at his heart and tore at his soul.

Although the mixture of pain, grief and fatigue had drained him of energy, he longed to arrive at their destination, wanting exertion to drive the frustration of inactivity from his muscles. He needed to see where the accident had happened, to understand what had befallen his father and he refused to completely extinguish the tenuous glimmer of hope that he still held buried deep in his heart. It was impossible to believe that Mark’s unique vitality had been permanently quenched without being confronted by indisputable proof, but that verification was also what he hoped he
“Steve, we’re nearly there. What do you want me to do?” Amanda’s tentative voice forced Steve to the awareness that he’d been staring unseeingly out of the window as the miles passed. It took him a minute to reorient himself to his surroundings, the familiar territory seeming oddly alien.

“Just drive over the bridge, turn right and park in the siding beside the river,” he instructed, even his own voice seemed to echo strangely in his ears.

These directions took longer to follow than anticipated since the flow of traffic slowed down as it approached the bridge. As they crawled closer, it was evident that one side of the overpass had been closed and the reason for that became apparent as they crossed. An agonising chill seared through Steve’s veins at the sight of the gaping hole in the protective barrier on the opposite side of the bridge, a vulnerable gap protected only by a row of forlorn orange cones and police tape flapping dully in the breeze. The sight brought a piercing reality to what hitherto had been a vague mental image.

He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the proof of the accident, and it was clear that the other drivers felt the same fascination. The traffic had slowed as they indulged their curiosity and Steve hated that detached interest in what meant the devastation of his life.

It wasn’t until the curve of the bridge blocked the shattered barrier from view that he became aware of Amanda patting his knee in a futile attempt at comfort. Every muscle in his body was corded with tension, setting up a chain reaction of involuntary tremors and harsh breathing that was probably anything but reassuring to the doctors in the vehicle.

“I’m fine,” he asserted automatically and completely untruthfully. However, the fact that he was even capable of making the effort seemed to appease Amanda and she replaced her hand on the steering wheel. The track that paralleled the river was unpaved, and the recent rain had washed out sizable potholes so despite Amanda’s best efforts at avoidance, their progress caused Steve to flinch at every jolt. However, as she brought the vehicle to a stop, he climbed out as if the hospital bed was but a distant memory, and after exchanging a resigned look, the two doctors followed.

Steve strode up the sloping back of a large rock, the top of which afforded him an excellent view of the ominous gap in the bridge and the churning water below, swollen from recent rain, and he measured the distance between the two with an optimistic eye. It wasn’t that far a fall and, especially with the assistance of a seat belt and an airbag, it shouldn’t have been fatal. His gaze was drawn inexorably back to the swollen river, murky with the sediment it had swept along in its headlong rush down the mountains.

In his mind’s eye, he could suddenly see his father’s car crashing through the barrier and Mark, dazed and injured, struggling valiantly but hopelessly against the turgid current. He swayed, an incoherent sound of protest escaping his lips.

“I should have been here.” He didn’t even realise he’d spoken that anguished thought aloud until he felt Jesse’s hand on his arm. He shook it off almost roughly, unable to face sympathy and shutting down his imagination with brutal force.

“You said that Search and Rescue was here.” The words came out harsher than he’d intended.

The multitude of tire tracks in the mud argued for their earlier presence in this area, and Jesse felt that their absence now was a sinister intimation of the failure of their search. He contemplated pointing out what seemed obvious, but pain was radiating off his friend in tangible waves, battering Jesse with a force that shook him and he couldn’t bring himself to shatter that last hope so
he merely suggested a less drastic alternative.

“Maybe they’ve moved further down the river.”

Steve merely grunted in response, and fear remained stamped on his rigid features. “I’ll check this side of the river, you two work down the other side.”

Without waiting for a response, he moved off, silhouetted for a moment against the sky, then disappearing behind a lonely tree, stunted and bowed by the harsh weather, leaving Jesse and Amanda to trade glances of dismay and frustration.

“You go with him. He’ll probably need you,” Amanda directed.

“What I am supposed to do, wait until he collapses then carry him back? I wouldn’t get him five feet.”

“Then I suggest you don’t let it get that far,” Amanda snapped back, her temper flaring in response to Jesse’s sarcasm. The younger doctor hunched his shoulders but made no reply and Amanda relented. She sucked in a deep breath, tasting the faint tang of salt and seaweed on the breeze that wafted up from the direction of the ocean. “Jesse,” she began, her tone totally at odds with her previous manner. “Could he be right? Is there any chance that Mark...?”

“None.” The word was gently spoken but brutal nonetheless and seeing Amanda’s visible deflation, Jesse explained sadly. “I wish I could say there was, but even if there was the remotest possibility that Mark had escaped drowning, the Search and Rescue team have already explored the whole area with dogs. If there was anything to be found, they would already have done so.” He looked after the figure of Steve rapidly receding into the distance. Even as he watched, Steve’s right foot caught on an exposed root and he stumbled, only just catching himself before hitting the ground. Jesse started to run, throwing back over his shoulder, “Now we just have to persuade him of that before he kills himself.”
Chapter 8

The nightmare image of his father frantically struggling in roaring, muddy water refused to leave him and impelled Steve to redouble his efforts, forcing his aching and weary body past all physical limitations. Exhaustion and pain were easier to disregard than the icy, jagged shards of grief that stabbed him mercilessly, splintering the pieces of his soul.

He had worked with Search and Rescue in the past and knew from this professional experience how hard it was to recover bodies from swollen rivers. Often they were washed all the way out to sea, but they also ended up buried in river silt, caught under a snag or pushed by the spate to be trapped under a big rock. Of course, if they were retrieved, the corpses were... The abrupt mental picture caused a violent surge of nausea and he stumbled blindly as he fought for control. The jolt sent an electrical spike of agony through his body, and his pulse hammered painfully in his shoulder as he sucked in lungfuls of cool air to clear the black spots that spiraled queasily in his vision.

He straightened as he heard Jesse jogging up behind him and then moved forward again stiffly, scanning the banks of the river.

“Steve, wait up. What do you want me to do?”

Reluctantly, Steve halted, but he didn’t turn to acknowledge his friend, not wanting to reveal the emotions that he knew were written with bitter clarity on his face. “Just use your eyes,” he instructed impatiently, unable to spell out the details, the horror of the task rendering him almost incapable of voicing it.

“He, I really want to help,” Jesse persevered earnestly. “You need to preserve your strength, so tell me where to go and we can cover the ground more efficiently.”

The next few hours inscribed themselves indelibly, caustically, and in horrific detail in Jesse’s memory, haunting him for a lifetime. He searched diligently in all the barely accessible places to which Steve directed him, scrambling over logs and rocks of all sizes and scrabbling through the assorted wet and filthy detritus that had been swept down the river. Yet he was assailed continually by a sense of utter futility, going through the motions for the sake of his friend while knowing no favorable resolution was possible.

He had been on the verge of protesting a multitude of times, but the look in Steve’s eyes, fathomless with the pain of loss yet still bleakly resolute, excised the words from his lips. When Carter Sweeney had abducted Mark, Steve had investigated every crime scene, following the slightest clue with an obsessive determination that eschewed such nonessentials as food and rest, overriding his friends’ protests at the irrationality of his actions.

His drive now had even more momentum, and remonstrating as to its ill-advised nature would fall on equally deaf ears. Yet back then, Steve had been in excellent physical condition, now he shouldn’t even be on his feet. His breathing was growing harsher with the jarring impact of each step and his white knuckles matched his ashen face.

The little drizzle that had dampened the air became heavier, completing the job of soaking them that delving in the floodwaters of the river had started. As they worked their way down towards the ocean, the ground started to level out, the rocky banks giving way to tamer terrain while the river spread wider and became shallower. The possible places of concealment for an unconscious person diminished and, correspondingly, any hope of finding Mark declined. Still Steve persevered,
although his stride became uneven and faltering. He no longer indicated areas for Jesse to scrutinise, but insisted on examining the meagre possibilities for himself.

Eventually, they were positioned over the flat, sandy delta with a clear view down to the breaking waves of the ocean. Jesse snuck a quick glance at his friend, flinching at the defeated look around his eyes and the stark gash of his lips against pallid flesh. He delved around the most optimistic corners of his mind for something comforting to say, but was unable to dredge up anything remotely appropriate.

“I suppose...” he started tentatively, but broke off, unable even to complete the sentence in his mind and realising that the suggestion that Mark’s body had been swept out into the ocean would not improve his friend’s state of mind.

“He’s not dead!” Steve swung round with a ferocity that surprised them both. The older man wasn’t even sure where the assertion had come from but now the words were out, he drew strength from them, savouring the texture and taste of their sustenance.

Jesse stared at him, clearly upset. He swallowed, uncertainty choking the words in his throat. He desperately wanted to help and he believed this denial would only harm. “Steve, he’s gone.” Grief, both first-hand and vicarious for his friend’s sake, shredded his composure and he blinked back the extraneous moisture in his eyes. “Mark’s gone. God, I know it hurts, but you have to accept that.” He stepped forward, holding out a hand in an attempt to mitigate the impact of his declaration, but lowered it as Steve rejected it with a violent gesture.

"I don't have to accept a damned thing," Steve stated in a low, passionate tone. "There’s no body, and I will never believe he's gone until I have tangible proof. Dad would never give up on me and I'll be damned if I give up on him."

Jesse lowered his head, unable to withstand the adamant force of those blue eyes, their depths haunted and filled with pain. This wasn’t the best time for a confrontation even if he wanted one. Tension was rolling through Steve in shuddering waves, compounding tremors caused by damp clothes and an overstressed system. He looked on the point of collapse and would never make it back to the car under his own power so Jesse fell back on practicalities.

“Why don’t you sit down here while I try and find Amanda? We’ll bring the car down to the landing ramp.” He watched Steve lower himself wearily onto a large rock, huddled in an uncomfortable position, then set off at a run.

There was more undergrowth on the other bank so Amanda hadn’t made it as far down the river, but once he’d located her, Jesse yelled across to meet back at the car and a wave of her arm indicated her understanding and agreement.

The solitary walk allowed too much time for reflection and for the welter of powerful emotions that rampaged through his mind to deteriorate into even greater disorder. He regretted pushing Steve to accept his father’s death, but mixed in with his compassion for his friend was frustration for the detective’s willful neglect of his own health and stubborn disregard of the facts. Underscoring and blurring it all was his own misery and corresponding but unfocused anger.

Nervous energy kept him moving even after he reached the car and he paced around in aimless circles until he spotted Amanda approaching, besmeared with mud and with her wet hair hanging limply in strands.

“How’s Steve?” she called anxiously in greeting.
“Well, he’s not collapsed yet, through some miracle of sheer pigheadedness, but he’s not doing well,” Jesse responded dryly. He waited until they were in the car and he’d given Amanda the directions to the turn-off before unburdening his train of thought.

“I think it was a mistake to bring him out here. He refuses to believe that Mark is...gone. In fact, he says he won’t believe it until he sees the body.” It was difficult to talk about such things and the stress spilled over as irritation.

Amanda recognised the source of his vexation and although she couldn’t agree with his assertion, she was cautious in her expression of that disagreement. “Jesse, I’m no psychiatrist, but I seem to remember that denial is one of the normal first stages of grief. It’s not unusual for someone suffering from the initial emotional shock and disorientation of loss to simply refuse to accept it. In fact, it’s often healthy since it serves to protect the individual from experiencing the intensity of that grief until they are better able to cope with it.”

“It’s not like Steve,” Jesse insisted stubbornly. “When have you known him to evade anything just because it’s difficult?”

“This is hardly a typical situation. There’s nothing that could hit him harder than this,” Amanda protested in distress. “I think we have to expect uncharacteristic behaviour, but we still have to support him the best we can.”

“But what are we supposed to do, pander to this...fantasy?” Jesse’s voice broke on the last word, revealing his own heartache. “This is hard enough as it is, I can’t just pretend it hasn’t happened.”

“I don’t know. Maybe we’re out of our depth on this one, maybe we should get some professional help.”

Jesse snorted. “There’s no way we’ll get Steve to agree to that.”

“I didn’t mean necessarily for him, but a consultation might help us figure out the best way to help him.”

There wasn’t time for further conversation. “Turn in here,” Jesse directed. “Steve’s a bit further down on the left so park as close to the water as you can.”

Steve hadn’t moved from the rock where Jesse had left him, nor had his appearance improved. Lines of pain bracketed his eyes and mouth and black shadows devoured the skin under his eyes. He pushed himself laboriously to his feet as they approached and stood swaying slightly. Jesse hastily looped his friend’s good arm over his shoulder, and Steve made no objection to the assistance. His efforts at walking lacked his usual smooth coordination as the renewed demands on his damaged system depleted it still further.

They stumbled along wordlessly, the exertion siphoning off any desire to converse, but the silence that engulfed them also contained something more than just weariness. Jesse was aware of an unusual constraint that he had no idea how to overcome.

He tried to catch Steve’s eye as he finally eased the older man down onto the passenger seat, but the detective was oblivious not only to his friends but to his surroundings in general. His eyes were fixed on the river in front of them, but he was seeing something else altogether, something grim if Jesse could guess by his expression.

“Steve, are you...comfortable?” Jesse chose phrasing that he felt Steve would be more receptive to hearing, not wanting to duplicate his mistake in the hospital. There was no response, so Jesse
gently touched his friend’s knee to attract his attention. He almost regretted succeeding as the pain in the intense blue eyes that met his was almost too much to witness. He repeated his question patiently and wasn’t surprised at the uninformative answer.

“I’m fine.”

“Steve, I need to know how you’re really doing. I can give you more painkillers if your shoulder is giving you too much trouble.” There was concern in his voice but also a firmness that demanded an answer.

“No drugs.” Steve rejected the idea unequivocally. “I need to think.”

“You need to rest,” Jesse contradicted him, but he could tell that arguing would gain him nothing more than further alienating his friend so he capitulated, shutting the passenger door and sliding in behind Amanda.

The journey proceeded mostly in silence. Amanda could see that Steve’s eyes were shut but every line of his body was taut with suppressed pain -- it was impossible to tell how much was physical and how much emotional. She concentrated on driving, glad for the mechanical task to distract her from her own morbid thoughts. She started when Steve finally spoke to her.

“Take the next left.” The command was reinforced by a pointing finger and Amanda automatically turned as he instructed. She tried to think of a tactful way to query the wisdom of lengthening this excursion, but Jesse had no such qualms and beat her to it.

“The only place we’re going is back to the hospital,” he stated forcefully. “You know pain is the body's way of telling you to take it easy before you do any more damage. You’re in no condition to do anything right now.”

“I need to check out Dad’s car. It’ll have been towed to the county impound yard.” Steve’s voice was low and colorless and this lack of emotion helped Jesse clamp down on the harsh words that threatened to erupt.

“It’s not going anywhere. It can wait until you’re stronger.” He couldn’t see Steve’s face from where he sat in the back, but there was no reaction in his body language.

“If you don’t want to drive me, I’ll take a taxi.”

The quiet but obdurate tones pushed Jesse past the point of treading carefully, his own anger taking too strong a hold.

“Damn it, Steve. You’re going to kill yourself. You have to face reality and...”

“Jesse!” Amanda broke in sharply, preventing the young doctor from saying something irrevocably damaging to his friendship with the man he saw as an older brother. She understood his growing frustration and, to a large extent, shared it. They wanted to help Steve but as hell bent as he seemed on self-destruction, it was impossible to tell what was hurting him and what was helping him and none of them were thinking too clearly at the present. Once again, she found herself wishing that Mark was there. He always knew how to deal with his recalcitrant son, but the irony was that it was only when Mark was in trouble that Steve became so intractable.

“Are you sure it will be there?” she asked hopefully.

“It’ll be there. It’s policy that any vehicle that is impounded for a official police investigation will be towed directly to the county impound yard.”
“We’ll take you there, but please, after that, you need to rest. OK?” It was a compromise, and Steve nodded briefly in agreement before furnishing her with the directions.

The Hilton Heights Police Vehicle Impound looked a lot like a junk yard, with cars in various states of disrepair littered around, interspersed with some shiny new models, all of them waiting for disposition by the courts. The only difference was the high barbed wire fence around the perimeter, with police no-trespassing notices at evenly spaced intervals and CCTV cameras recording all visitors.

Steve showed his ID at the gate and, although the security guard eyed his still damp and disheveled appearance with some skepticism, he let them in, directing them to the appropriate section. “The officer investigating the case just went in to the office to get the preliminary evaluation from the mechanic. I’ll inform him you’re here.”

Steve exited the car without assistance, moving unerringly past several battered vehicles to locate his father’s sedan. He halted abruptly as he took in his first complete look at it, reaching out a hand to touch the hood as if it provided a tangible link to Mark. It afforded little comfort since the considerable damage it had suffered was an appallingly vivid and poignant visual reminder of its driver’s corresponding fate.

The lovingly polished and pristine surface was besmeared with mud with forlorn strands of dried algae adhering at intervals. The front and right corner were totally caved in and there were a myriad of dents marring the bodywork. Strangest of all, the car had been twisted into a slight crescent shape. Jesse surmised that it had been caught amidships against the bulwark of a bridge or similar structure and the force of the water on either side had crumpled the middle, thrusting the two ends around. Steve’s expression was bleak, the skin pulled too tightly over the structure of his face, casting the bones into stark relief. He seemed frozen to the spot, only his eyes moving as they flickered over the length of the wreck.

Amanda took a step towards him, her hand upraised, hoping to offer some comfort, but the movement shattered Steve’s reverie and he avoided the contact. “Don’t touch anything but look around the car.” His voice was flat and emotionless, at odds with the fathomless pain in his eyes.

The driver’s door proved impossible to open, but the passenger door yielded to a tug and, entering that side, Steve eased himself over until he was behind the steering wheel. The car smelt dank and the upholstery was still soaking wet. For a moment, his knuckles gleamed white on the wheel as if he were trying to snap it in two by main force. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for, but his instincts told him there was something off kilter and he had to find it.

He searched under the seats and in the glove compartment, and checked the settings on the controls in front of him. There was nothing instantly recognisable as abnormal, but there were some inconsistencies which deepened the frown carved between his brows.

“Excuse me, Sir.” The unexpected voice brought Steve’s attention round with a jerk, surprising a gasp of pain from him as the movement jarred his shoulder. The speaker was a uniformed policeman, and Steve once more dug out his credentials for inspection.

While they were scrutinised, he slid back out of the car to stand beside the cop whose nametag proclaimed him to be Officer Collins. He was typical of many young recruits, his hair closely cropped in regulation style and his slight chubbiness accentuated by the bulletproof vest that most officers on the streets wore as a matter of course under their uniform.

“Lieutenant Sloan.” He looked up from Steve’s ID. “Are you related to the owner of this vehicle?”
“My father,” Steve stated shortly, then as the young man stammered his way through a sincere but awkward expression of condolence, he cut him off. “Can you tell me what’s been discovered so far?”

“It was a tragic accident.” Collins pulled out some papers from a file he was carrying, clearly happier to be on more solid ground. “The mechanic’s report indicates that nothing was wrong with the car. From the testimony of witnesses to the incident, our best guess is that he...Dr...your father suffered a heart attack or...”

“There was nothing wrong with his heart,” Steve broke in heatedly. “It’s as strong as mine.”

“Oh.” The officer looked nonplused for a moment then carried on doggedly. “...or some other medical condition which caused him to lose control of his vehicle while he was crossing the Hilton Heights Bridge, leading to...”

Steve again interrupted, unable to listen to the formal recitation of the accident. “All the windows were wide open and the AC was on yet it was a cool, damp evening. How do you explain that?”

Collins gaped in bewilderment, then glanced down at the paper in his hands for inspiration. “Well, the windows...the proper procedure to escape from a flooding vehicle...”

“So,” Steve cut in ruthlessly. “My father had recovered enough from this crippling heart attack despite the shock of the fall to open the windows.”

“We do have one more working theory,” the young man defended himself. “People who observed the accident stated that the car changed direction suddenly and seemed to charge deliberately at the side of the bridge. It is possible that it was a suicide attempt. I understand that there’d been another death in the family and he was depressed.”

Steve was furious; Jesse could see it in the white around his lips, the blue ice in his eyes and the pounding of the pulse in his neck, and he shifted slightly to block his friend from acting on that rage, but Steve restrained himself with glacial control. “That is completely impossible. My father was not suicidal and if you repeat that again I’ll see you brought up on charges of incompetence.”

Collins quailed before the blast of cold fury. “Then what do you think happened?” he asked in bewildered frustration.

“Attempted murder. Someone arranged for my Dad’s car to go off the bridge.”

Collins was clearly out of his depth and considering retreat, but he attempted one last-ditch stab at reason. “But all the eyewitnesses say there was only one person in the car.”

“That they could see,” Steve rebutted. The cresting wave of exhaustion and pain suddenly broke over him and only by leaning heavily against the car did he avoid the almost irresistible pull of gravity. Jesse and Amanda were instantly by his side, propping him up and propelling him gently back to the car. “Thanks for your help.” Amanda smiled kindly at the young officer, sensing he was well-meaning if not overly bright.

They were settling Steve into the car, his face almost translucently pale against the cream of Amanda’s upholstery, when Collins hurried up again. “Excuse me, I almost forgot. The Search and Rescue team recovered these items. I wondered if you could identify them.”

With the utmost reluctance, Steve reached out to take the grimy plastic bag. There were two items inside, both metallic although the muddy river water had removed the original sheen. One was a cell phone, destined never to work again, the other was a pen. He recognised the latter instantly
and in that moment everything faded to insubstantiality except that one object which seemed to expand to fill his vision.

He’d given it to Mark for Father’s Day with the comment that it was the modern equivalent of soap on a rope. The doctor had been laughingly complaining of senility, that he was incapable of keeping a pen more than a few days, so Steve had bought him one that was worn round the neck, the leather attached to the lid so it was always available when required. Mark had worn it every day since.

“They’re my dad’s.” His voice was devoid of expression and the flat, neutral tone was more chilling than if he had sounded angry or distressed. Steve felt like a ghost, drained of all vitality. His eyes burned, his head ached and pain danced a jangled rhythm with stiletto heels along every nerve ending culminating with a polka on his shoulder that felt as if it were impaled by a red-hot poker.

“Amanda, please take me home.” His eyes were shut but someone with as much knowledge of him as the two doctors could sense the palpable distress that emanated from him. Jesse traded a worried glance with Amanda, both too concerned to fulfill the heartfelt plea without some discussion.

“We need to go back to the hospital. You agreed...”

“I agreed to rest,” Steve interrupted tersely. “I’ll do that much better in my own bed.”

“But at the hospital...”

“I’m not going back there.” Steve’s habitual easy-going nature was not evident in the uncompromising tones.

This time there was resignation in the visual exchange and Amanda started the car with a grimace of vexation. However, she couldn’t find it in her to blame Steve for his current willfulness. He’d just been forced to absorb two severe blows on top of the emotional buffeting he’d already suffered. Identifying his father’s personal effects had been a painful ordeal which must have blasted his hopes for Mark’s survival. Perhaps even worse had been the unintentionally cruel suggestion that his father had committed suicide. Even if he’d immediately discounted the idea, the mere concept of such a betrayal had clearly shaken him.

Troubled thoughts bedeviled Amanda as she drove to the Beach House and she knew she wasn’t alone in that distress. However, she didn’t anticipate that matters would deteriorate further when they arrived.

Steve got out of the car then turned to face his friends as they prepared to accompany him into the house. The shadow of his unshaven chin highlighted his drawn ashen face and the fine tremble in his frame displayed the dizziness and exhaustion wreaking their misery on him. However, his expression was shuttered and he seemed to have erected a wall of grief between himself and the rest of the world.

“I want to thank you for everything you have done today, but now I’d appreciate it if the two of you would go home.”

Amanda and Jesse exchanged glances of consternation. The thought of leaving Steve alone under these circumstances was anathema to both of them.

“Steve,” Jesse began carefully. “You’re in no condition to be left by yourself. You didn’t want to go to the hospital and we respected that, but then you’re going to have to accept that one of us at
least has to stay with you.”

“I don’t have to accept anything,” Steve snapped, the reference reminiscent of their earlier argument. He made a visible attempt to reign in his temper. “Look, I just want...I need some time alone.”

Jesse gazed at his friend in dismay. He understood what motivated the request. Steve was a private individual and needed some solitude to come to terms with recent events. His emotions ran like a subterranean river of lava, deep, hidden and always controlled. However, there were times when they threatened to erupt in a molten pyrotechnic display. Jesse had never been the target of his anger but seeing how close Steve’s feelings were to the surface, he feared that the wrong words on his part would spark an explosion.

“I understand you want time by yourself.” His offer was conciliatory. “You won’t even notice I’m here. I’ll stay in another room and I’ll...”

“No!” Steve struggled for control. The rational part of him knew his friends were only trying to help and didn’t deserve his ire, but he craved privacy, the opportunity to lower his guard and lick his wounds in private. Also, it was hard to contain the anger now it had seeped in. It may have been only a convenient replacement for grief, but the sheer precipice of loss now facing him was too daunting to face and that blaze of fury diverted him from the void.

He took a deep breath. “Look, I’m not going to do anything stupid. I’m exhausted and I have no intention of doing anything other than sleeping. You can come back in the morning and check up on me. I just don’t want anyone around right now.”

Jesse was forced to defer to his wishes. Steve’s concession of allowing them to return the next morning made the departure slightly more palatable, but they still left with great reluctance.

“Are we doing the right thing?” Amanda asked anxiously, watching in the rearview mirror as Steve trudged wearily towards his own entrance to the Beach House, blatantly averse to venturing into the upper levels.

“I don’t see that we have much choice,” Jesse returned gloomily. “I think trying to force him into anything would do more harm than good. He needs to feel in control of something at this point. I thought anger was supposed to be the stage of grief experienced after denial but he seems to have combined the two.”

“Always the overachiever.” Amanda tried to smile but it slipped miserably off her face as if it had nothing to hold onto.

Steve paused at the corner as they left, the expected relief at their departure never materializing, just a renewal of the desolation that went so deep and hurt so much. Stiffly, he fit the key into the lock and swung open the door, not allowing himself to feel the aberration of entering at the lower floor. For a moment he stood, at a loss for his next move, then he lowered himself down on the couch.

His grief was a monstrous force that left him reeling. All the things he should have said and done became a pile of regrets heaped upon his shoulders, overwhelming him with their weight. He curled forward, his arms wrapped around his body as he shook with emotion -- guilt, overwhelming sorrow and loss.

After a while, he lifted his feet onto the couch, curling up into a position more defensive than comfortable, unable to forget waking up in the same place less than forty-eight hours before, hours
that extended into a lifetime. He thought he’d never fall asleep, but exhaustion hijacked him almost immediately and suddenly he was falling, tumbling weightlessly into the dark void opening before him.

He didn’t know how long he slept, but it was still dark outside when a nightmare of being inexorably pulled below murky, pitching water woke him with a choking gasp. He sat bolt upright, sweat pouring from him, chilling his body. He shivered and, drawing up his knees up, bent his face down to rest against them. He longed for the oblivion sleep offered, but was unable to relax again with the raw, gnawing ache that infiltrated soul-deep.

It seemed as if a tenebrous shroud lay over the entire world and the darkest corner hovered over his room. He couldn’t sit still any longer and found himself moving, almost automatically, to the stairs. Yet, even as he emerged into the kitchen, illuminated only by the moonlight through the windows, it felt wrong. The room was empty, and it wasn’t a physical emptiness. The place felt chilled without the warmth of Mark’s personality filling it. How could he be haunted by someone who wasn’t there?

Mechanically, Steve walked to the kitchen to get a glass of water, not bothering with the light switch. He opened a cupboard then stopped abruptly, leaning forward on the counter bracing himself with his arms, as the domesticity of the act triggered memories which ripped through him like razors, so sharp that he lost his breath for a moment.

He tried to block out the pain but it always resurfaced no matter what he tried. It was too fresh, too recent, too damn intense. His throat was tight and his chest ached, so constricted that he couldn’t seem to breathe, as he fought the despair and grief that erupted at the memories. Maybe if he could find relief in tears, the pressure would lessen but he felt too empty, the pain too raw and overwhelming for tears. They would not be enough to cauterize the wound where his father had been ripped from his life.

Fury rolled through him with blinding force at the realisation that his thoughts had wandered perilously close to the abdication of hope, and he threw the glass to smash against the wall. The violent motion caused his shoulder to renew its fierce aching, but it was a pain he knew and could tolerate. With savage satisfaction he seized a mug and its trajectory resulted in the destruction of a vase sitting blamelessly on a nearby mantelpiece. The explosion of sound provided a gratifying break in the suffocating emptiness and Steve indulged his impulse to shatter the silence and the furniture for a few more minutes before sitting down heavily in a chair, rasping inhalations shuddering through his body.

Finding Mark’s pen had shaken him and the shock, combined with the drugs, had left him confused and unfocused, but he wasn’t going to give up. His jaw set in grim determination. He knew he was going on nothing more than faith and that thread was stretched so thin by this time it was almost invisible, but it hadn’t snapped and he wasn’t going to allow it. He had to maintain that hope because if he ever let go, he would shatter into so many pieces he’d never be whole again.

He wasn't in this alone, or at least he didn't have to be. Jesse and Amanda also had an emotional investment in his father’s fate. He needed to use all his resources starting with harnessing the rage that rasped through him, not allowing it to control him. Slowly, his shivering body stilled and he sat there unmoving, finally applying rational thought to the problem. Why had Mark been on the bridge? Trenton had sent the files over to him. What had he found?

Steve switched on the lights and, looking around with a detective’s eyes, discovered he didn’t have far to explore. Piles of folders, stacked neatly on the kitchen table, invited investigation. In front of Mark’s chair, one solitary file sat squarely, singled out from all the rest. He felt his heart press
painfully against his insides as, in a flash of insight so vivid it was as if his father had whispered in his ear, he realised that Mark had uncovered the identity of Serena Trenton’s murderer.

As he approached, he also espied the white rectangular piece of paper and a knife embedded itself in his gut as he recognised his father’s distinctive handwriting marching across the page, and twisted deeper as he read the final words --We need to talk. He tried to clear his throat but found he could scarcely swallow. Bitter regret fermented inside, metastasizing like the most virulent of cancers, crippling him with despair.

“Why didn’t you wait for me?” It was an agonised whisper, but he already knew the answer. Despite his best intentions, he’d made his disapproval of Mark’s avid involvement in the investigation plain, depriving his father of his customary wholehearted support thus forcing him, at a time when he was at his most vulnerable, into making impulsive and reckless decisions. To distend Steve’s feelings of culpability, he knew that Mark would never have become committed to unraveling the murder if he hadn’t invited him into the inquiry in the first place. It seemed that every step of the way, he’d sown the seeds for this catastrophe.

However, despite the molten pain of that guilt, he knew that someone else bore the ultimate accountability for Mark’s…disappearance… and the urge to find and tear apart that person burned high in his veins.

He carefully folded Mark’s note, slipping it into his wallet, then opened the file, devouring every word in an effort to duplicate his father’s line of thinking. When he’d finished, he couldn’t find anything definitive that would prove the Devlin family complicit in the murder, but that was irrelevant. He was more than willing to take that on faith. Of more importance was his father’s note and the fact that the route to their house would lead him over the Hilton Heights Bridge.

As soon as it was light enough, he had some questions for Michael Devlin and his sons.
Chapter 9

By the time the pale rays of the dawning sun were an uncertain promise over the top of the mountains to the east, Steve was ready to depart. Two over-the-counter pain pills were his one concession to his recent injury, chased down by a cup of coffee before he descended to the garage to inspect the only car now left to the Sloan family. It was actually his father’s, an old Ford that he kept more for sentimental reasons than practical purposes, taking it out for the occasional drive on lazy Sunday afternoons. Luckily it was an automatic, since Steve’s right shoulder wasn’t sound enough for shifting gears.

His early departure was prompted by more than one consideration. He realised that Jesse’s arrival was probably imminent and he had no desire to tarry and engage in further arguments over the state of his health and his fitness to pursue police activities. He’d apologise to his friend when he returned but, for now, every cell in his body was coiled for action, on the verge of a literal explosion, as if his very skin might not be sufficient to contain the violent emotions pent up inside. He needed answers and he needed to do something to distract himself from the emptiness that surrounded him.

Reaching awkwardly across with his left hand, Steve started the car, relieved when it responded immediately. It was early enough that there wasn’t too much traffic on the road and he drove mechanically, following the flow of other vehicles as his mind reviewed the information he’d read on the Devlins. It started to rain, lightly at first, but soon fat raindrops slapped noisily on the roof like Irish tap dancers in the midst of a jig and the wipers swept waves of water off the windshield. His vision was cut down to the rear lights of the car ahead which proved something of a blessing as they approached the Hilton Heights Bridge.

His tension ratcheted up a few extra notches as awareness of the edifice drenched his consciousness, his heartbeat pounding like the repetitive thud of a judge’s gavel before condemning a man to death. He tried to keep his mind blank, to let the rain wash his imagination clean, but as he drove over the bridge, he could see every moment of the accident as if it were etched in glass, all sharp lines and razored edges slicing into him. The still gaping hole in the wall mirrored the awful void ripped in his soul.

Had Mark been drugged? Had there been someone in the car with him? What had he felt as he went over the edge? Steve drove on autopilot for the first few minutes, blind to everything but the shafts of pain that impaled him at each image.

Once again Steve struggled to refocus his thoughts, painstakingly transmuting loss into grim determination and channeling despair into constructive anger. The rain accompanied him up the canyons, turning the road’s surface slick and the car fishtailed a couple of times as he crossed over muddy streams gushing over the tarmac. Wisdom dictated a more leisurely speed, but now away from other traffic, Steve truly didn’t care enough to slacken his pace -- fighting the steering wheel one-handed at least left little time for intrusive emotions.

When he arrived at the Devlin’s gatehouse, he was momentarily taken aback by the extent of the security that deep in the canyons, but on closer surveillance, he could see that most of the precautions were passive. There appeared to be no CCTV and no personnel, just the deterrent of walls and barbed wire. Leaning out of the car, he depressed the call button on the intercom system, unsurprised when there was no immediate response -- after all, it wasn’t even 8:00 am. He pushed the device again, holding it down for an obnoxiously long period.

“What? Who is this?” A voice yelled back angrily -- clearly early morning visitors weren’t the
norm at this residence.

“This is Lieutenant Sloan, LAPD. I’m here to speak to Mr. Devlin.” His tone was demanding, bordering on rude, but although he’d announced himself in an official capacity, he knew he was here as a son, not as a cop.

There was a silence, which he read as guilty, then a different voice, harder and more self-possessed came over the speaker. “This isn’t the best time, Lieutenant Sloan, but you can come in.”

The gates opened and he drove in, still assessing the area and its security. Not wanting to broadcast any vulnerability, he removed the sling as he pulled into a convenient parking space. The front door was already open as Steve walked towards it and a large, strongly-built man watched him approach, his height exaggerated by his elevated position at the top of the steps. There was something about him that set Steve’s hackles rising, a primal recognition of the dangerous, predatory quality exuded by his adversary.

He nodded curtly to the man, not offering a handshake, and was invited in with an equally brusque nod. Alert for both forewarnings of attack and evidence of Mark’s visit there, he allowed himself to be ushered into a large sitting room. Although offered a chair, he elected to stand, too tense and cautious to let his guard down even that much.

“Lieutenant Sloan, I’m Jack Devlin. I presume you’re related to Dr. Sloan?” The enquiry was cold and dispassionate, but the mere mention of Mark’s name sent a current of electricity arcing through Steve’s frame.

“My father,” he answered shortly. He didn’t expect a confession and was aware of a slight curiosity as to where Devlin intended to take this line of questioning.

“I appreciate you coming to apologise in person.” Devlin leaned both hands against the back of an armchair and waited expectantly.

The shock of anger was like a hot knife in Steve's chest. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Your father inveigled his way into this house under false pretenses then proceeded to badger my father, a very sick man, to the point of collapse, making absurd allegations and totally unfounded charges. To be honest, if we hadn’t been so busy coping with the aftermath of Dr. Sloan’s visit, I’d have called the Medical Board and lodged a formal complaint.”

Steve mentally acknowledged it was a brilliant tactical move, throwing him awkwardly on the defensive. Devlin had admitted Mark had been there, preempting any evidence on that issue, but had also seized the offensive with his accusations which, in Mark’s absence, were difficult to disprove.

“My father is a doctor. He would never cause harm to anyone.” Although Steve’s voice was quiet, the tone underlying his calm words was smoothly dangerous. “Where were you while he was supposedly browbeating your father?”

“I was working. When I came home, I found my father agitated and barely able to draw a breath so I told Dr. Sloan to leave. He got into his car and drove away.” The words were delivered with an edge of smug assurance. Devlin clearly knew that witnesses had placed Mark alone and in control of his car until he reached the bridge. It would be impossible to prove that the pharmaceutical businessman was culpable for the accident in any way as things currently stood.

Steve’s blue eyes flared and then darkened with an all-consuming fury he could barely hide, let
alone control, convinced now that the Devlin family were responsible for his father’s disappearance. Only the knowledge that he needed some lead to prove this enabled him to restrain the impulse to throw Jack through a wall. “How is your father?” he asked abruptly.

“Dying.” It was baldly stated, but there was enough grief in those two syllables to wrestle an unwilling empathy from Steve.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” It was gruff but apparently infused with enough sincerity to carry conviction for, after a moment’s hesitation, Devlin gestured him to follow as he strode down a long hallway. They went past a kitchen, down a dimly lit corridor then stopped at a door that stood slightly ajar. Carefully, Jack eased the door open and Steve followed the unspoken invitation as he disappeared inside.

Steve grasped the situation the moment the cloying scent of terminal illness struck his nostrils, and one look at the older Devlin confirmed that the man’s life could probably best be measured in hours rather than days. An oxygen mask was fitted snugly over his mouth and nose, hiding those features, but the flesh had fallen away from the rest of his face, leaving a death’s head skull wrapped in skin.

A younger version of Jack Devlin sat by the patient’s bedside, eyes blazing belligerently at the sight of the visitors, but Steve thought he could also recognise a guilty defensiveness that was familiar from experiences in many interrogation rooms.

No words were spoken, the room held the silence of a grave, and after allowing him another few seconds to process the impossibility of Michael Devlin’s involvement in any recent criminal activity, Jack urged him back out into the hall.

As they regained the normalcy of the sitting room, Steve was curious enough to ask, “Why isn’t he in hospital?”

“He wanted to die at home, and what my father wants, he gets.” There was an ironic twist to his lips as he spoke which Steve couldn’t fathom but realised was important.

Striving for the common ground of grieving sons, Steve continued, “I’m very sorry about your Dad. I hope you can understand that I’m worried about mine too. I need to figure out what happened to him.”

But the detente was clearly over. Jack turned to him with patently false innocence. “Why, what did happen to him?”

Steve struggled to control his temper, reigning in his impulse to smash a fist into the leering face in front of him. “After he left here, he had an accident. His car went over the Hilton Heights Bridge,” he replied tersely.

“Well, that’s too bad.” There was a mocking smile on Jack’s face and Steve clenched his fists in a last-ditch attempt not to respond to this callous retort.

When he spoke, his voice was hoarse with the effort of self-restraint. “Can you tell me if he seemed ill when he left? Was there anything in his behaviour that could account for the accident?”

Jack leaned forward confidingly. “He got what he deserved,” he answered provocatively.

Steve’s temper bared its teeth in a snarl, slipped its short leash and leapt for the man’s throat. He slammed a left roundhouse into Jack’s face, trying to follow it up with a right jab as the man staggered backwards from the impact, but that caused him more pain than the recipient since in the
rush of fury-induced adrenaline he’d forgotten the injury to his shoulder.

A prolonged fight was out of the question, as satisfying as it might have been. Devlin was as large as he was and, right now, probably stronger, all things considered. However, despite his injury, Steve held a considerable advantage in his comprehensive combat training. As Jack recovered enough to throw a punch of his own, Steve blocked it, then wrapping his arm round Jack’s extended one, he stepped sideways past Jack pulling him into a painful and immobilising arm lock. It was an extremely effective method of restraining suspects. Jack couldn’t move or attempt reprisals without breaking his own arm.

“What did you do to him? What did you do to my father?” Steve demanded savagely.

Jack Devlin was no coward and, if anything, the humiliation of his position solidified his courage. “Go to hell,” he hissed.

Steve tightened the hold ruthlessly and Jack cried out involuntary from the pain. “Tell me,” Steve insisted. “Did you drug him? What did you do?” He moved his arm backwards slightly and Jack let out another yell. It would take only the slightest pressure to snap his arm entirely and only the smallest thread of civilisation was holding Steve back. He finally had an appropriate target for the rage and grief that had swelled impotently inside, trapping every nerve ending, but, perhaps fortunately, there was an interruption before the battle of wills could be tested further.

Alerted by their sibling’s shouts, the other two brothers burst into the room. “What the hell are you doing? Let him go!” They moved forward with the idea of extricating Jack, but a slight twist from Steve disabused them of that notion. “Stay back.” Jack panted. “Call the cops and tell them what this maniac is doing.”

Steve was aware of one of the brothers disappearing while the other hovered ineffectively in his peripheral vision. He moved his face closer to Jack’s, his words spat out in icy assurance, a personal promise. “If you’ve hurt my father, it’s not the cops or the courts you’ll have to worry about. I won’t take you down, I’ll take you out.”

Sweeping Jack’s nearest leg out from under him, Steve deposited him on the floor where he sat nursing his arm and gazing up with hate-filled eyes. “A father for a father, Sloan. Remember that.”

The words hit Steve like stones flung from a catapult, but there was nothing he could do at that time. He backed away cautiously from the two brothers but neither offered any aggression, frozen in position and glaring at him like carved gargoyles, cold, hard, and malicious. He retreated to his car without incident and pulled away fast, the gates operating automatically from inside.

He was half-way down the canyons when reaction set in and he pulled over to the side of the road, needing time to process the events of the last hour. His shoulder ached unmercifully and a glance down showed him a small stain where blood had soaked through his bandage and his shirt, mute evidence of overexertion on that recent injury.

Jesse’ll kill me for ruining his nice work. That’s if he doesn’t kill me for standing him up this morning. It was just one of the myriad of fleeting impressions that piled up like windblown debris, lightweight and inconsequential, against the central pillar of thought protruding prominently above all other considerations -- the Devlin brothers were responsible for whatever had happened to Mark and, by extension, they were almost certainly guilty, altogether or in some combination, of Serena’s murder.

He had to get a warrant to search their house. Somewhere there would be the evidence required for a conviction. He needed to get to the station rapidly and a direct route carried the additional bonus
of avoiding the Hilton Heights Bridge. Focus restored and a clear goal established, Steve resumed his drive.

In the police parking lot, he replaced his sling, its white folds conveniently concealing the bloodstain, and the support it offered now very welcome. Many colleagues greeted him as he strode through the building, happy to see him apparently mostly recovered from his injury and expressing their condolences for his loss. He acknowledged their comments as gracefully as he could but kept moving purposefully all the while until he entered his own department.

Cheryl’s absence registered immediately and he realised guiltily he hadn’t checked on her progress since leaving the hospital. For a moment he paused, absorbing the additional sense of loss, the realisation of another anchor lost in his life intensifying his feelings of floating adrift.

Suddenly his left shoulder was grabbed and he turned to find Dan Berry, another homicide lieutenant. “Hey, Sloan, you’re a hard man to find. I’ve been chasing after you for days to take your statement.”

Steve hadn’t given any thought to the fact that an investigation would have been set up for his own shooting. Since recovering consciousness in the hospital, his entire focus had been absorbed by his father’s disappearance and he’d never even attempted a conjecture as to his own assailant. Now, considering the almost synchronous timing of the two events, it seemed likely that the assault on him was related to Mark’s accident in which case any leads might prove useful in his own investigation against the Devlins.

“What have you found out...?” He began to question his fellow officer when a commanding bellow interrupted the interrogation.

“Sloan! My office. Now!”

Newman had perfected a gruff persona when dealing with his officers, but it took no detective skill to recognise that he was now genuinely furious. As Steve entered, the door was slammed shut behind him. The Captain barely took the time to move back behind his desk before launching his attack.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” A thump on the wooden desk emphasised the expletive.

The question wasn’t specific enough for Steve to deduce which of his activities had aroused Newman’s wrath so he countered with a wary, “Sir?”

“I just got a call from a Jack Devlin stating that you forced your way into his house, acting in a totally irrational manner and you threatened him and his family and assaulted him. He wants to press charges.”

Steve struggled to control his instinctive response, realising it would only support Devlin’s accusations of psychosis, but inwardly he was kicking himself. Jack had outplayed him, maneuvering him out of the game by deliberately goading him into a physical response and he had fallen for it like a rookie.

“That’s not exactly what happened, Sir,” he protested lamely.

“Did you go over to Devlin’s house?” Feeling like a hostile witness on the stand, Steve nodded reluctantly.

“Did you hit him?” Newman persisted impatiently.
Steve felt the need to redirect the interrogation. “Sir, he murdered Serena Trenton,” he claimed forcefully.

The captain threw up his hands in irritation. “All the more reason for treating him with kid gloves. Do you want the case thrown out of court for..?”

“He was also responsible for my father’s accident,” Steve interrupted abruptly.

Newman stopped his tirade, eying his officer carefully, noting the tight lines which seemed to be permanently etched around somber eyes and the shoulders held in a constant state of tension.

“Do you have anything...any evidence at all, to support that allegation?” he queried more gently.

Steve thought back to Jack’s last words, ‘a father for a father’ but ultimately he was forced to shake his head. “Nothing that will stand up in court,” he admitted unwillingly.

"Sit down, Detective."

Steve gritted his teeth at the restrained tones in his Captain’s voice. "I'd rather stand, sir."

"And I said, sit down! What part of that did you not understand?" Obviously Newman’s patience would only stretch so far.

Steve reluctantly sat, poised stiff-backed on the edge of his chair and Newman took his own seat.

“Lieutenant...Steve, I know this is a difficult time for you. Your father will be greatly missed around here. You should be on leave, bereavement leave or sick leave, it doesn’t matter, but you’re not in a fit state to be working right now.”

If the situation hadn’t been so desperate, Steve might have found some humour in his Captain’s awkward attempt at paternalistic sympathy. As it was, the dismissal of his legitimate concerns as overwrought delusions was offensive. “Sir, my father figured out that the Devlin family was responsible for Serena’s death. He left me a note before going out there.”

Newman’s frown deepened. “If he thought they were murderers what was he doing going out there by himself?”

Steve had no intention of elucidating his Captain on that thorny issue. “I don’t know exactly. You know my father, I expect he was looking for confirmation of some point.”

Newman tapped on his desktop with his pen. “Do we have anything concrete to tie the Devlins in to the Trenton murder?”

“No, but have you ever known my father to be wrong?” Steve believed his father had more than earned the benefit of the doubt from the department, but he retained enough judgment to perceive that pointing out the details of his many accomplishments might prove counterproductive.

“Steve, you’re a cop and a good one. Think like one for a moment. We have no hard evidence to link them to anything and meanwhile you’re setting yourself and the department up for a nasty lawsuit. Now the case has been reassigned due to your injury and I’ll pass along your theory to the detective in charge. You are on leave. You must have a lot to do getting your father’s affairs in order.”

Steve’s face was set hard, a muscle jumping in jaw. “I’m not yet ready to accept that my father’s dead.”
Newman clearly felt out of his depth with this groundless optimism. “The witnesses seem to have left the issue in little doubt,” he tried cautiously.

Steve had watched enough magic shows with his father to know that sleight of hand could fool even the most perspicacious eyes. “There’s been no body found and you know how resourceful my father is.”

“This is...” Newman was quite obviously searching for an acceptable synonym for crazy and as Steve considered his own feelings, he wondered if the Captain wasn’t right. Any sane person would accept the circumstantial evidence, but he couldn't. Wouldn’t he know if Mark was dead?

Newman came to a decision. “You are not involved in this case anymore, Steve. Go home, get some rest.”

Steve leaned forward. “My father is missing and you want me to go home and put my feet up?” His voice was deceptively neutral but the hand that wasn’t in the sling gripped the edge of the desk with white-knuckled anger as the rage that festered so close to surface erupted again. He stood up. “I don’t think so. I’m going to find him and the people who are responsible.” The words were stated with implacable resolve.

Newman mirrored his movements on the other side of the desk, containing his own anger at this insubordination. “You leave me no choice. Lieutenant Sloan, pending the IA investigation into Jack Devlin’s allegations, you are suspended with pay.” He ignored the flash of betrayal in the other man’s eyes before they hardened into hard-won impassivity.

“You know the drill, Detective.” Newman held out his hand, truly believing his actions were for the benefit of his officer in the long term but also knowing this was an additional blow inflicted on top of many.

Steve reached across with slow deliberation to pull his gun from his holster, never breaking eye contact with his Captain, hefting it for a second before slapping it into his superior’s palm. He pulled the badge off his belt, the light glittering accusingly off its polished surface before he tossed it with casual contempt onto the desk. “Will that be all, Sir?” he demanded tersely. Everything in his life seemed to be splintering into tiny pieces, and the tighter he closed his fist, the more they slipped between his fingers.

“No, you’re in no condition to drive. Berry will drive you home and take your statement.”

Steve nodded, the accumulating tension lodging in his jaw as he ground out, “I see.” And he did understand. Newman was depriving him not only of the official means of continuing the investigation, but also of his last means of independent transportation. He bit back the bitter words that sprang to his lips, turned sharply on his heel and left.

Newman watched him go, reading the tension radiating from his detective’s stiff shoulders and his board-straight spine. The Captain puffed out a long breath, sinking back into his chair. Idly, he picked up the badge from his desk, turning it over in his fingers before placing it and the surrendered gun in his desk drawer.

Steve Sloan was one of his best detectives even discounting the maternal help he got in his excellent solve rate. He would probably have made Captain himself by now if his uncompromising honesty didn’t lead him to eschew the political expediencies of the department. It was hard to watch such a man self-destruct and be able to do nothing more to help than remove the most obvious instruments of disaster. He was no psychologist and had no idea how to address the issues clearly devastating his officer. But in the absence of Mark Sloan, he knew who was most likely to
be able to reach him.

Checking on the number, he dialed. “Jesse Travis, please.”
Jesse shut his car door and for a moment leaned against it, staring at the house that had become his home away from home, a place of amusement when times were good and a sanctuary when his spirit was troubled. Normally the building exuded welcoming warmth, but today, in the shadows under the lowering, murky clouds it looked dark and impenetrable. Jesse knew he was projecting his own trepidation at the prospect of entering.

When he had arrived to find the house empty that morning, he’d been furious and terrified. The call from Captain Newman had been simultaneously reassuring and deeply troubling. Obviously Steve was still functioning physically which was a relief, but it was hard to imagine a more devastating series of events for his friend emotionally.

Steve was one of the strongest people Jesse had ever known, with a seemingly unassailable sense of identity, but anyone could break given sufficient pressure and he was afraid that the accumulative and percussive impact of losing his sister, his father and, even if only temporarily, his job could be the force that shattered Steve.

Jesse hesitated a moment at the front door, realising that, for the first time, he was unsure of his welcome, then reached out gently to see if it was locked. It was, and he was reluctant to ring the bell since he was hoping that Steve would be resting if not asleep. Both he and Amanda had spare keys so letting himself in was no problem. He climbed the stairs, heading for the kitchen, and was unsurprised to find Steve staring out the window, dry-eyed, but with more anguish in his face than he could remember ever seeing on someone before.

“Hey, Jess.” Steve turned to acknowledge him with every appearance of normality, but the dark circles under his eyes and the tired posture as he leaned against the wall betrayed him.

Jesse’s heart ached for everything his best friend was going through. “You weren’t here when I arrived this morning.” It wasn’t what he’d intended to say and as soon as the words were out of his mouth he knew they lacked conciliatory tact.

“I know, I’m sorry.” The words were right, but uttered flatly with no intonation, robbing them of meaning. There was also no accompanying explanation which would have allowed Jesse to ease into the topic of Steve’s suspension.

“I let myself in,” he continued awkwardly, throwing his keys onto the table. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“No problem.” Steve still sounded totally abstracted as if he’d closed the blinds, dimmed the lights and retreated so far inside himself that Jesse wondered if he’d ever manage to find his way back.

He wasn’t sure which was worse, a distant, withdrawn Steve or a belligerent, hostile Steve. Neither was characteristic. Although he did not display the same gregarious amiability as his father, Steve had inherited much of Mark’s easy-going nature. He was typically self-possessed and dependable, a steadfast and loyal friend who was slow to anger unless friends and family were threatened.

Jesse decided that he could at least take advantage of his friend’s present preoccupation. “Let me check to see how your shoulder’s doing.”

He received a vague grunt of assent and Steve started unbuttoning his shirt, revealing the stained bandage underneath. With a frown, Jesse began work, aggravated to discover that not only had two
of his stitches been torn out, but also that the wound looked swollen and inflamed. A lecture on the stupidity of engaging in physical struggles with a hole in one’s shoulder trembled on the tip of his tongue, and only the belief that he would be wasting a fine example of oratory on an oblivious audience stopped him from delivering it.

He rebound the injury, finishing with an unnecessary flourish to conceal his disquiet at his patient’s utter stillness throughout the operation. Unwilling to postpone the conversation any longer, but unsure exactly how to broach the issues confronting them, he started with a tentative, “Steve?”

“No!” The tone was curtly uncompromising as, despite his distraction, Steve sensed his intent and rejected the overture.

Jesse pasted a false smile on his face and continued on a different track without hesitation. He wasn’t going to leave without Steve discussing the day’s events but he could bide his time. “When did you last eat?”

A one-shouldered shrug confirmed his impression that it had been too long and he stood up purposefully. “I’ll make us something to eat.”

The refrigerator offered little by way of choices, but he settled on what he called a ‘bachelor’s special’ -- an omelette with anything he could find to throw in. Despite the mechanical nature of the task, he found it impossible to relax, bedeviled by echoes of past laughter and hospitality and the feeling that he was usurping Mark’s position as host.

He frequently glanced across at Steve, who was sitting as still as humanly possibly, containing himself inside his body like an alabaster statue, cold and lifeless, gray shadows haunting a face weary from lack of sleep and nightmares that disregarded the distinction between waking and sleeping.

“Dinner is served,” Jesse announced with grim cheer. He had to repeat himself twice before he got a reaction from his friend and he suppressed his irritation at being so comprehensively tuned out. Having got Steve’s attention, he strove to keep it by maintaining a stream of trivial comments that required at least a minimal response.

However, the topic of Mark’s death lay unbroached, a tangible, oppressive thing between them, like a vicious carnivore waiting to pounce. As he watched, Steve stabbed a fork into his toast, then scrutinised it with a scowl as if disappointed that it didn’t fight back.

Jesse sifted through possible preliminaries: ‘So, how was your day?’, ‘You know, I got an interesting phone call today,’ ‘Have you heard the one about the suspended cop?’ None of these appeared promising as the verbal wedge he needed to pry open his taciturn friend. He felt like he was suddenly living in a foreign country, the language of which he barely knew.

Steve was still moving as if he wasn’t really present. He had battened down his hatches and fortified his defenses, and Jesse could tell that any sympathetic advances on his part would simply ricochet off the walls that surrounded his friend. He needed a more radical approach, the conversational equivalent of lobbing a stink bomb over the barriers to force Steve to break his own way out.

“So how long are you going to sit around here feeling sorry for yourself?” His heart thumped sickeningly at the surprised hurt in his friend’s eyes as Steve’s head jerked up to stare at him. With two long strides Steve was back at the window, standing ramrod straight, his hands clenched
at his sides. The young doctor could feel the anger bleeding off him and wondered just how much more it would take to send him over the edge and if he himself would survive the attempt. This was surgery, the infliction of pain for a greater good or at least the lancing of a wound to rid it of infection, so despite hating himself for generating the additional distress, he pushed on ruthlessly.

“Mark’s dead and it’s time for you to move on.”

Steve was now truly ice-cold furious. Jesse could see the pale blue sky of the frozen tundra in his eyes and judged it was time to fire the final volley. “Ruining your own life like this is a desecration of his memory.”

He held his breath for several seconds, the count after pulling the pin from a grenade, the words hanging heavily between them; then the explosion rocked him backwards.

“Get out!” In a movement that somehow defied sight, Steve was suddenly towering over him, enforcing the bellowed command with physical intimidation. Yet despite the awareness that Steve was quite capable of picking him up and tossing him across the room, Jesse was undaunted. Even in the heat of fury, he didn’t believe Steve would hurt him.

“Or you’ll do what?” Jesse tipped his head back, meeting his furious gaze. “You’ll beat me up, or throw me against a wall and break my arm -- you seem to have that down pat today.”

He could almost feel the change in temperature as Steve’s rage slowly dissipated under the reminder of his earlier violence, tipping him, unanchored, into an emotional void.

“What happened today, Steve?” he asked gently, sensing his friend was now ready to talk.

The detective looked at him consideringly then nodded reluctantly. “Dad left me a note.” He started his narrative almost as a formal dissertation but his voice gained momentum and passion as he relived the events of the day until, near the end, it was hoarse and raspy, as anger and desperation churned in his tight features in equal measure.

As he listened intently, Jesse shared the same emotions, his natural empathy enhanced by his close relationship with the Sloans.

“You really believe that it wasn’t an accident, that the Devlins murdered Mark?” he asked incredulously.

“I don’t just believe it, I know that they are responsible for whatever has happened to him,” Steve asserted resolutely.

His rejection of the term murder did not go unnoticed and Jesse found himself struggling to hold onto his own temper, which seemed determined to slide through his fingers. “Steve, as hard as it is, you’ve got to accept that Mark’s gone. Whether it was murder or an accident, he’s dead.”

“Why?” Steve’s very body language showing an inflexible determination which would not be swayed. “Why do I have to accept that? Maybe the question is why the hell are you in such a hurry to believe he’s gone!”

Jesse felt a prickle of heat run under his eyelids and he blinked back the water that flooded unbidden down into his eyes. “This isn’t about me,” he choked out bitterly.

“Isn’t it? Well, maybe it should be. You’re all so eager to make me out to be irrational and out of control, but maybe I’m the only one here who’s seeing things clearly. How could you of all people give up on him so easily?” Steve’s body was stiffly coiled in on itself, practically vibrating with the
Scalding heat ran through Jesse’s body like a flash flood down a dry riverbed, a composite of guilt, fury and despair but he retained enough sanity to see what was happening, the two of them ripping each other to shreds over this shared grief. “Stop it! Do you think this isn’t killing me too?”

The heartache in his voice resonated with Steve’s own anguish and for the first time he actually looked at his friend. Usually Jesse was incredibly animated, giving the illusion of action even while standing still, but now his body language telegraphed exhaustion rather than his usual exuberance. Steve took a deep breath, allowing another’s grief to register besides his own.

“I’m sorry, Jess. I know how much Dad means to you. Look, can we get off this adversarial tangent for a minute. I’m just trying to understand. You know how resourceful Dad is, why do think it so impossible that he might still be alive?”

“Resourceful, yes, but Steve, he’s not invulnerable or immortal.” Jesse desperately hoped that his friend would accept his point, because he couldn’t bear talking about it any more, every word abrasive on already inflamed nerves.

Steve didn’t answer at once, moving over to pour himself a drink of water and, in that pause, Jesse was intensely aware of the small sounds that somehow deepened the silence; the last drips out of the faucet into the sink and the gusting wind driving the rain against the windows with a subdued rattle.

Eventually Steve turned round. “Maybe it’s foolish optimism.” His voice was quiet, but no less intense for that. “Or maybe it’s faith, a lifetime’s habit of watching him turn defeat into the most surprising victory. But most of all, it’s a choice. If I accept he’s gone, I’m not sure I’m going to be good for anything and there’s too much to do right now, too many questions unanswered. No, until there’s incontrovertible proof to the contrary, I’m going to believe my dad’s out there somewhere, needing my help.”

By the time he’d finished, Jesse had to strain to hear the words, but such was Steve’s death grip upon the glass that the young doctor was afraid it would shatter.

It was the longest speech he’d heard his naturally taciturn friend utter for a long time and it made perfect sense. In such circumstances, forced inaction was utter agony for Steve. But Jesse’s main concern was that especially with his recent injury and fear draining his natural reserves and the helpless inactivity reinforced by his suspension preventing him from refueling, what would happen if Mark was found or even worse, if his body was never discovered? At some point Steve was going to crash hard. Nobody could live under this strain indefinitely.

The dark circles under Steve’s eyes and the thinness of his cheeks were a testament to the anxiety that had burned through him for the last few days. These telltale symptoms of extreme emotional stress were readily apparent. What was less visible was the tension that crackled with Steve’s every movement. An almost electrical charge seemed to tingle in the air as Steve paced restlessly.

Jesse could think of no way to relieve this strain, but he owed Steve the same honesty his friend had offered him. “When they told me that Mark was...dead, it was one of the worst moments in my life and although I’d dearly love to believe that there’s a chance he’s still alive, I don’t dare hope with such little foundation. To go through that again...to set myself up for...” He broke off, unable to find words that wouldn’t exacerbate his own misery and seem insensitive to Steve’s grief.

He was immensely grateful to see understanding amid the somber pain that lurked in his friend’s eyes and suddenly realised that, despite his positive stance, Steve was deeply afraid for his father.
He wished there was something constructive he could provide. “Steve, I’ll help in any way I can. If you truly believe that the Devlins are responsible for what happened to Mark, I’ll try to help you prove it.” He paused nervously, knowing he had to qualify that promise. “But I won’t be party to you destroying yourself, either personally or professionally. The Devlins have a restraining order out on you so anything we do has to be discreet.”

Jesse’s instincts told him that saving Steve’s job might, at this point, be synonymous with saving his life. If his obsession with the Devlins resulted in his dismissal from the force, it would be the final straw, the one that broke the proverbial camel’s back. His occupation was the only thing that would keep him moderately sane.

Steve’s normally sparkling blue eyes were sunken and dull, the dark shadows under them evidence of his exhausted state and Jesse hoped his friend would concede with at least minimal grace to the imperative of sleep. Putting their tenuous truce to the test, he continued firmly, “And you’ll be in no shape for anything active in the next forty-eight hours at least.”

For a moment he thought he’d overstepped the boundaries, but Steve merely nodded his head wearily. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to go downstairs and rest.” He hesitated, trailing the fingers of his left hand along the table without looking at his friend. “You must be tired too. The bed in the spare room is made up if you want to stay the night.”

Jesse tried to conceal his pleasure at the invitation, glad that his friend’s isolationist impulses had mellowed. It would be considerably easier to keep an eye on Steve’s activities and apply a restraining presence to overly hazardous ventures from close by.

His initial sense of delight quickly palled into depression as the unaccustomed silence of the effectively empty house emphasised the sorrowful change of circumstances. After a lackluster attempt at cleaning up after his culinary endeavors, Jesse retired to the bedroom he’d occupied frequently in the past, most notably while recovering from genetically modified smallpox. From such an inauspicious beginning, Jesse dated the true beginning of his close relationship with the Sloans as they had so generously opened their home and family to him.

He’d marveled with a fringe of envy at the way the lives of father and son intertwined like oak and ivy growing into and through each other, at work, home and play. Now, however, he could see the downside to that symbiosis. When ripped apart, there was no styptic in the world for the depth of that wound. Seeking the oblivion of sleep from his morbid thoughts, Jesse pulled the covers over his head.

He slept better than he’d expected, lulled by the rhythmic white noise of the waves. There was no sound in the house when he woke and he hoped this equated to an equally peaceful night for Steve. He showered and shaved with a backup razor he left in the guest bathroom for just such eventualities, then entered the kitchen. There was no sign that Steve had breakfasted and a search of the refrigerator left him uninspired so he sat and watched the rain-driven surf surging high on the beach.

A good night’s sleep might restore a greater emotional equilibrium to his friend, so he had no intention of waking him. He knew that anger was a legitimate part of the grieving process, but it was disconcerting to see Steve’s mercurial oscillations between rage and quiet abstraction. “Things will get better,” he told himself, but it was a mantra that brought him no calm whatsoever.

Eventually, the audible growling of his stomach, complaining of the paucity of recent sustenance, drove him to his feet. It would be nice to have some fresh bagels, maybe with bacon and eggs, to tempt Steve into eating breakfast. He patted his pocket to confirm the location of his wallet, then looked around vaguely for his keys. A visual survey of the room offered no revelation so he
wandered into his bedroom. When a quick search of that area uncovered nothing, he resorted to pulling up the cushions on the sofa.

More bewildered than exasperated, he applied the Holmesian axiom that having eliminated all the possibilities in the house, whatever remained, however improbable, must be true and went outside to check his car. Afterwards, he couldn’t imagine why it took him so long to realise the truth, but as he gaped in bewilderment at the empty space where his car had been, the alternatives that first crossed his mind were that the vehicle had been stolen or he was mistaken as to where he’d left it.

The realisation didn’t hit at once but filtered in slowly, cementing the gap between suspicion and certainty. How could he have been so stupid! With Mark’s fate uncertain, how could he have deluded himself into believing Steve would listen to reason? He tore back into the house and down the steps into the basement apartment two at a time.

Without announcement or apology he flung open the door to the bedroom. Steve was gone, the emptiness of the room conveying a frightening finality.

“Oh God, Steve, what have you got yourself into now.”
The rain had tapered off to a mild drizzle, but both earth and air were saturated and moisture accumulated quickly on anyone braving the elements. Steve remained oblivious to the droplets pooling on his exposed skin, not even pausing in his observation of the Devlins’ house to brush them away as they combined to trickle slowly down his face.

He had been lying almost motionless in the grass, concealed by darkness and shrubbery and protected only by light waterproofs, for nearly two hours. During that time, he had used night-vision binoculars to track the activities of the building’s occupants as closely as possible. To the best of his knowledge, there were three men, now in bed and hopefully asleep, and a fourth, almost certainly awake, at the bedside of the invalid.

There had been no discernible movement from inside for half an hour so Steve calculated it was time to move in. The thick layer of nimbostratus clouds blanketed all celestial sources of light and there were no street lamps this far into the canyons, so only the faint orange glow of the ubiquitous light pollution from the city provided any illumination. To deter burglars, two outside lights had been set up that worked on motion sensors, but Steve hoped that wildlife set them off frequently enough for the residents to ignore them if he inadvertently strayed into their radius.

He approached the house at an oblique angle from the back, employing all the stealth acquired as a soldier in the jungles of Vietnam, alert for any indication that the occupants were more vigilant that it appeared. For a long minute he waited, a motionless shadow against the dark wall, but the silence was only cracked by the soft drip of water. The odor of damp wood caught in his nostrils, oddly different from the sea spay scent to which he was accustomed, accentuating the foreign nature of his actions.

He was about to break into a house, but the illegality of the act was causing him surprisingly little concern. He reflected momentarily on the irony of how well his career of enforcing the law had prepared him for this criminal enterprise. Although he’d had little practice, disabling burglar alarms, picking locks and discerning the best method of entry into a locked building were well within his acquired expertise.

He knew that if he were discovered, his job was over. The act of unlawful entry was effectively burning his bridges and even if he found something incriminating, it would be inadmissible in a court of law, but still a sense of urgency drove him onwards.

‘A father for a father.’ Jack Devlin’s phrase replayed continually in his thoughts like a bad tape stuck in a loop. Had it merely been an idle choice of words, a barb meant to satisfy his own grief or had it a deeper meaning? Michael Devlin was clearly fading fast and Steve’s instincts told him that Mark’s fate was connected to that of the dying man.

Ultimately, Steve chose Kitty Lynn’s method of ingress and cut a hole in the glass of a sliding door, using the small opening to undo the lock. Before entering, he divested himself of his waterproofs and, after a moment’s hesitation, his shoes, realising that leaving wet, muddy puddles in his wake would not improve his chances of remaining undetected.

He stepped silently inside the dark room, mentally adding breaking and entering to his list of dubious accomplishments. He had noted the telltale red light of a motion sensor alarm high in a corner on his earlier visit, but trusted that with the night-time movements necessitated by round-the-clock nursing of the Devlin patriarch, the system had not been armed. The blinking light registered his presence with an extra flash but remained quiet and Steve just hoped that confirmed
his theory and that it hadn’t sent a silent signal to the local police force.

Slipping through the furniture more by memory than sight, he arrived at the door and gently turned the handle to peer into the lighted corridor beyond. Here, no concealment would be possible if his timing coincided with a late night snack hunt by one of the residents, but there were no sounds from the rooms beyond so, with pulse jumping, he soundlessly coasted down the hall. He had no idea what he was looking for specifically, trusting only that he’d know it when he saw it. The kitchen seemed as good a place as any to start – a possible repository for drugs and incriminating paperwork.

His penlight stroked over the contents of the fridge, making its contents ripple and gleam in its specially focused beam, and he duly memorised the labels in the medical containers although none of their long names were familiar. No drawers offered anything remotely promising, so he decided to move on. He was hoping that one of the rooms beyond the sickroom was an office and would offer better pickings.

However, the hall was bare and well-lit and this was unknown territory. A misplaced step on a creaky board could easily betray his intrusion. He was tense as a bowstring, cold trickles of sweat sliding down his back and the erratic thumping of his heart threatening to drown out all other sounds. He sucked in a deep but quiet breath, attempting to clear his mind. The knowledge that no back up would be forthcoming either from colleagues or friends was profoundly isolating yet also gave him the freedom to act, since being suspended, his actions would not reflect so badly on the department. His fear of discovery lay not in concern for his personal safety, although having attempted at least two murders, he was sure the Devlins wouldn’t cavil at a third, but in the awareness that capture meant failure.

His stealthy tread was assisted by the carpet pile, and he had crept noiselessly to just beyond Michael Devlin’s room when a loud exclamation caused him to spin around in alarm. Heavy footsteps pounded closer to the door, a voice within crying out, “Jack, Jack!”

Unsure whether this sudden activity was a response to his presence, Steve sprinted for the nearest door, hoping the unavoidable noise of his movements would be cloaked by the rousing of the household. He dove into the room like a rabbit down a bolthole, retaining enough presence of mind in the darkness to close the door quietly behind him, poised to stage a defense if indeed he had been discovered. However, it soon became clear that the commotion had been caused by a change in the senior Devlin’s condition. The old man was fading fast and the family had been summoned for a final farewell. Clearly Steve’s time was limited.

Curious as to where he’d ended up, he slowly swept the narrow beam around the area, keeping half his attention on the voices outside. It seemed to be a storage room where boxes had been haphazardly piled around some dusty furniture. The deliberately narrow ray of the flashlight had been designed, with burglary in mind, not to illuminate more than its immediate focus so Steve jumped in startled fright as a bed, obviously occupied came into view.

Recognition was almost immediate. “Dad!” he whispered wonderingly. Shock chased down his spine as the sight literally tore the breath from his chest. His emotions scudded wildly, ricocheting between unrestrained joy at the realisation that Mark has not perished at the bridge and anguished despair at the sudden fear that perhaps after all he’d arrived too late. He stood frozen, as if caught in that fraction of a second between a very vivid dream and the waking from it, his eyes searching for signs of life and his heart gripped by the icy embrace of dead fingers reaching from the grave as he realised that Mark was unrestrained in an unlocked room.

“Dad?” This time his voice was louder, utterly oblivious to anything beyond the motionless form
on the bed, his heart pounding so loudly he couldn’t hear beyond its thunderous roar. He dropped
to his knees, tentatively reaching out a hand, shaking a shoulder even though all instincts told him it
was futile. There was no response and Steve remained kneeling in numb disbelief, light headed,
heavy hearted, blood roaring through his veins. His flesh was searing, not from heat but from an
icy coldness that welled up from deep inside.

Wait! Cold! An inconsistency registered in the small part of his mind that was still capable of
rationality and he shifted his hand higher, resting the palm on his father’s cheek. It wasn’t
particularly warm but lacked the lifeless chill of a corpse. Now hopeful, he searched for a pulse,
impaired by the tremor in his fingers and it was long moments before he found it, unnaturally slow
but definitely present, pushing warmly at his fingertips. “Oh, God!”

Drugged, his mind supplied and the diagnosis was confirmed by a glance at the needle marks on
Mark’s arm. The release of fear and adrenalin transformed his muscles to jelly, and he rested his
head on his father’s shoulder in the agony of sheer relief as he fought against the emotional
tsunami seeping his body. As the all-consuming fear that had dominated his life since waking up in
the hospital dissipated, it was replaced by a murderous rage and if Jack Devlin had happened to
venture into his sight at this moment, Steve would have had little compunction in sending him a
small metallic greeting.

He shook his head unconsciously as he closed his eyes and tried to remember how to breathe. The
image of his father, mistreated, doped and then dumped into this small, dark room like so much
trash caused his chest to ache as if his ribs had been pried apart. He desperately hoped Mark had
been unconscious and not suffering throughout his ordeal, but felt the need to reassure anyway.
“Dad, everything’s going to be fine. I’m going to get you out of here.”

He checked Mark over quickly for hidden injuries, but apart from some bruising on his face and
arms, there was nothing obvious, and he sat back on his heels. “I haven’t the faintest idea what to
do right now, Dad. This is your area of expertise, not mine.” He rubbed Mark’s hand gently,
hoping for some sign of life, but there wasn’t the slightest twitch in response.

With a strange mixture of joy and anxiety, Steve considered the options available to him. His first
choice was to call for help, but his cell phone had been broken in the crash and he hadn’t thought to
help himself to Jesse’s. It might be possible to reach a phone in the house, if it wasn’t in use, but to
have a chance of success he’d have to leave his father unprotected and vulnerable and that was
unthinkable.

He was unable to fathom why Mark had been left alive so far, but suspected it had something to do
with Michael Devlin. However, the older man’s restraining presence was clearly finite and Steve
wanted to get his father out of the house as quickly as possible. He was armed with his back-up
weapon and if he took the household by surprise he might possibility keep them all subdued, but
the odds of four against one were not favourable and, handicapped by Mark’s unconscious body, he
would prefer evasion to confrontation.

He now regretted leaving his shoes outside, although it was probable he would have been
discovered before now if he’d retained them. The prospect of carrying his father to the car he’d
hidden down the road was daunting enough without adding bare feet. With an encouraging pat and
a murmured, “I’ll be right back,” Steve padded to the door. The faint murmuring of voices
emanating from the sick room and a quick peek showed him that the door was open and he
resigned himself to the impossibility of retracing his steps.

He needed to explore in the opposite direction for an escape route and he was determined to take
Mark along in the process. He hadn’t given much consideration to the problem of toting a fully
grown unconscious man -- he’d had training and practice in the proper techniques for lifting and carrying as a volunteer fire-fighter -- but it hadn’t occurred to him the difference a recent bullet wound would make.

Remembering the intensifying rain outside, he wrapped Mark securely in a blanket then with a grunt of pain, he hoisted his father expertly onto his shoulders, keeping up a soft monologue of information and reassurance in the hope that, like a coma victim, Mark was aware of his surroundings.

It was hard to combine surreptitious movement with the heavy load, but Steve shifted deftly out the door and down the corridor, horribly conscious of the susurration of nearby voices and their exposed position. He chose the room at the opposite end of the hall, easing the door open quietly and dipping sideways to maneuver inside. It appeared to be the office he’d sought earlier, but now the only item of interest to Steve was the window reflecting his image in the narrow beam of his flashlight.

“It’s easier to break out than in, Dad,” he muttered. Although that was undoubtedly true, a flick of his fingers unlocking the latch, it was also immeasurably harder to squeeze through a limited space while carrying an inert body. After a couple of false starts, he elected to slide Mark through the gap feet first then, supporting his father’s torso, slither down awkwardly to the ground himself.

Mark’s complete and prolonged limpness was disconcerting and as worry solidified into a chilled mass in the pit of his stomach, he reached again for his father’s pulse. Only marginally reassured by the lazy rhythm, he was attempting to close the window behind them when the furious cry of, “He’s gone,” assailed his ears quite clearly, a warming of imminent discovery penetrating the vacant dark room between them.

With scant ceremony, Steve hoisted Mark back into a fireman’s life and set off at a shambling run for the cover of the bushes. Within seconds, his socks were sodden and the wet fabric provided little traction in the muddy ground, compelling him to retard his headlong flight for fear of pitching headlong. A gravel pathway offered more hope of progress, but their combined weight thrust him down viciously onto the small stones which sliced through the thin material and into the soles of his feet. However, Steve was oblivious to all physical discomfort as the front door was flung open in a burst of light and the opening disgorged armed men like army ants swarming from an anthill to fight an intruder.

Fear prickled at the base of his spine as they fanned out between him and the gate, cutting off his easiest route back to the car. He faded back into the night, heading for the periphery of the property, not relishing their new role as prey in this deadly hunt. He felt trapped, caught in the spider’s web of the Devlins’ estate although it covered a large area. Earlier, he had vaulted over the surrounding wall in an area where the barbed wire had fallen, but it would be impossible to duplicate that athletic feat while carrying his father. Dawn couldn’t be more than a couple of hours away and then they would be sitting ducks for the Devlin shooting party in the light. He blocked out the increasing agony in his right shoulder and the prickly pains that reverberated down to his fingertips and, after slightly adjusting Mark’s position, he headed off in what he hoped was a direction that would offer escape.

The shouts of the hunters kept him apprised of the general movement of the pursuit and for several vital minutes it drifted towards the front of the grounds. Steve reached the wall and turned to parallel it, searching frantically for a weak area -- a convenient tree branch, a pile of bricks, anything that would allow him to clamber over with his precious burden, but the stark, shadowed bulk of stone mocked him with its inaccessibility. He ran a hand over the moist, rough surface, but it offered no purchase to climb. A running leap would allow his fingertips access to the top and he
could haul himself over, but then he’d have no way to reach back to Mark.

Frustrated, he staggered on, his breath harsh in his throat. The shouting increased in volume, words of anger and strategic suggestions now clearly audible. Goaded into greater haste, Steve stumbled heavily over a tree root, effectively blind in the dark and rain, and fell heavily to his knees, unable to suppress a cry of pain as the impact cruelly jarred his shoulder.

“Over this way!” The sound seemed to have betrayed their location and the baying of the hunters swung round, driving him on as he tried to ignore the shaky weakness in his legs and the cramping protests of his shoulders and back. It was impossible to maintain or even reach the speed necessary for evasion and his mind sought frantically for an alternative plan.

He almost ran headlong into a bush and its possibilities only occurred to him belatedly as he staggered around it. With a gentleness that used more energy than he could afford, he lowered Mark to the ground, wrapping him more securely with the blanket then rolling him carefully under the concealing brush. It wasn’t a hiding place that would hold up to rigorous scrutiny and every instinct revolted at leaving his father in that condition, but it was ultimately the only way to protect him.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.” He gave Mark’s shoulder a light squeeze then set off at a run, the odd lightness on his back counterbalanced by the heaviness in his heart. Once he judged himself sufficiently far away to bring the pursuers at an angle that would keep them away from his father, he drew his gun and aiming as carefully as circumstances allowed, squeezed off a bullet. The flurry of movement that greeted his shot might have been humorous if the situation wasn’t as dire. Lights spun in crazy circles as their bearers frenziedly dove for cover and a barrage of return fire exploded in the still night air.

Although nothing came close, he let out a yell as if hit, allowing a methodically searching light to brush over him before clumsily ducking away for cover. With triumphant shouts, the chase resumed. Confident that his dark clothes against the shadowy background would present an almost impossible target, Steve concentrated on speed, ignoring the sporadic spray of bullets, jinking like a snipe only when the probing rays of the flashlight briefly illuminated him. His original plan, to make an obvious escape over the wall, causing the Devlins to abandon their pursuit so he could circle back to Mark, was proving more problematic that he’d thought. Negotiating the barbed wire-topped high wall would leave him framed and exposed for too lengthy a period so he stumbled onwards, the air thick as molasses, dragging at his limbs.

His adversaries were not only fresher, but also had a greater knowledge of the lay of the land and would soon be in a position to encircle him. He couldn’t allow that. The bobbing flashlights in their hands marked their locations and with experienced judgment, he calculated his target, squeezing off two shots.

A scream verified his accuracy. “My leg. Jack, he shot me. The son of a bitch shot me.”

Steve flung himself flat on the sodden ground to avoid the furious fusillade of retribution that ripped the air around him and listened intently to the oldest brother’s barking of orders. “Bob, go help Jeff. Billy go to the house and get the shotgun. We’ll perforate the bastard.”

Steve was unsure whether they believed he was Mark or had forgotten about their former captive in the heat of fury, but he was eager to keep them too stirred up to think straight. With an effort he started moving again, grateful in his exhausted state that the pursuit was now more circumspect. He desperately wanted to circle back to Mark, but he had to lose them entirely before that became an option.
His lone hound dogged him silently, a constant if reduced threat, and Steve knew that this was the best time to appear to escape before his reserves were totally depleted. His shirt clung wetly to his back, sodden with sweat and precipitation, and he was limping as every step drove shards of jagged pain through the soles of his feet. His arms were bruised from fending off the branches that his eyes missed as the shifting shadows were overlaid with the crimson sparks pounding in the familiar rhythm of his racing heartbeat, touching his vision and disguising roots and undergrowth. It took several seconds to recognise the absence of the looming wall, the descent of a large tree crumbling a portion to the ground. It seemed like the ideal solution to his problem, and, mind benumbed by weariness, he ran into the gap, headless of anything except the opportunity it presented.

His progress was almost immediately impeded by a slightly yielding resistance, but the restraint only added to the abundant adrenaline in his system and he instinctively and blindly fought against the ghostly fingers as they ripped and tore at his clothes and flesh, wrapping himself inexorably in a steely embrace. At first oblivious to the pain in the struggle, his movements became more feeble, and fear turned to a lead weight in his stomach as he became aware of the shredding agony of the hundreds of pieces of steel embedded in his skin.

A victorious shout cut across the darkness, “We’ve got him. He’s in the wire!”
Chapter 12

Steve’s struggles had succeeded only in wrapping himself in a Gordian knot of barbed wire. Any movement aimed at release in one location only tightened the spikes in another, increasing the pain to a searing degree. He had to force himself to relax as icy prickles of fear tingled up and down his spine, merging with the stabs from the steely barbs. Panting breaths shuddered through his chest and he ignored the warily approaching gunman on the grounds that there was nothing he could do to counter any threat offered since he’d lost his weapon somewhere in his exertions. However, he used the illumination of the light trained on him to try to unravel the clutching wire.

His best guess was that there had originally been three strands loosely fastened across the gap, but that they had been torn free from their moorings by his impetuous entry. The first entwined his legs, the second encircled his torso and the last gripped his shoulder, winding up round one side of his neck. He concentrated on the latter as the most threatening to his long term wellbeing and the most easily unwound, but even the slightest movement of his arm tightened interconnected strands elsewhere. Patiently he persisted and eventually he accomplished the first disentanglement but at some cost as warm blood seeped down his neck to be lost in the cooler counterpoint of trickling rain. He was attempting to anchor that piece of wire securely to avoid it springing back when a grating laugh scraped across his nerves.

He glanced up, but the light shining in his eyes blinded him to everything behind it and he dropped his gaze, sure that Jack Devlin wouldn’t shoot without taking the opportunity to gloat. Sound became paramount, the key to information when his eyes couldn’t make out any portion of his enemy. He could faintly distinguish Devlin’s slightly hitched breath and his grunt of satisfaction before he began to speak.

“Detective Sloan, how the righteous have fallen. Breaking and entering is a serious crime, you know.”

“Yet it pales in comparison to murder and kidnapping.” Steve retorted, detaching another coil of wire with a vicious jerk. Blood welled up crimson on the shredded skin, glistening oddly in the beam of the flashlight before being diluted in the incessant rain and soaking pinkly in the tattered remains of Steve’s shirt.

Devlin squatted down a prudent distance away. “So tell me, Lieutenant,” he began conversationally. “I need a professional opinion. If a man, on whom you had a restraining order, broke into your home, shot a member of your family and was killed himself in the performance of this crime, don’t you think a jury would call this self-defense, a justifiable homicide?”

Steve shook his head dubiously, playing for time as he continued to extricate himself, all the time surreptitiously searching for his gun. “Juries are unpredictable.” He plucked doggedly at the strand across his stomach, some of the barbs visible as dark lines under his skin like a bizarre tribal tattoo. It seemed that Devlin was content to allow him to continue his efforts to extricate himself, no doubt confident in his ability to shoot him if he succeeded.

“However, once the prosecutor presents all the evidence connected with Serena Trenton’s murder, I think I can guarantee you a rendezvous with the electric chair.”

“There’s no evidence.” The assurance in Devlin’s voice slipped slightly on the assertion.

“Sure there is.” Steve’s needling sought out his adversary’s weaknesses. “How do you think we were on your doorstep so quickly? The suicide scenario was a creative idea, but you made several
amateur mistakes and, with modern forensics as they are, we had no trouble tying you in. For example, the DNA on her clothes from when you lifted her up on the chair.” It was a bluff, but he stuck to the facts of which he was sure. “Then when the star witness appears, you haven’t a hope.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” The light shot three feet into the air as Devlin clearly jumped to his feet, but to Steve the outline of the beam was fuzzy, blurring like an out of focus street lamp. He blinked frantically, thinking at first that it was atmospheric moisture causing the visual illusion, but the haze split into a myriad of dancing stars, although they may have been black holes as everything seemed sucked towards them. He felt suddenly dislocated from his surroundings, disoriented and nauseated and he fought down the bile that rose in his throat and the void that clawed at his consciousness. Losing the struggle meant leaving his father unprotected and that was unacceptable so by sheer dint of will he summoned a laugh.

“My father will testify not only as a medical expert to you committing Serena’s murder, but also to your kidnapping, drugging and general mistreatment of him.” The catalog of the abuse suffered by his father at this man’s hands roused his anger, providing an effective antidote to the physical chill and exhaustion consuming him. “It’s amazing how eloquent he can be. There isn’t a jury in the world that won’t condemn you to death after he takes the stand if you kill me.”

“Where is he?” There was a tautness in the demand that spoke of barely suppressed sanity and the light flashed in dizzying circles as if Devlin expected to find Mark standing nearby.

“Gone...Safe.” Steve forced a feigned satisfaction into his tone and resumed his efforts at self-extrication.

“You’re lying.” It was a shout of rage. “The last dose wouldn’t have worn off yet and besides your car is still here. We disabled it.”

“You don’t think I was stupid enough to come here by myself, do you?” Steve could only wish that were true. “A friend came with me in his car and helped me get Dad out. It was slow going, so once you gave chase, I broke off in this direction to buy them time. Didn’t you ever think how easy it was to follow me? I could have lost you any time but I was careful not to.” There was a fine line between convincing Devlin that murder was contrary to his best interests and actually goading him into committing such violence and for an unnerving moment, Steve thought he’d pushed the man over it. He could see nothing of Jack behind the dazzling light, no expression of eye contact to judge the niceties of psychological profiling, but he’d faced many homicidal gunmen in his career and was all too familiar with the nearly tangible undercurrents that swirled revealingly between them.

The silence intensified into a palpable sensation, forcing Steve’s breath to stillness and muting his heartbeat to a dull roar. The thick tension, charged with irrevocable decision, sparked along his nerve endings like a live wire, spurring him to defuse the imminent explosion. He eased from the twisted sitting position into which he’d stumbled into an approximation of a reclining pose, knowing that not only would that make him harder to shoot, but that it was also a less provocative stance.

The dampness of the ground under him immediately started to seep through his clothes and he shifted, trying to ward off the chill while furtively groping for some means of defense garnered from the broken wall around him.

The matter might have ended disastrously for Steve if there hadn’t been an interruption, but any gratitude he might have felt for the newcomer was short-lived as he realised it was the shotgun-toting brother. Fear flashed like a lightning bolt up his limbs and into his spine. He’d seen the horrendous damage inflicted by a short-range blast from such a gun and although intellectually he
knew Jack’s automatic could easily shoot him equally dead, psychologically, there was an additional horror to facing such a devastating weapon.

“Is he still there?” Bob asked excitedly as if Steve were an exotic animal spotted on safari. He peered forward, one side of his head grotesquely lit up by his brother’s flashlight, exaggerating the hollows and protuberances of his face.

The odds against Steve had increased exponentially and his chances of escaping from the two murderous brothers had vanished like the last wisp of fog in the heat of the sun. The Devlins were unpredictable especially in their increasing desperate attempts to prevent their plans from unraveling. So far they were keeping their distance, partly out of respect for his defensive capabilities but also out of uncertainty as to their captive’s eventual disposal.

A soft glint over to his left caught his eye and in the guise of shielding his gaze from the blazing beam that spotlighted him, he tried to identify it. Was it his weapon or was the power of his imagination adding shape to the shadows to suggest the outline of a gun? Either way it was out of his reach, so for now Steve decided his best hope lay in keeping the brothers talking. He was mostly disentangled, held prisoner now only by two simple strands embedded deeply but straightforwardly across his belly and right thigh. He could pull free of them with comparative ease, but chose to leave them as a visual symbol of his captivity and consequent harmlessness.

“I must admit,” he called out conversationally, “my father’s reappearance will cause quite a shock as you had nearly everyone convinced that he was dead. How did you pull that off, anyway?”

It was an open invitation to brag and although the criminal tendency to ‘monologue’ was greatly exaggerated in film and on TV, it was human nature to crow about accomplishments and Billy fell for the bait.

“That’s enough, Billy,” Jack cut in sharply and the younger brother’s voice trailed off sullenly, but he’d said enough for Steve to grasp the scheme, in fact, to understand far more than what had been relayed. Of course it had been Jack Devlin’s plan. It carried the same chillingly efficient, calculating hallmarks that underscored Serena Trenton’s faked suicide.

Once Mark’s death had been established and accepted in the minds of all concerned with no visible blame attached to the Devlins, they would have disposed of his body. Mark’s earlier story of South Africa’s use of Tubarine assumed a new, more horrifying significance. They would have dumped him in the ocean and if his remains had ever reached the shore, it would be presumed a natural end of the journey began at the Hilton Head Bridge with no forensic evidence to the contrary.

Contemplation of this possibility, separated from reality by only the flimsiest of margins, rolled through his mind, hot and molten, igniting an incandescent rage that threatened to erupt in a violent explosion of retribution heedless of the odds and arms confronting him. His fingers closed over the jagged edges of a broken segment of stone from the wall, clenching hard enough for the new sting to temporarily supplant other aches and pains. Only the consideration that getting himself shot would almost certainly result in Mark ending back in Devlin’s hands helped him restrain himself and ride the wave of fury.

“Why?” He spat out bitterly as he levered himself back onto an elbow. “What did he do to deserve this treatment?”

“Everything was going fine until that interfering old fool stuck his nose in.” The response was
vicious, rabid with hatred, but still familiar enough to rouse a genuine, if weak, laugh from Steve.

“I’ll grant you the interfering. His curiosity would kill a litter of cats. However, I’ve never met anyone smarter. He bested you, didn’t he? He was on your trail instantly, saw straight through your little charade.”

His nonchalant yet scathing rejoinder drew Billy back into the fray. “Well, he was pretty stupid to just walk into our house alone,” he stated defensively.

“He may have been alone, but it was in the sure and certain knowledge that I’d be following him if he got into trouble.” Speaking the words brought its own reassurance to Steve as he recognised their truth. Mark would have known that his son would find him.

“Oh yes, he told us that,” the youngest Devlin sneered. “That’s why Jack shot you.”

“Shut up, Billy!”

Another mystery solved. Steve could picture the scenario in his mind -- Mark cornered, outnumbered and desperate, trying to ward off imminent disaster with the talisman that his son was a police officer and would exact immediate retribution if they attempted to detain him. Steve could only hope that his father was not aware of how his words had backfired. He would be devastated to find out that his son had nearly died as a result. It would have taken only a minimum of detective work on Devlin’s part to pinpoint his target’s whereabouts and identify the car he was driving. He must have been thrilled to find Steve at his competitor’s workplace, so the shooting would cast suspicion on one of Trenton’s employees. There was certainly nothing to link the Devlins with the incident.

It was also worth noting, especially given current circumstances, that Jack Devlin was a marksman. Whether that shot had been intended to kill or merely to act as a distraction, it had been remarkably accurate in the conditions, a point that didn’t bode well for his own long-term prospects. Steve didn’t believe he had convinced Devlin of the merits of his case for continued survival, after all, the man had little to lose, but at the moment Jack still seemed undecided, weighing up the likelihood of successfully murdering again with impunity.

The multitude of small puncture wounds and more severe tears were all throbbing with a painful intensity, setting up a syncopated, incremental feedback loop that built up in the pain receptors of his shoulder. His hair was plastered against his forehead but he didn’t know if it was the rain or sweat acting as the adhesive, nor was he sure if he was hot or cold; there were too many sensations swarming through his overloaded nervous system.

He risked another surreptitious glance to the left and this time the shape of the gun was clearly delineated against the more random configurations of the leaves. It was appreciably lighter as dawn approached although it was impossible to make out anything but the most amorphous of shadows behind the flashlights that still focused on him. A quick calculation showed him that the weapon was hidden from the Devlin’s line of sight by the wall, but it was also well out of his own reach. Any quick movement, hindered as he was by trappings of wire, would not be fast enough to outrun an admonishing bullet and a slow crawl was unlikely to find favour either.

He needed a distraction and he couldn’t quite see Jack falling for the ‘look who’s behind you’ ploy, and under the full force of their observation he couldn’t exactly pull the ‘throw a stone to make everyone look in the wrong direction,’ ruse and at the moment his ingenuity didn’t seem capable of conjuring up a more creative strategy. The Devlins were whispering together now, -- urgent, sibilant words clearly full of malice, but just beyond the threshold of his hearing. He could indistinctly make out violent gesticulations but despite the intentness of their conversation, he
didn’t doubt that any move on his part would meet with immediate retaliation.

The need to return to Mark was gnawing away at his composure and he didn’t feel like waiting patiently for the two psycho brothers to come to the decision to shoot him so he launched his first volley in an inchoate plan that was probably more suicidal than scintillating.

“How’s your father doing?” Actually the more he thought about it, the more he realised that ‘plan’ was a misnomer. It was more a fuzzy, highly dubious hunch of the best way to proceed.

Not surprisingly, it was Billy who couldn’t resist the invitation to expound. “He’s dead.” Grief and fury blended in a volatile mix, but Steve was more interested in provoking a reaction from Jack as the indisputable leader of the brothers.

“I’m sorry.” He was, and not only out of disinterested compassion. Whatever stabilising influence the patriarch had provided was now defunct. Not allowing himself to dwell on the emotions that death exposed, he continued ruthlessly. “I know what it’s like to lose a father...except of course, I didn’t.” His eyes tried to pierce past the dazzling brightness of the flashlight into the gloom, into the darkness of Jack Devlin’s soul.

As if in answer to that unspoken probing, the older brother spoke, venom coating every bitter word. “I should have shot that old bastard while I had the chance. If I ever see him again, I won’t hesitate and it shouldn’t be too hard to obtain another opportunity. If I tell your father, I have you here, I think he’ll think twice about stepping into the witness box.”

Steve swallowed. He didn’t want to be shot out of hand, but neither could he afford to replace Mark as a drugged, useless body discarded on a bed. He dredged up a credible facsimile of a laugh. “You’re still under the illusion that you can beat my father, but you don’t have a chance. Better men than you have tried and failed. You’re a rank amateur.”

“The only thing your father is good at is terrorising sick old men,” Devlin spat back.

A starburst of rage rocketed up inside Steve’s chest and he allowed the adrenaline to tense exhausted and stiff muscles while still maintaining control. As dawn washed in, illuminating the darkness with diluted colour, it allowed Steve to see his adversary with some clarity for the first time that night. Black brows beetled together in a hate-filled scowl. The focus of each man was absolute and every atom in the ten yards between them was charged with the force of the emotions crackling between them.

“Your father was dying. Dad had nothing to do with it.” Steve continued to goad Devlin. “The doctors had given him six months, he was doing fine until your father’s visit.”

“You know what I think? I think my dad is just a handy scapegoat for you. What killed your father was learning that his sons were worthless, no-good murderers. You killed him just as surely as if...”

Steve had started moving, sensing Jack’s intent even before the other man had formed it, seizing that moment of opportunity as Jack, enraged beyond rationality, turned to snatch the shotgun from his brother’s hands, to execute a diving roll towards cover. The last strands of barbed wire, reluctant to release their victim, somewhat hampered his progress until they ripped free in a spray of blood. He scooped up his gun neatly on the move, and was almost entirely behind the wall, every muscle in his body tensed for a moment that seemed to stretch into infinity, when the first barrel exploded. He was far enough away for the shot cluster to have spread considerably, the pattern dispersed, and only a few pellets slapped into his legs before they were withdrawn hastily behind the now comfortably solid stone wall.
Devlin was shouting profanely, stammering almost incoherently with rage, but since he hadn’t yet worked the pump to reload the barrel, Steve risked leaning around the edge to fire two quick shots before ducking back back.

There was a moment’s silence then a cry of anguish laced with indescribable fury. Any doubts as to the wisdom of staying where he was were removed by the ratcheting of the pump and another tumultuous discharge. There were sounds of immediate reloading, fast, experienced and furious, and more shot smashed against the wall. Even the sturdy stones quailed under the power of destruction, particles blasted into fine powder wafting into the air to form a glistening cloud in the pale light.

Steve kept his head down, scuttling backwards from the most highly targeted area and gripped his gun tightly in both hands as the origin of the blasts drew nearer. If Devlin rounded the wall firing, Steve would have no chance of survival. He contemplated a fast retreat, but even if he were in any condition to lose himself in the undergrowth, it was unlikely that he could outrun a shotgun blast at this point. Fear clawed at his belly, muscles aching with the tension of bracing himself uselessly in expectation of that lethal, agonising discharge.

To his surprise and tentative relief the explosions stopped, probably because Devlin was out of cartridges. “You’re dead, Sloan.” His voice was low and vindictive, quivering with passion. “You’re a fucking dead man. I don’t care where you go or who you try to hide behind, I’m going to find you and kill you.”

Still wary, Steve stayed motionless listening to the sounds of footsteps receding before rising a quick peek round the gap. He watched Devlin carry his brother’s limp body back towards the house with unexpected empathy. Until just a few hours ago he believed he’d lost both father and sibling and that immense loss he wouldn’t wish on his worst enemy - a position for which Jack Devlin would definitely currently qualify. It seemed they had a lot in common - apart from the whole homicidal thing Devlin had going. Although considering he’d just shot his kid brother, Jack might disagree with that.

Steve groaned, trying to rein in his scattered thinking. The only thing that really mattered was getting back to his father. He started to stand and, with a yelp of pain, had to grab at the wall to prevent himself from collapsing back down. The blood was singing in his ears and his stomach rolled over queasily as the trees swirled around him in a spiraling vortex.

His injuries from the wire were sore and throbbing but mostly superficial. However, scrambling over stones and twigs without shoes, with the additional weight on his shoulders forcing him down, had badly lacerated the soles which were sliced almost raw by the pounding, bloody from heel to toe. But there was no time for indulging in weakness, Jack would be back to make good on his promise. Steve hobbled forward stiffly, letting the pain course through him and forcing his legs to continue on regardless.

Everything looked different in the light, which wasn’t surprising since now he could actually see the trees and bushes that had been merely dark blurs against a black background just hours before. Still, an instinct deeper than thought guided him back without deviating from his path. The beige blanket could now be seen through the foliage of the bush and a sudden shaft of fear slid into him as he realised the Mark hadn’t moved an inch since he’d left. This unnatural stillness caused dark thoughts and feelings of desperation to rampage through his mind even when he confirmed that his father was still breathing.

“I’m back, Dad.” He studied his father’s familiar and beloved face closely, then shook him gently, trying to remember what medical responses he could elicit to reassure himself. Surely there should
be some reaction after all this time. “I have to tell you, you’re starting to worry me here.” It was something of an understatement. Fear was knotting his stomach, drying and tightening his throat until it hurt to swallow, choking him.

Had the Devlins, in their complete and utter disregard for Mark’s welfare, actually injected him with a fatal overdose? After all this, was his father going to die? The thought knifed across his heart with a pain that was more racking than anything his body had ever been called on to withstand. He had to get Mark to hospital as soon as humanly possible, yet that was clearly becoming an increasingly challenging proposition.

Never taking his gaze off his father, Steve sat back to take the weight off his feet while he mentally ran through his options. Since his own car was apparently out of commission, maybe he could hotwire one belonging to the Devlins. It would certainly be considerably easier than trying to carry his father to safety, but also carried substantial risks. It would mean walking into the lion’s den in the forlorn hope that the predators were otherwise occupied. He had few bullets left as he’d intended the night’s foray to be a covert mission, not a confrontational one. Reluctantly, he decided that the risks outweighed the benefits. Jack Devlin had the superior firepower and would be only too delighted to employ it.

In the absence of a car, he really wished he could at least recover his shoes. His eyes fell on the blanket enfolding Mark. It was a poor substitute for leather soles, but it would have to do. Shifting his father slightly, he hacked off a couple of pieces of the material to jury-rig into footwear while continuing his strategic deliberations.

He could leave Mark behind in a more secure hiding place while he went for help. This would give him greater mobility and speed should Jack make good on his threat to hunt him down, but he was too afraid he’d return to find his father dead. It couldn’t be safe to leave him alone in his condition even if there wasn’t a homicidal maniac prowling the grounds.

The stiff, wiry hairs of the blanket felt like the barbed wire from which he’d recently escaped on the lacerated flesh of his feet, but he grimly bound them up, tying knots with two narrow strips to keep them fastened. He’d whittled down his choices to one -- renewing his flight with Mark draped over his shoulder.

It was a daunting prospect, but Steve refused to acknowledge the intimidating nature of the task that lay ahead. “I’ll tell you what, Dad. You promise to keep breathing and I’ll promise not to drop you.”

He tucked the blanket more firmly round his father leaving his arms clear for the fireman’s lift. The material was so waterlogged it couldn’t be providing much by way of warmth but it did furnish padding and some protection from the elements.

Wincing, he got his feet underneath him, preparing for the arduous task of lifting his father’s dead weight off the ground and onto his shoulders. He managed it in the prescribed stages, pulling Mark into a standing position, then lifting one of his father’s arms and ducking underneath before straightening with an effort.

Once upright, he staggered a few painful steps before reaching out and bracing himself against a nearby tree so he could adjust Mark’s not inconsiderable weight more effectively. “He ain’t heavy, he’s my father,” he misquoted dryly. “That may be true, Dad. But the next time you suggest shedding a few pounds, I’ll be behind you all the way.”

He swayed in place and almost fell before regaining some of his equilibrium. He still had to get past the surrounding blockade and the only two places he knew he could achieve that were the
entrance and the ill-fated gap he’d recently left. He quickly opted for the gate since it offered easier terrain and presumably was nearer to helpful neighbours. Hopefully Devlin would return to the gap in order to resume the chase and that would give them a much needed head-start.

The rain increased in volume, pitiless and chilling, and almost blinding in its fury. By the time Steve reached the end of the drive, the pain in his shoulders was like white fire and every step agony on his torn feet. The gates swung open willingly for him and he only hoped that there was nothing in the mechanism that sent an alarm to the house when activated.

He contemplated fabricating some sort of travois, but there was no time. With lethal pursuit almost guaranteed, distance was more important than ease of travel. He breathed in deeply, sucking the cool, moist air deep into his burning lungs then set off down the canyon.

Time quickly became meaningless, the concept slipping away as evasively as secure footing on the road. Water streamed almost continuously over the surface sometimes ankle deep, and he often slipped and slid through inches of sludge where minor mudslides had carried debris across his trail. He was beyond exhaustion and pain defined his existence, consuming his senses in a red haze, yet with a stubborn tenacity that bordered on pigheadedness, he persevered, concentrating only on the next step. Left, right, left, right - it was always possible to take just one more stride.

The deluge cut down on visibility, not that there was anything of the remotest interest to see in the sodden scenery except foliage. He’d fought fires in the summers when the fierce Santa Ana winds dried out the vegetation, but it was amazing how lush the brush had become in the rain. Steve’s gaze was mostly focused on the ground ahead, but well-developed survival instincts kept him periodically checking behind. Blinking to clear the raindrops trickling into his eyes, he spotted something moving back down the road and his stomach plunged as if he'd just dropped thirty stories in a runaway elevator as the figure materialised into the shape of a person. There was only one person who would be on this road at this time -- Jack Devlin.
Chapter 13

There was an inevitability to the situation: too much lay between the two men and a reckoning was unavoidable. Steve would almost have welcomed the confrontation if it hadn’t been for his father’s unconscious presence. With an effort, he increased his speed, although he knew that there was no chance of outrunning his adversary. However, the more cloaking rain between them the better.

A lot would depend on the weapons with which Devlin had chosen to arm himself. Steve almost hoped that his adversary had retained the shotgun because it would be way too easy for the gunman to simply pick them off with a rifle. Intuition told him the former was more likely. This was personal, and Jack wasn’t looking for a distant kill. He wanted to see fear in his victim’s eyes and, more importantly, he wanted blood.

A small gully offered a manageable path off the road and Steve started to scramble upwards, escaping from the direct line of fire. The ground was treacherously unstable and he slipped and slithered, the additional weight on his shoulders throwing him off his balance and his energy draining faster than air from a slashed tire, despite the adrenaline flooding his system.

He had to find a place to safeguard Mark. His preference would be a locked, but not airtight, vault in the center of a police station at Fort Knox, but he would settle for any secure, concealed location that was sheltered enough so that Mark didn’t risk inadvertently drowning in his unconscious state. There were places that met one or even two of these criteria but not all. He climbed up the side of the gully, using roots and branches to pull himself with his free hand, needing to find an area out of the direct flow of water.

An overhanging rock with a mountain laurel growing underneath provided the most promising protection, and Steve gently eased Mark off his shoulders and onto the ground, his weary arms trembling with the effort. He was grateful for the cushioning afforded by the blanket and made sure his father’s head was not only comfortable but also out of the way of potential runoff.

The rain pattering on outspread, verdant leaves drowned out all other noise, but Steve kept alert for the slightest indication of movement. He pulled out his gun, checking his ammunition, dismayed, but unsurprised, to find only three bullets left. It didn’t matter. He was tired of being the quarry in this chase. This time, he would take the hunt to his pursuer.

His gaze was cold and hard, the warrior replacing the public servant as he scanned the scenery, softening momentarily as he patted his father farewell.

With the weight off his shoulders and both hands free, he was able to move stealthily through the undergrowth, his absolute focus not permitting the intrusion of pain or weakness. He automatically headed upwards, seeking the high ground for combat advantage and better visibility.

Crouched next to an outcropping of rock, the mud besmearing him providing excellent camouflage, Steve might have been an inanimate part of the landscape if it wasn’t for the restless searching of his blue eyes and the occasional blinking away of the excess moisture settling over his vision as the rain streamed down his face.

Leaves trembled continuously from the overhead beating and water gathered in increasing volumes, trickles becoming streams becoming cascades, carrying along light debris as it tumbled down the small canyon. Yet there was no sign of Devlin, no motion that indicated a human presence. What Steve could see of the road through the foliage and precipitation was empty, but red warning signals flashed along his nerve endings as every instinct told him that Jack Devlin was
nearby.

From his vantage point, Steve could still watch the area in which he’d hidden Mark, making sure that Devlin hadn’t unexpectedly circumvented his position to attack from the other side, but he concentrated his attention to the right. His patience was soon rewarded when an anomalous movement in the bushes a gully away caught his attention. A head of black hair peered cautiously out of the undergrowth, and Steve flattened himself further against the rock.

For a few seconds Devlin was in plain sight, the shotgun clasped firmly in his hands easy to identify, before he was hidden by the curve of the hillside. Careful not to dislodge any stones that might rattle down and betray his position, Steve wormed his way across on a path that would intercept Devlin’s but slightly higher up the gulch.

The rockier terrain at the top of the gully quickly shifted to a muddier landscape and after crawling through it, Steve was barely distinguishable from the sludge surrounding him. He waited silently, tucked under some brush, his gun upraised, following his adversary’s progress by the sequential waving of the foliage in his direction.

Devlin was careless. Perhaps overconfident because of his superior firepower or perhaps too distraught to be sufficiently vigilant, he gave little scrutiny to his surroundings, proceeding onwards perpendicularly across the more open ground of the canyon without hesitation. Soon his back was turned to Steve, an easy and tempting target, offering not only an end to the threat which had been so constant, but also revenge for the anguish and terror inflicted on both himself and his father in the last few days. Yet he couldn’t bring himself to pull the trigger.

Shooting a man from behind was too much like murder and both his training and the fundamental human decency so central to his character prohibited such an action. Neither was a warning call the answer; its results would almost certainly be tragic. Either Devlin would succeed in turning in time and it wouldn’t take much accuracy for a blast to be lethal for Steve or he would be forced to shoot Devlin, because for the latter to tamely surrender at this point was inconceivable.

An alternative occurred to him and his left hand searched out a sizable rock which he hefted consideringly with the retrospective instincts of a quarterback. The throw was perfectly judged, impacting Devlin’s shoulder blade with an audible thud that was almost drowned out by his cry of pain and surprise. The shotgun flew from nerveless fingers, giving Steve the opening he desired. With a few running strides, he launched himself down on the other man, using the momentum gained from his higher elevation to propel Devlin down to the ground.

It was a successful strategy that had often worked for him in the past, but Jack didn’t stay subdued for more than one stunned second, turning on his assailant with a snarl and an elbow in the face. Soon the fight had deteriorated into a slug fest as both men unleashed the fury of insults and injuries inflicted on loved ones and self. Steve’s wounded shoulder was balanced by the severe bruising he’d just caused with the rock missile, but neither cared about blows sustained, only about inflicting more damage on their enemy.

The mud cushioned much of the violence, punches often sliding ineffectually off slick skin but Steve was aware only of the release of days of pent-up pain and fear, the grief that had settled in his heart and twisted his soul easing with this mindless opportunity for revenge.

Although there was little scientific in his tactics, Steve’s training and experience enabled him to get the upper hand and he was gearing up to deliver a decisive blow when he was interrupted by a strange noise, a reverberating pop that seemed to gather volume into an intensifying rumble. Simultaneously the ground seemed to liquefy beneath him, sweeping them both downhill in a flowing river of mud.
“Landslide!” Steve clutched a handful of Devlin’s shirt, hauling him bodily sideways as he fought the downward current in an attempt to reach safety. “Come on!” Rocks, bushes and other debris pummeled him as he crossed their plummeting path. Something large, he wasn’t sure what, slammed into his arm, tearing Devlin from his grasp. He made a frantic grab to catch him, but his fingers closed on nothing and he caught a last glimpse of the other man’s despairing face as the mud swept him away.

Steve slipped under, finding the consistency of the slurry a lot like cake batter -- but not as tasty and with sticks and pebbles thrown in. Black flecks swirled before his eyes as he struggled to his feet, grasping a solid rock to the side. It was enough to allow the mudslide to pass and seconds later he collapsed, coughing and retching, the foul taste in his mouth making him sick and nauseous.

In retrospect, he realised he should have expected such a disaster as the recent torrential rain had saturated the soil, the water loosening it enough to slump down the hill carrying the vegetation and loose rock with it. He’d been lucky to survive the experience. Only the relatively small size of the gully and their location near the top of the slide’s inception had allowed him to resist its destructive force.

He sat up gingerly, his eyes scouring the bottom of the hill for signs of life, but now everything was ominously still, even the force of rain seemed to have abated. That was good news since it meant.... “Dad!”

The horror was almost physical, striking his nerves like shards of ice, and then he was on feet, racing across the denuded bedrock. The frozen fist of fear clenched around his heart melted slightly as he topped the rise and realised that the mudslide had been localised, confined solely to the gully he’d been in, and the one in which he’d left Mark was untouched. However, the hollow ache in his gut didn’t ease until he confirmed his father was unharmed and still breathing. He swayed as tension washed out of him and the exhaustion of intense emotions and too many hours without sleep caught up with him.

There wasn’t an inch of his body that didn’t throb and ache, but Mark still needed a hospital and the dangers of the area had presented themselves to him with unequivocal clarity so, for the third time that night, Steve hoisted his father onto his shoulders. Despite his desire to vacate the vicinity with all due celerity, he climbed down with meticulous care, anxious to avoid precipitating another landslide.

He was aware that any safety the road offered was purely illusionary as he crossed evidence that his gully hadn’t been the only one to spew its contents with lethal force down into the valley, but he had no energy to spare for contemplation of that danger. Every step sent jolts of pain through his frame and the trembling of exhausted muscles, pushed beyond the limits of endurance, were mutating into shudders that tore through his body like a series of intensifying tidal waves, leaving destruction in their wake.

Conscious only of the need to keep moving, he was unaware of the car approaching up the road until it stopped in front of him. He gazed at the barrier uncomprehendingly, unable to identify it either as salvation or as a threat. However, he recognised the incredulous voice that emanated from the figure that exited the vehicle.

“Steve!”

For his part, the only thing Jesse could recognise in the drenched, mud-smeared individual staggering down the road was the physique. He stared in an amalgam of relief and horror at his bedraggled friend, not even trying to guess at the ordeal that had brought him to such a clear state
of exhaustion.

As he hurried forward to help, Steve lowered the equally disheveled figure he’d been carrying to the ground, falling on his knees beside him. “Thank God, Jesse. Please help him!”

Jesse’s focus had been entirely on Steve, but as the rain fell on the muddy face revealed atop the soaked, filthy blanket, the water washing the gaunt features, a burning chill of dawning realization spread through his limbs. Disbelief and shock consumed him at the sight of the face he’d never expected to see again.

“Oh my God, Mark!” His breath hitched in his chest, paralysis holding him captive for several seconds. The utter stillness of the limp body instilled in him the fear that the help for which Steve was pleading was too late and his hand trembled uncertainly as he reached out, fumbling with suddenly numb fingers. “He’s alive! Oh God, I don’t believe it, he’s really alive!”

His eyes flooded with moisture, a profound and amazed gratitude spilling over into joy and he moved closer, hands searching carefully for causes of Mark’s unconscious condition, first checking for a possible head wound.

“He’s been drugged.” Steve’s voice was oddly small and lost for so big and strong a man and while his fingers kept moving, Jesse switched his gaze to check out his friend. What he saw alarmed him considerably. In the few places the rain had rinsed away the ingrained dirt, blood and bruises stood out starkly against the white pallor of his face and if the tears in his clothes at all corresponded to equal damage to the flesh beneath, as was his best guess, Steve needed medical help as much as his father. Perhaps most disturbing was the glassy look within his eyes from the pain and shock that dominated their unfocused depths.

“Steve, are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Steve responded rather impatiently, dismissing the question as irrelevant although in Jesse’s opinion he was probably as far from fine as a person could get while still being able to answer the question. However, this wasn’t the time for pushing the issue and the doctor continued his examination.

“He’s cold, mildly hypothermic. I’ve got a dry blanket in the car to replace this one.”

Steve didn’t move as Jesse returned to his car. The true drain not only on his body but on his soul was just beginning to hit. Only the sheer stubbornness that had carried him this far, bolstered by the need to know his father would be okay, was keeping him upright in blatant denial of gravity and his own complete exhaustion.

He helped Jesse wrap Mark in a bright red cover then maneuver him into the back seat of the car, crawling in to support him and make him comfortable even though he was unconscious. Steve’s body was so tired, in such desperate need of rest, that it simply refused to relax, fine tremors coursing unremittingly through overtaxed muscles. As the car bounced and jolted down the pot-holed road, he cushioned his father against the jarring motion, holding him steady against his good shoulder.

Jesse fought the car as it fishtailed through another shallow mudslide, trying to find the right balance between urgency and caution. Despite the worry he felt for both friends, there was an upwelling of joy in his soul, bubbling and tickling inside as his universe, which had been so off-kilter, righted itself.

With one hand he fished out his cell phone and hit the speed dial, relieved when the call went
through. The poignant cry uttered by Amanda when he related the good news echoed in his heart, bringing an involuntary smile to his face but it slipped away quickly as he explained the current situation. She promised to have things ready for their arrival at the hospital and Jesse disconnected. He contemplated calling Captain Newman, but since he had no idea what had actually happened that night and didn’t want to get Steve into more trouble, he desisted. His friend was in no condition to be answering questions about his recent activities.

Swerving to avoid what looked like a miniature meteor crater in the road, he glanced anxiously in the rearview mirror to check on the status of his passengers. From this angle he couldn’t see if Steve’s eyes were open but the tension sheathing his form left Jesse in no doubt as to his level of consciousness. There was something about the way he was holding his father -- in an embrace so fiercely protective that no hurt would dare try to penetrate it -- that brought a lump to Jesse’s throat.

He owed his friend an apology and he’d never in his life been so happy to be wrong. It was a miracle that Mark was alive and Steve’s battered condition attested to the fact that he was the miracle worker. They weren’t out of the woods yet, but at least light was visible through the dense foliage.
“Damn it, Steve!” Unspoken worry dripped from Jesse’s frustrated shout. He directed his most effective glare at the obdurate detective, but it bounced right off his friend’s impervious hide. The young doctor mentally rifled through his arsenal of tools to manipulate Steve, He’d started with reason and quickly progressed to intimidation and threats, retreated to sympathy and bribes before bringing out the big guns of coercion coupled with a blinding flash of medical verbosity. All that was left to him now was the highest calibre weapon he possessed - guilt.

“I’m only asking you to lie down in that bed, not leave the room altogether. If Mark wakes up to find you collapsed on the floor, that isn’t going to do him any good, is it?”

Steve just sat there in the wheelchair, arms crossed tightly over his chest, as if he was holding himself together by sheer force of will. Jesse could see the tremors pass through his body, the accumulating tension lodging in his jaw as he ground out, "And I’m not trying to run a marathon, I’m just sitting here quietly. I’m fine."

Jesse drew in a deep breath to deliver the litany of reasons why Steve was not fine, and it was an extensive list, but the futility of such a diatribe struck him as he saw a determination in his friend’s eyes that would light a candle at ten paces and he released the breath in a long huff. He glanced across at Amanda who had remained mostly quiet throughout this one-sided debate. Now, she shrugged, though whether it was in resignation or indifference to the topic he couldn’t tell.

Steve had turned back to his father, exhaustion curling off him like smoke and desolation reeking from every line of his body. This dejected posture deflated the last of Jesse’s righteous indignation and he wished the news he’d recently given his friend could have been unadulteratedly positive.

Upon arrival at the hospital, Jesse had been torn between his two patients but Mark’s prolonged unconsciousness would have won out over Steve’s more evident but ambulatory injuries even if the latter hadn’t made it clear where the young doctor’s priorities needed to be.

After establishing that there was no obvious physical trauma responsible for Mark’s condition, Jesse analysed his blood-work for the drugs that Steve had informed him were used and, following a hunch, he tested for tubarine, the same substance that had been used on Serena Trenton. The screening came back positive and he quickly administered Endrophonium as an antidote as well as saline and glucose to counteract the dehydration and malnutrition that were also clearly evident.

The repeated administration of the neuromuscular blocking agent over several days had left Mark in a coma and although his condition was improving, it was a real possibility that brain damage had been caused by the cocktail of drugs. The concept of that sharp mind in any way impaired was horrific for all of them but, for now, all they could do was wait.

Jesse was really tired of being the bearer of bad news. He could feel a little bit of his former anger crawling back, though now without a target, as he remembered Steve’s reaction to the warning that the father he knew might still be lost to them forever, how the desperate hope had turned to raw, living pain in his eyes and the gaunt, stark lines of his face tightened even more as he shook his head in denial.

Jesse placed a hand on Steve’s good shoulder, hoping the gesture of support would say what he seemed incapable of putting into words. He could feel the tension and barely suppressed tremors under his fingers and it struck him once more that resilient did not equal indestructible.
On the journey to the hospital, Steve had given Jesse enough information to help Mark and to call Captain Newman to tell him to send a unit to the Devlin’s house, but since arriving at the hospital the detective had been more than usually taciturn which Jesse had put down to pure weariness and being emotionally drained, so he was surprised when his friend actually volunteered a comment.

“He’s going to be fine.” They were brave words, but doubt gave his voice an odd quiver - like the little jumps and jiggles on the seismometer before a big explosion. Jesse and Amanda exchanged a glance; they had tried to argue him out of his optimism before and been proved wrong and they had no intention of doing so again, but they couldn’t ignore his comment either. Steve seemed cast in stone as he sat there, all sharp planes and immovable body, but they knew him well enough to see the way his shoulders bowed with the strain of presenting a strong front to the world.

Finally it was Amanda who spoke, tentatively as she wasn’t sure how best to approach the issue. “He’s alive and getting the best care possible, thanks to you.”

“Thanks to me!” Steve’s emotions rose in a tidal wave for which he was totally unprepared. It was as if saying the words had broken some internal dam and now all the fear, helplessness and pain washed through him. “It’s my fault he’s lying there. I got him involved in the case to begin with and he was in Jack Devlin’s hands for almost three days before I finally found him. He...” His mouth snapped shut suddenly as if he only just realised that he’d spoken aloud and he lowered his gaze to avoid the dismay in Amanda’s face as she quickly jumped in with reassurance.

“Steve, you can’t blame yourself for this. If it wasn’t for you he’d almost certainly be dead. You believed he was still alive when the rest of us had given up hope.”

“And found him as soon as humanly possible,” added Jesse coming out from behind Steve to stand at the foot of the bed so he could better observe his friend. “It was finding a needle in a haystack.”

The only response to their encouraging words was a slight twitch that could be interpreted as a shrug. Steve seemed to have retreated back into uncommunicative repression. However, a few minutes later, he spoke again in a more conversational tone of voice, though the effort of projecting that calm bled through in the monotone he used.

“Dad’s good at finding needles in a haystack. Given the proper motivation, he could reach into a haystack while blindfolded and ram the hidden needle right through his thumb.”

The two doctors appreciated his struggle to restore normality and Amanda reciprocated by regaling Steve with a story of his father’s recent medical legerdemain while Jesse quickly examined Mark again.

“This is looking good,” he stated approvingly as he examined the EEG. “See here,” he pointed to the readout. “Before, these were slow-wave and minimal amplitude, but they’ve almost strengthened to normal.”

“Which means?” Steve prompted impatiently.

“Well, at the very least, it means that he’s coming out of the coma.” Jesse opted for a matter-of-fact tone.

As if in response to this auspicious pronouncement, Steve felt a twitch in the fingers he clasped between his own. “He’s moving!” he exclaimed, the warmth of hope spreading slowly through his system.

He ignored Jesse’s muttered warnings of the length of time drugs took to metabolise and leaned
forward. “Dad? Please wake up. You’re safe now so just open your eyes.” He continued exhortations and encouragement as his father’s movements grew in vigor and frequency until finally Mark’s eyes opened blearily.

“Steve.” It was more a matter of lip-reading than hearing the word on his lips, but the recognition was clear and a delighted smile stretched across Steve’s haggard features, lessening the shadows of pain in his eyes.

“Hey, Dad. How’re you feeling?”

There was a puzzled crease in Mark’s forehead as he wet his lips and tried again, his voice gaining more strength. “Stroke?”

It took Steve a second to decipher the meaning of this utterance and Jesse beat him to a response as he came round the bed to stand beside Steve’s chair. “No, you haven’t had a stroke, Mark. You’ll be fine.”

He turned slightly to Steve. “Give us a minute?” It was phrased as a gentle request but Steve recognised the doctor persona and though he longed to reassure himself as to his father’s condition, he understood the need for a medical appraisal. He wanted to afford Mark some privacy and Jesse some room to work, so he pushed his wheelchair back slightly with a nod.

Steve knew enough about medicine from all-too frequent personal experience to know that Jesse was putting his father through a basic neurological exam. He practically had the questions memorised and he watched with some anxiety that quickly waned as Mark obediently tracked a pencil moving across his vision, played what Steve thought of as finger tag, and successfully jumped through a series of other sensory, motor and verbal hoops, so he was ready for the diagnosis when Jesse turned to him with an exuberant smile. “Almost everything checks out well. There’s mild paresthesias, that’s a tingling sensation, in his extremities, but that should quickly dissipate. Everything else is fine except for some retrograde amnesia which isn’t at all uncommon in traumatic situations.”

Inexpressible relief suffusing his whole being, Steve gripped his friend’s arm. “Thanks, Jess.”

The young doctor patted his shoulder. “I need to spread the good news to the staff. We’ll leave you alone for twenty minutes or so, but then you both need some rest.”

Amanda bent over and pressed a gentle kiss on Mark’s forehead. “Welcome home, Mark.”

As the two doctors departed, the room was quiet as father and son drank their fill of each other. Now that Mark was propped up on his pillows and colour had returned to his cheeks, Steve was able to start the process of dispelling the nightmare of the seeming lifeless body he carried so long. Evidence of his father’s ordeal was still apparent, but a characteristic twinkle was in his eye even if a frown of concern was presently cutting deep grooves in his forehead.

Mark tried to remember the reason for the bone-deep exhaustion evident in the hollowness of Steve’s eyes. How could he have forgotten an event that left him in a hospital bed and his son looking so drawn and battered? Steve’s skin was pale and mottled with bruises, and evidence of bandages was visible under the scrubs he was wearing.

“I’ve seen healthier looking corpses,” Mark observed at last, although there was concern evident behind the humour.

“Yet strangely enough, I don’t remember ever feeling better,” Steve responded. It wasn’t a lie, the
aches and pains were negligible compared to the vast contentment saturating his system. Mark seemed to understand the sentiment underlying that implausible statement and didn’t challenge its veracity. However, his brows again furrowed in concentration as he failed to fill the void in his memory with anything meaningful.

He tapped his head ruefully with a forefinger. “I seem to be missing some marbles. You have to tell me what happened before my curiosity eats me alive.”

Steve almost smiled as his Dad looked at him eagerly like a child awaiting a bedtime story, but a sudden and appalling thought wiped away all inclination to laugh. “What is the last thing you remember?” He tried to keep the question casual and not allow the anxiety he felt to bleed through. What if Mark’s mind had conveniently wiped out all events up to and including Carol’s death? It seemed logical that he would subconsciously want to obliterate that terrible memory, yet he didn’t have the strength to absorb that news now. Nobody should have to live through that twice.

Mark gave the question due consideration, carefully working chronologically forward but arriving at the same dead end. “Monday night,” he answered at last. Steve squelched the momentary swell of relief as he realised that his father’s most recent Monday night might not correspond with his.

He raised a quizzical eyebrow. “I don’t suppose you’d care to elaborate on that?”

From Mark’s startled reaction, it was clear that it hadn’t occurred to him that his memory loss might cover more than a few hours or days, but he obediently recounted his schedule. “Amanda gave us the results of Serena Trenton’s autopsy and we discussed how we’d proceed on the case. We were all going to go out for a meal but you got called away. I arrived home late in the evening and went downstairs in the hopes that you were awake, but you were fast asleep on the sofa. The last thing I remember was going to bed.” He paused, trying again to summon recollections that refused to materialise. “I went to sleep in my own bed and woke up here.”

Mark didn’t miss the fractional slump of relief in his son and could guess at its cause. “So, how much time have I missed?”

“Today is...” Steve stopped, unable to figure out exactly what day it now was. “Only a few days,” he amended vaguely.

“So, what happened?” Mark prompted expectantly.

Steve regarded his father, unable to restrain himself from teasing. “I thought you weren’t supposed to tell amnesiacs anything, that they have to regain memories by themselves.”

Mark sat straight up in bed although unused muscles creaked alarmingly. “You’re kidding me. You wouldn’t torture me like that!” His expression managed to combine indignation and plaintiveness.

Steve wasn’t usually given to self-analysis, but he discovered to his surprise that beneath the typical spirit of banter that existed between them, deep inside, there was a small kernel of anger directed at Mark. During the last couple of days he’d felt as if he’d been functioning at the epicenter of an eight point nine earthquake. The grief that had ripped through him upon waking up in the hospital to the news that his father was dead had embedded razor sharp shards of anguish deep in his soul and the cascading events since had left little time to work through the haunting emotions; and it could all have been avoided if Mark hadn’t exhibited his usual finely-honed sense of self-preservation and walked invitingly into the lion’s den.

That thought was immediately followed by a surge of guilt that he himself had been acting in such a way that Mark had apparently not felt able to confide in him. Unconsciously, he rubbed his
temples in an attempt to erase the persistent ache that had taken up residence there, pain radiating down the back of his head and into his neck. He was aware that any rationality he still possessed was muddied irretrievably by physical and mental exhaustion.

“Steve?” His confused mental meanderings were interrupted by a soft voice that steadied him. Even before he looked up, he could imagine the expression in his father’s eyes, the bright flecks of concern in a warm blue field of understanding support. Yet when he met Mark’s gaze, he was struck again by the evidence of his father’s recent ordeal, the evident weakness and pallor and any anger he was harbouring abruptly evaporated. His father didn’t need new problems dumped on him now.

“You solved the case,” he stated bluntly, directing a slightly crooked smile at his father who looked puzzled.

“And this was a bad thing?” Mark asked slowly, feeling his way cautiously along what was clearly a touchy issue.

Steve contemplated his answer, wanting honesty between them without burdening his father with too much information. “Solving the case was a good thing, nearly getting yourself killed in the process was a bad thing.” His voice sounded tight and strained despite his best efforts to keep it steady, but Mark heard all the words, including the ones he hadn’t said aloud, and they went some way to explaining the residual stress that was evident in the wan cheeks and the worry lines etched into his son’s face.

“I don’t remember that, but I’m sorry.” The quiet and sincere apology that tacitly acknowledged the impact of such an event dissipated the last of Steve’s vexation. He stretched his shoulders back as far as they would go, trying to ease some of the tension from them.

“There’s plenty of blame to go around. Does the name Jack Devlin ring a bell?”

Mark was about to shake his head in denial when a frisson of alarm, more a sensation than a memory, feathered along his nerve endings, trailing goose-bumps in its wake.

“Dad?” Steve was alarmed by Mark’s increased pallor and prolonged silence, and rested his hand on the motionless arm.

Mark dredged up a smile. “Part of me seems to remember,” he joked weakly.

“Maybe we should leave this until you’re feeling stronger,” Steve suggested. “You’ve been drugged for a long time.”

Mark again experienced a disconnected sensation, as if he were slightly out of step with the rest of the universe, a memory teasing him, floating tauntingly just outside his grasp. Each time he tried to sink deeper into the feeling, it receded, just tickling at the recesses of his mind.

“I was drugged,” he stated experimentally, hoping the repetition would bring another jolt of remembrance. He ignored Steve’s recommendation of rest, pursuing that wisp of recall intently. Almost unconsciously, he found himself staring down at the needle-marks in his arm, the small, red circles livid and alien against the pale skin of the inner elbow. Suddenly he could feel ghostly hands restraining him, enduring fear and helplessness as cruel fingers dug into his flesh and a shadowy figure approached with a shiny needle, a drop of liquid trembling on the point.

The wall holding back the past collapsed like a shattering dam, the pressure of memories bursting forth inundating his mind with vivid images, the events of the last few days replaying themselves in
The rigidity of the muscles under his hand alerted Steve to a change in Mark’s condition. He reached towards a call button in alarm. “That’s it, I’m calling Jesse.” Mark intercepted his hand.

“I’m fine. I remember it all now. They drugged me.” This time it was said with grim assertion. “I thought they were going to...” A glance at his son’s expression decided him against finishing the sentence. “My guess is it was the same drug combination they used on Serena. Tobarine, or tubocurarine chloride is a neuromuscular blocking agent and used alone it would take only a slight overdose to cause respiratory failure...” He broke off again, realising that he was trying to distance them both from the experience by burying it under the weight of medical terminology, but they were too aware of his near escape from sharing Serena’s fate.

“I am sorry, Steve. I didn’t think there would be any danger,” Mark explained ruefully. “I just wanted to talk to Devlin to get some confirmation, at least in my own mind, of the family’s involvement in the murder. It worked too. Not only did the old man more or less confess that his sons were responsible, but I also found a mangosteen that...”

“A what?” Steve interrupted blankly. He hadn’t even thought about the particulars of the case since waking up in hospital three days ago and in his befogged mind this seemed like a gratuitous reference to exotic fruit.

“Anyway,” Mark continued hastily, seeing that his son wasn’t interested in detective reasoning, “I was having a nice chat with Devlin senior, when his private nurse called in reinforcements.”

“Devlin junior, junior and junior,” Steve supplied wryly.

“I see you’ve met them. Larry, Curly and Mo weren’t too happy to see me there and decided to...extend a prolonged invitation to stay.”

Steve rubbed his head again as he contemplated that easy statement. “Dad, I’m just too tired to figure out a diplomatic way of asking this, but why the hell didn’t they just kill you -- not that I’m not thrilled you’re still alive, of course.”

“Believe me, the question of my continued survival crossed my mind more than once,” Mark admitted. “I certainly owe my life to old man Devlin. He wasn’t involved in Serena’s murder, you know. He had his suspicions about the boys, but until I arrived he was happy to turn a blind eye and hope he was wrong. However, confronted by their obvious culpability, he couldn’t stomach another murder especially one under his own roof. He was in no physical condition to stop them, but he tried and the excitement and exertion caused him to collapse which had the benefit of finally grabbing their attention. He made them swear, in a kind of reverse deathbed vow, not to kill me. To be honest, though, I think the only reason the oldest son agreed was because he wasn’t sure if they could actually murder me with impunity.”

He grinned impudently at his son. “I made it quite clear that if they messed with me, they could expect the wrath of the police force to descend en masse on their doorstep.”

Steve tried to match his smile, knowing that the last thing Mark needed at that moment was to realise how close he’d come to getting his son killed. However, he obviously failed to adequately camouflage his unease from the virtually telepathic eyes of his father, and Mark’s good humour faltered. “What’s the matter?”

Only the fact that he was already thinking of the hole in his father’s argument allowed Steve to come up with a fast and satisfactory response. “Jack Devlin had successfully figured out a way to
deflect the attentions of the cops and dispose of you in the process.”

Mark didn’t look too surprised. “He’s a clever and utterly ruthless man.”

“Was,” Steve informed him succinctly.

“You know as much as I hate to admit it, I’m really not sorry. Your doing?”

Steve thought back to how he’d instinctively tried to save Devlin in the end and shook his head slowly. “Though not for lack of trying, to be honest. It’s a long story, Dad.”

“Then you better get at least the short version in before Jesse comes back,” Mark warned him, shifting slightly on the pillows for greater comfort. He flexed his fingers then rubbed one hand with the other to try to diminish the pins and needles sensation that plagued his extremities.

“Let me,” Steve offered. Mark looked surprised but relaxed as his son’s strong fingers massaged the numbness away.

Steve was glad of the distraction, an excuse not to look at his father as he recounted events that he’d rather expunge from his memory. Mark could read him too easily and his feelings were still too raw to be displayed to anyone.

“Well, the first thing you should know is that you’ll probably be getting some strange looks for a while because everyone thinks you’re dead.” Steve struggled to keep his voice light, though he was suddenly glad of the warm hand between his that refuted that conclusion.

“Again?” Mark matched his tone, but there was an underlying sympathy in it that nearly proved to be Steve’s undoing. The morass of emotions from the past few days welled up again without warning, leaving his throat too tight to utter a word. He concentrated on the kneading motions of his hands until the constriction eased enough for him to speak.

“The welcome home parties are getting tiresome,” he agreed, remembering the shindig thrown by the staff after they’d faked his father’s death following a car bomb. Back then, he’d at least been one of the conspirators and apart from a few terrible seconds, had always known that Mark was safe.

“So, bearing in mind that I’m right here, how did I die?”

Steve launched into an extremely expurgated version of the events. His voice wavered slightly as he described his father’s putative death, then it firmed, and he went on evenly. He didn’t realise it, but the very economical way he described what had transpired was in its own way more revealing than if he’d embellished his story with graphic details and emotive comments.

By the time he’d finished, Steve felt like an old, torn rag that had been wrung out completely and discarded unceremoniously on the floor. His hands had stilled and, slightly self-consciously, he withdrew them back to his own lap.

Mark watched him closely, noting the way Steve’s jaw twitched with suppressed emotion. Steve’s narration had filled in some important gaps, but ‘I got you out of there, Jack Devlin came after us and got caught in a landslide,’ was minimalistic to the point of starvation and didn’t explain why his son looked like he’d bought stock in a bandage company.

“You missed out the bit where you tussled with the wildcat,” he pointed out mildly.

“Huh? Oh!” Steve’s hand crept up to his neck where his encounter with the barbed wire had left
more by way of scratches than puncture wounds so had been deemed harmless enough to be left unbandaged. “It wasn’t a cat.”

“No?” Mark feigned surprise.

“I had a run in with a barbed wire fence,” Steve elaborated sheepishly.

“Run in!” Jesse chose that moment to return. “Sounds like you did more than that. Did you have a bath in the stuff? It’s a good thing your tetanus is up to date. I’ve seen more holes in a pin cushion.”

Jesse was too intent on perusing his friend’s chart to notice the quelling glance Steve sent in his direction and continued blithely. “And what on earth made you think that a man with a bullet hole in his shoulder could...”

“What?” Mark’s exclamation vied in volume with Steve’s, “Jesse!” and the glare the latter sent his friend could have withered a plastic flower.

Jesse, however, seemed unaffected. “You mean, you didn’t tell Mark you’d been shot?” he asked with eyes round with innocence.

“Let me look at that.” Mark neatly plucked Steve’s file from Jesse’s fingers.

“Hey, what happened to doctor/patient confidentiality?” Steve protested.

“I am your doctor,” Mark reminded him kindly.

Steve could foresee disaster but there was nothing he could do to prevent it without making Mark even more suspicious. He watched his father’s frown take root and proliferate and his only hope was that the sheer quantity of minor injuries would divert Mark.

“Jess, you’re right. I should be in bed.” It was a weak attempt at distraction, but the young doctor seemed to have picked up on his tension for he forbore to tease his friend.

“When were you shot?” Mark asked suddenly. He answered his own question by flipping back a few pages. “But that was before...why would they...?”

Steve could almost see the tumblers falling into place in his father’s mind, unlocking the mystery the inconsistencies had created. The last pin fell into place with a nearly audible click, draining the last remnants of colour from Mark’s face. He stared at his son with horrified eyes in which Steve could read a complex, arid tapestry of bleak comprehension and culpability.

“It’s my fault.”

“No, Dad,” Steve tried to forestall the self-recriminations, but Mark was too immersed in his own emotions.

“What was I thinking? I told them you were in charge of the investigation and that you knew where I was and that you’d be coming after me. I might as well have painted a large target on your back. I could have got you killed.”

Jesse finally clued in to what Steve had been trying to tell him earlier and grimaced in apology, but Steve could only deal with one guilt trip at a time.

“No!” Steve interjected, more forcefully this time, successfully cutting his father off and hurrying
to speak into the gap. “You did exactly the right thing. You kept yourself alive by whatever means possible.”

“Even at your expense.” Mark spoke with uncharacteristic bitterness.

“You had no way of knowing that would be the result,” Steve argued. “Taking potshots at cops isn’t exactly a sane reaction.”

“You know, he said something at the time, about distracting you. I thought he was talking about me -- my disappearance.”

“It doesn’t matter, Dad.” Blue eyes captured and held kindred blue eyes with an emphatic urgency. “You used the protection you had available to you and I would bet it provided the doubt that ensured your survival. If he’d thought he could get away with it, Devlin would have knocked you off as soon as his father was out of sight. That would have hurt me far worse than any bullet could do.” He shook his head unconsciously and swallowed to hold onto his control as he remembered the agony of the past few days. “I’ve had some experience with believing you dead and, believe me, I don’t want to go through it for real.”

The painful sincerity was convincing, but Mark’s sense of guilt insisted on one last stab before it stopped fighting and surrendered. “If I hadn’t gone there without backup, none of this would have happened.”

Jesse had stayed quiet long enough and with a snort he irrepressibly reentered the conversation. “Like father, like son,” he muttered quite loudly enough for his friends to hear.

“He means,” Steve explained, his mouth twitching, “that I did exactly the same thing.”

“Oh, not exactly,” Jesse elaborated. “You stole my car.”

“Borrowed, Jess, borrowed. I was sure you would have lent it to me if I asked.”

“Sure I would...but there would have been certain conditions imposed on that borrowing. Like my accompanying you. And that reminds me, borrowing implies the return of said property. You seem to have lost my car.”

“Not lost exactly. I can tell you precisely where it is. Of course, Devlin said it didn’t work any more.” At Jesse’s indignant sputter, he hastily added, “But I’m sure that’s just temporary.”

Mark’s smile broadened as the exchange continued, and he allowed himself to relax into the familiarity of the bantering. Steve was alive and, for now, that was all the mattered. However, one more question occurred to him.

“I can understand you not wanting to take Jesse here into a potentially volatile situation but why didn’t you take police back up?”

Jesse feigned concern. “Steve, I think I should reexamine your head wound. It appears to have caused amnesia. There are so many things you seem to have forgotten.”

“Haven’t you got any other patients to torment?” Steve asked pointedly.

“Actually no. I’m off duty and since I don’t have a car, I don’t have any way to get home.”

Seeing Mark was looking at him worriedly, Steve relented. “It’s nothing too terrible. The Devlins had taken out a restraining order after my first visit so technically I shouldn’t have been there.”
Jesse cleared his throat meaningfully so Steve continued reluctantly. “And officially I’m also suspended since the Captain thought...well, anyway, he suspended me.”

Mark didn’t look reassured. “How much trouble are you in?”

Events of the last twelve hours had been too meteoric and overwhelming for Steve to consider their legal implications, so there was a pause before he responded. It was within the realms of possibility that he’d face charges of manslaughter or even murder as Jack Devlin had predicted, but it was extremely unlikely so he decided to only mention the best-case scenario.

“There’ll probably be some kind of official reprimand,” he stated honestly. “I did go against orders. However, since not only was I proved right that the Devlin brothers were behind Serena’s murder, but also, more importantly, I found you kidnapped by them, taking the issue any further would only make them look like fools.” His voice lowered slightly. “Either way, it doesn’t matter. It was worth it.”

As he sat there sharing a smile of understanding with his father, Steve was filled again by a sense of contentment. His career seemed truly inconsequential compared to what he’d gained. If he hadn’t defied Newman’s orders, Mark would be dead and nothing would have seemed worthwhile any longer. He’d been willing to sacrifice his badge for Mark before for less reason, and if that proved the cost now, it was a price worth paying.

The room shifted giddily behind Mark’s head and Steve must have swayed with it for suddenly Jesse was steering the wheelchair towards his own bed. “That’s enough for this evening. Actually it’s enough for about the last three evenings.”

He helped Steve climb awkwardly under the covers, the detective trying to avoid putting weight on his bandaged feet. The soft cleanliness of the mattress felt heavenly beneath his weary, battered body and he sank down gratefully. “S’good. May not leave for a week,” he muttered almost unintelligibly.

Jesse snorted. “I’ll remind you of that in forty-eight hours when you’re griping and whining and insisting you’re well enough to be discharged.”

The gibe was lost on its recipient and Jesse’s face softened as he gazed down at his sleeping friend. “About time too,” he mumbled fondly.

“He’s going to be fine,” he reassured Mark as he walked back over. “It’ll be a while before he’s really on his feet again, and he’s going to need some physical therapy on his shoulder, but he’ll heal in time.”

“Jesse, what...?” Mark began, but the young doctor cut him off with an upraised hand.

“I know you have a million questions, and I promise I will answer them the best I can, but not tonight. You need your rest too.”

He helped Mark settle more comfortably against the pillows, knowing he was right in his assessment when the older man didn’t contest his appraisal.

“It’s good to have you back, Mark.” The words didn’t adequately express the depth of relief and joy he felt, but anything more would risk exposing nerves that were still too raw.

“Had you worried, huh?” Mark smiled sleepily.

“Or something,” Jesse agreed carefully.
With a last look at his two sleeping friends, Jesse took off to search for Dr. Chavez, mentally rehearsing his explanation as to why his fellow doctor’s beloved BMW was not only filthy on the outside, but also its upholstery was smeared with mud.

Given his state of complete physical and mental exhaustion, Steve had expected to slip quickly into an unconscious state and stay there for some time. He had been right as to the former, but wasn’t as lucky concerning the latter. Once the painkillers had worn off, he’d jolted awake with the unnerving sensation that there was something important he’d forgotten. Unable to pin down the cause, he’d attributed it to the after-effects of the adrenaline coursing through his system and, after checking that Mark was sleeping peacefully, had drifted off again. Yet the pattern was repeated throughout the night as the slightest sound nearby jerked him to alarmed wakefulness.

The room was dark and the hospital seemed quiet, except for the ubiquitous background humming, when Steve awoke at the entrance of a male nurse. He drowsily watched the man’s progress across the room towards Mark, stirring only when the nurse prepared an injection for the IV.

“Is he alright?” he asked in concern, his voice hoarse with the disuse of sleep. The words caused the orderly to start violently, almost losing his grip on the syringe before recovering himself and turning slightly so his face was in the shadows.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine. Don’t worry.”

Steve’s skin felt suddenly cold as if all the blood in his body had gone into hiding. Disparate pieces of information surged together -- a sound, a number, an innocent fact related by his father -- to complete the puzzle that had been eluding him all night.

“Get away from him,” he shouted, flinging back the covers. His abused muscles had stiffened in the night and he stumbled rather than leapt out of bed. The pain of his full weight on his lacerated feet startled a cry from him which he transformed into a loud yell of fury, aimed at both alerting the staff and alarming his opponent.

The intruder froze for a crucial second, unsure as to whether to use the needle as he’d originally intended or to defend himself with it against the assault being launched in his direction by the large, enraged man. He backed away from Steve and, in a flash of inspiration, thrust Mark’s IV stand hard in the detective’s direction.

Steve instinctively moved to catch the pole, not wanting the IV to be yanked out of his father’s hand and as he tangled with the tubes and wires, the assailant stepped back in with a wild jab which he only just managed to block with his right arm, the jarring impact translating into numbing pain in his shoulder. His peripheral vision showed him Mark awake and starting to move out of bed, and fear spiraled through his gut as the intruder feinted in that direction.

In his haste to protect his father, Steve left his injured side vulnerable and this time the needle found a billet in his bicep, injecting him with the majority of the contents of the syringe before breaking off while still lodged in his arm as he spun around to deliver an uppercut that, whilst lacking his usual force, still contained enough power to send the man skittering across the floor like a deformed bowling ball.

The nurse made no attempt to rise, wiping a smear of blood from his chin as he lay on the floor regarding Steve with an odd mixture of apprehension and satisfaction.

Steve heard his father cry out his name in alarm, but he didn’t move immediately. There was a strange sensation of heaviness in his arm, a tingling in the fingers that seemed to seep upwards, leaving an inert lump behind instead a functional limb. He tried to take a step forward but his legs
suddenly crumbled beneath him, their strength dissolving like wet paper and he wasn’t even able to break his fall, merely collapsing into a disorganised heap. His muscles might be flagrantly disobedient to his commands but he could feel the pain of his head smacking into the floor.

How could he have forgotten the fourth man in the house that night, the one who’d summoned the brothers to the bed of their dying father, and who’d joined them in their armed hunt later? Mark had even mentioned Devlin’s male nurse just a few minutes earlier, but he’d been focused so entirely on the Devlin clan, he had discounted any threat external to the family.

He was aware of Mark again calling his name, now with a desperate urgency, an alarm blaring and a growing cacophony of voices but he couldn’t turn his head to satisfy his curiosity. He couldn’t even protect his father from the man who’d come to murder him and the bitter frustration of that outweighed any potential fear until the progressive paralysis reached his diaphragm and the simple act of breathing became challenging then impossible.

He was going to suffocate in the middle of a hospital and he couldn’t even call out for help.
Chapter 15

Steve’s shout roused Mark and he bolted upright, disoriented and fearful. The tableau that greeted his eyes did little to elucidate or reassure. His son appeared to be stalking one of the nurses whom Mark recognised though couldn’t immediately identify. It was only as the man threw the IV pole towards Steve, turning slightly into the light, that Mark was able to place him -- Devlin’s private nurse.

Under normal circumstances, Mark knew the best thing to do in a fight was to stay out of his son’s way, but seeing him tangled in the IV lines and clearly hampered by his injuries, Mark felt impelled to find some way to help. His feet hadn’t touched the ground when he saw the syringe lodge in Steve’s arm, scant fractions of a second before his son decked his opponent.

He called out anxiously, but Steve was staring down at the floored nurse. There was something strange about his stance and Mark ripped the needle out of his hand, flicking a switch on the heart monitor to sound an alarm, and was off the bed when, in the midst of a hesitant step, his son collapsed bonelessly.

“You’re going to be okay,” he reassured him automatically, patting his son’s chest and a second later was offered the hope that his own words were true. He could feel Steve’s heart pounding under his fingers, pumping the blood frantically around his body in a futile search for oxygen. The symptoms all came together in a flash of understanding, which he turned immediately into action.

Tilting Steve’s head back and sealing his nose, he took a deep breath and started artificial respiration. He knew how terrifying it must be for his son to be utterly helpless and dependent for even such a fundamental life function as breathing, so as he came up for air, Mark again took a moment for encouragement. “For now, I’m going to breathe for you. You’re going to be fine.”

He established a regular rhythm, deriving comfort from the corresponding rise and fall of his son’s chest.

“Oh my God, Steve. What happened?” Mark didn’t think he’d ever been so relieved to hear Jesse’s voice.

“Tubarine,” he explained succinctly. “Get neostigmine.”

He felt the displacement of air as Jesse vanished, and out of the periphery of his vision he was
dimly aware of the male nurse being led away by security. However, his entire focus had narrowed
to the mechanical process of inhaling and exhaling and the life-giving oxygen being transferred.
He wasn’t going to lose his son, that determination filled every cell in his body.

Dizzying spots were dancing in front of his eyes, the result of hyperventilation, when a manual
tank resuscitator appeared before him. “Dr. Travis told me to bring you this.”

Without taking the time or precious breath to acknowledge the nurse, he quickly fit the airtight
mask over Steve’s nose and mouth, squeezing the bag to force the air into his son’s lungs. With his
fingers on Steve’s pulse, he monitored the operation of the machine, giving himself a moment to
recover before speaking.

“Steve, I know how frightening this is, but it’s just temporary. The tubarine paralyses all your
skeletal muscles, including your diaphragm which is why you can’t breathe, but it will wear off
and until then we’ll give you artificial respiration. It doesn’t effect the heart or other internal
organs so it’s not full CPR.”

Jesse suddenly appeared beside him, his red face a testament to his haste. “It’s not neostigmine, but
we have the endrophonium we were using for you.”

“That’s fine,” Mark agreed tersely.

As Jesse filled the syringe he queried, “You’re sure it was Tubarine?”

Mark mentally ran through Steve’s list of symptoms and the speed of his reaction and it all
checked, but there was more to it than that. “It was meant for me,” he confessed in a low voice. “I
think it was intended to look like I’d merely succumbed to the accumulated effects of repeated
doses of the mixture they’d used on me. Either for revenge or more likely because they hoped that
with removal of my testimony the case against them in at least Serena’s murder would collapse.”

Mark allowed Jesse to give the injection, scooting round to Steve’s head, continuing to compress
the bag with one hand while gently smoothed back his son’s hair comfortingly, knowing that while
he was incapable of so much as voluntarily twitching a finger, Steve could still feel every
sensation.

“We’re giving you an antidote to the tubarine that will neutralise it,” he explained as the needle slid
into Steve’s limp arm. “I’d tell you to relax, but it’s not like you have any choice in the matter.”

He could see the joke register in his son’s eyes, the humour an unorthodox testament to the
veracity of his reassurance. The apprehension that could only be expressed in the blue depths
eased. Mark continued to expound on the effects the new drug would have on Steve’s system,
partly so his son would know what to expect, but more importantly as a distraction from the
paralysis holding him captive.

The endrophonium worked gratifyingly fast and Mark could see the relief blossom on his son’s
face as muscle control was restored. “Don’t try to force it,” he advised. “It’ll be out of your system
soon, just take it easy.”

Soon Steve’s lungs were functioning without need of assistance and Jesse removed the
resuscitator, frowning when he saw blood soaking the shoulder of his patient’s scrubs.

“Keep still for a moment, will you,” he adjured as Steve moved underneath his hands, testing the
extent of his mobility.

Steve scowled up at him. The last thing he felt like doing at that moment was keeping still and very
deliberately he wriggled his fingers in his friend’s face.

“If you don’t quit shifting around, I’ll give you another shot of tubarine,” Jesse threatened.

“Jesse!” Mark protested, half-laughing, but the experience was too recent and too nearly fatal to be entirely humorous.

“Well, this is the third time he’s popped the stitches in that shoulder. I swear, I’m not going to bother with needle and thread anymore. I’m going to use a staple gun, or maybe some glue.”

Despite his aggrieved words, Jesse’s hands were gentle as he repaired that and other damage. “You know, when I prescribed rest, I really didn’t have this in mind,” he teased his friend.

“Yeah, well, when I said I wanted to sleep for a week, this wasn’t what I had in mind either,” Steve retorted. He struggled to his feet, needing to prove to himself that his legs were capable of supporting him again. A hand on the wall provided a necessary prop, but although the muscles felt sufficiently stable, a residual dizziness spun the room around him and he realised he’d better sit. The floor was probably the best option and he’d already proved he could hit it, but an inherent stubbornness made him aim for the bed. Luckily, Jesse grabbed an arm before he pitched forward on his face and, with the help of a nurse, he maneuvered Steve back under the covers.

Mark hovered close behind. Despite the continuing banter between the two younger men, he could sense that his son was badly shaken by his recent ordeal. Steve was entirely too forthright and honest to camouflage his feelings successfully from those who knew him well and Mark could catch the troubled look in his son’s eyes as they flickered in his direction.

After Jesse had got his patient settled and comfortable, Mark signaled discreetly that he would like a few minutes alone with his son. As the young doctor departed muttering about checking some blood-work, Mark perched himself on the side of Steve’s bed. He knew better than to tackle his son directly on the issue bothering him.

“So,” he started lightly, “should we expect any more visitors tonight?”

“I certainly hope not.” Steve gave the matter some thought and shook his head. “There’s only one Devlin left and he’s almost certainly under medical care or under arrest. I wouldn’t expect that much loyalty from any of their other employees. I think the nurse was in it as deep as the rest of the family, and that was a last ditch attempt to stave off prosecution.”

“Well, thanks for stopping him, though next time I’d prefer it if you did it without him stopping you. You had me scared there, for a minute.”

“You weren’t the only one,” Steve admitted ruefully. “Dad...?” The hesitant pause warned Mark that his son was moving to the heart of what was bothering him and he tried to look as receptive as possible.

“Was that what it was like for you?”

The air left Mark’s lungs in a whoosh, leaving him winded. He’d assumed that Steve’s unease had stemmed from his own traumatic experience; he hadn’t thought of the insight it had offered his son into Mark’s ordeal.

“It was nothing like as bad for me,” he claimed staunchly. “You were injected with pure Tubarine, not the drug cocktail they used on me. My breathing was never compromised.”

“But you couldn’t move,” Steve insisted.
“No...I mean, yes. Well, I’m not saying it was any fun, but it could have been worse.” Mark was aware he was stuttering, his own demons surfacing and interfering with his attempt at reassurance.

Steve regarded him steadily. After the last hour, it took little imagination on his part to fathom the hell his father must have lived through and despite the minor issue of breathing, it had to have been far worse than his own. Mark’s little adventure into paralysis had been unrelieved by the presence of family and friends and the corresponding hope of protection. He had lain there, totally helpless, unable to even defend himself with his best weapon, communication, not knowing when the psychopaths holding him would return to commit murder.

Mark took a deep breath, reading the concerns passing through those pained blue eyes and tried again. “I think there was some kind of narcotic in the drugs they gave me. I really don’t remember much about the time before I lost consciousness.” As it looked like Steve might protest, he held his son’s gaze serenely as he continued gently. “And I never doubted for a minute that you’d find me.”

The words drifted between them like soothing balm, softening the whirlwind of their emotions. It was probably the one comforting thing Mark could have said that Steve would truly believe and his son settled back against the pillow, temporarily satisfied, a stifled wince of pain momentarily crossing his face as his shoulder protested the movement.

“That reminds me,” Mark continued blithely. “I don’t remember anything in your narrative that would explain the bandages on your feet either.”

“Well, you did ask for the short version.” Steve deflected the grievance gracefully.

“Clearly an error on my part,” Mark returned amiably. “One I intend to remedy.” Watching his son yawn widely, he amended, “In the morning...or afternoon.”

“Night, Dad.” The mutter was barely intelligible as Steve relinquished awareness, sliding into sleep like a seal into deep water.

“Good night, son,” Mark murmured, patting the blanket-covered leg beside him. Despite his own fatigue, he didn’t move back to his own bed but sat watching his son sleep as he had that night in Steve’s apartment. He reveled in the easy rhythm of his son’s breathing, yet that contentment was marred as, in the dim light, he also visually catalogued the myriad of bruises and lacerations exposed and the bandages white and stark against Steve’s skin. He’d made some mistakes and it seemed that Steve had paid a higher price than he had and the heavy ache of that knowledge would take a long time to fade away. Yet, for tonight, they were both alive and that was enough.
Chapter 16

Epilogue

Mark threw open the front door and then paused, the hand in possession of the keys still upraised from the process of unlocking. It was as if he were returning after several months abroad, the foreign country that he’d left now possessing a stronger reality than his home. He wondered if the French had coined a term for the oddly disjointing sensation that was the converse of deja vu. He wasn’t sure if it was caused by the magnitude of events that had transpired in the interim or if it was because the version of him that was entering the house was so different from the obsessed, driven individual who had left.

“Mark, is everything okay?” A soft, concerned voice at his elbow broke into his reflections as Amanda tried to peer round him to discover the cause of his sudden incapacity.

He cast down a beatific smile of reassurance. “Everything’s fine, honey. Just glad to be home.”

It wasn’t a lie, but neither was it the complete truth, and that disconnected sensation snapped at his heels as he led the way into the house. It was as if he kept climbing confidently onto a step that wasn’t there, landing with a startling and jarring jolt back on the ground.

Mark tried to ignore the uneasy feeling in favour of the familiarity of domesticity as he put away the groceries Amanda brought in from the car. Both he and Steve were going to be discharged from the hospital that day, but his son had wanted to visit with Cheryl, who was recovering satisfactorily in her own hospital room, so Amanda had volunteered to drive Mark back and prepare a meal to celebrate the Sloans’ survival and their return home.

Mark welcomed the resumption of normality as signaled by the four of them sitting together and eating at the Beach House, as they had so often in the past, but for once he also found himself craving some time alone to take in and process recent events. Steve had slept for almost the entire two days they were in the hospital, but it seemed like the whole staff had found an excuse to stop by and chat, to confirm with their own senses his remarkable resurrection. He was touched by the affection shown by so many, but the constant stream of visitors had left little time for quiet reflection.

Amanda sensed his preoccupation and made no attempt to force conversation. “Why don’t you have a rest while I take care of this?” she suggested gently.

Almost before the words of grateful acceptance fell from his lips, Mark was heading for his bedroom. However, an unwary step as he neared the hall resulted in a mysterious crunching underfoot. He lifted his shoe to discover a shard of china now crushed almost into powder by his weight. Closer investigation revealed the pile of the carpet to be liberally besprinkled with splinters of glass and ceramics.

The variety of composition and colours informed him that a disaster of some magnitude had taken place, though some effort had obviously been made to pick up the bigger pieces. For a moment, he stood staring as light caught the facets of the glass causing them to sparkle innocently into his eyes and it was several seconds later before he realized Amanda was speaking to him.

“Sorry, honey. I was distracted. I’m just going to get the vacuum out. I think Steve broke something here.”
His tone was steady, almost dismissive, and it camouflaged the slither of pain slowly uncoiling in his gut as the words conjured a potent image of how the damage had been done. He had never seen his son truly lose control. There was a core of steadiness to Steve’s character that seemed indestructible and yet Mark could also imagine, only too vividly, the guilt and grief his son had experienced.

Mark rejected Amanda’s offer of help and hauled out the cleaner. There were just little fragments of material, but they were a surprisingly poignant reminder of all his son had been through and he needed to clear them away before Steve arrived home -- a symbolic destruction of his son’s anguish. The house needed to be intact to confirm his world was still intact.

Mark removed the last evidence of Steve’s devastation of the glassware and was moving on to washing the wall when the doorbell rang and, with a grimace of resignation, he went to answer it. He should have guessed that the hospital staff would not be alone in wanting confirmation of his continuing existence. He was prepared for reporters or old friends but was surprised to find the imposing figure of Maxwell Trenton on the doorstep.

Although his stomach dipped at the prospect of conversing with the other man, Mark greeted him courteously. “Dr. Trenton, this is an unexpected pleasure. Please come in.”

The industrialist was used to commanding an economic empire, but he looked uncertain as he followed Mark into his study. “I don’t intend to take a lot of your time, Dr. Sloan. I know you have only recently returned from the hospital.”

“Can I get you a drink?” Mark was conscious of a reversal of their positions from the previous interview as he sat behind his desk.

“No, thank you. I really don’t intend to stay long.” Trenton cleared his throat self-consciously. “I feel I owe you a tremendous debt of gratitude and an apology.”

Mark tried to wave off both as unnecessary, but the magnate persisted. “I coerced you into helping me in a totally unfair way and you almost died as a result.”

He again overrode Mark’s attempts at interjection. “But I have to thank you for finding Serena’s killers. It helps to know that they’ve paid for what they did. I don’t think I could ever have started to come to terms with her death if her murderers were still out there.”

Mark could keep silent no longer. “You’re thanking the wrong person. I might be the one who figured out who was responsible, but if it had been left to me alone, I would be feeding the fishes and the Devlins would have got away scot-free. It’s my son who really deserves the credit.”

Steve, in his rare waking moments, had been reticent about the specific details of his actions since Mark had gone missing, but Amanda and Jesse had more than made up for that deficiency. Mark had heard of his son’s reaction to his putative death and the frantic search he’d initiated while barely off his hospital bed. Jesse had also related in tones of astounded awe how Steve, despite his not inconsiderable injuries, had carried Mark a lengthy distance to safety.

Mark would never embarrass his son with an overt acknowledgement of these intimate particulars, but the knowledge of the drastic measures his son had been prepared to suffer for his sake never failed to bring a lump to his throat, so his voice was noticeably thicker as he reiterated. “If it wasn’t for my son’s courage and persistence in the face of tremendous odds, I’d be dead and the Devlins would have committed both murders with impunity.”

“Then I owe him my gratitude too.” Trenton readily accepted the correction. “I’ll write to his
department to express my thanks for his stalwart efforts.”

Mark would have dropped a hint to that effect if the other man hadn’t suggested it first, knowing that Steve’s insubordinate actions on his behalf had endangered his son’s career. “Please do that,” he encouraged. “Steve disobeyed several orders to rescue me, which could result in trouble for him. A letter from such an influential man such as yourself could make a difference in determining the disciplinary measures he faces.”

Trenton expressed his pleasure at being able to assist, then sat rigidly, staring blindly out of the window, obviously needing to unburden something more but unable to broach the subject.

Mark tried to ease the conversation in what he thought, from his personal experience, was the general direction that would help the other father. “I know this is difficult time for you...”

That was all it took. Trenton shifted his gaze to the doctor with sudden intensity. “Why Serena?”

The childish directness of the question, the voice oddly small and lost from so formidable a man, took Mark aback. He hesitated, not sure if the question was rhetorical, a genuine plea for information, or even intended as a query on the larger scale of cosmic injustice.

The ambiguity was clarified as the industrialist continued. “I don’t understand. What did they gain by killing her?”

Mark concealed a heavy sigh. “With Jack Devlin dead, there’s a lot of questions that will be left forever unanswered. There are a lot of conjectures in my personal theory of what happened, but I don’t think it was his intention to kill her at the beginning. I don’t even know if their first meeting was planned or accidental, but I think they met through their mutual interest in health food, either at a club or a store. Maybe he concealed his identity or perhaps she just didn’t care.”

“I never discussed the more sordid details of the business with her,” Trenton put in heavily.

“Jack Devlin was a strong, vital man, passionate and complex.”

“The very opposite of her boyfriend.” The magnate nodded in understanding.

To get both of them through this discussion, Mark had to maintain a dispassionate demeanor, but he was finding it increasingly difficult not to become emotionally tangled in the narration. He sucked in another lungful of air. “Jack, on the other hand, was solely interested in acquiring Serena’s research. If Devlin Pharmaceuticals developed a new anti-microbial first, it could save his company.”

One of Trenton’s hands was clenched, the other rubbing across the knuckles in a restless motion and Mark could sympathise since odd internal tremors told him he should be shaking like a leaf but his voice was steady as he approached the denouement of the story. “My best guess is that things fell apart when Serena found she was pregnant, the timing making it obvious that Owen Hogan was the father. The prospect of motherhood changed her priorities, accentuating Jack Devlin’s lack of paternal qualities. She decided to break it off with him.”

“Devlin was more than furious, he was savage in his frustration. I’m sure revenge played a large part in his decision to kill her -- he wasn’t always rational when angry -- but he also hoped that her death would disrupt research in your company enough to keep Devlin Pharmaceuticals alive.”

Mark fell silent, his reserves exhausted. He hoped that Trenton now possessed sufficient information to find closure, because more graphic details would serve no purpose.
“I feel responsible.” The magnate studied his fingers as he confessed in a low voice, “If I had conducted my business in a more...if I hadn’t been so ruthless professionally, maybe my daughter would still be alive.”

Mark felt a wrenching empathy at the pained words. He felt enough guilt for Carol’s death simply for not being there, for somehow failing her. The thought of actually playing a role in her demise, albeit unintentional, was unbearable, and he hurried to find satisfactory words of reassurance.

“I do understand how you feel, believe me. I don’t know if you remember the Sunnyview serial bomber. Well, because of my involvement in that case, he chose Community General as a target. Many innocent people were killed in the explosion, and I nearly lost my son and many good friends. Those people would not have been in danger if I hadn’t made certain choices.”

Mark knew it wasn’t a perfect analogy, but he felt his central point was valid. “It was hard to escape the feeling of blame, but I came to realise that I couldn’t hold myself responsible for the irrational actions of others. You made legitimate business decisions like thousands of others have done and will continue to do. You had no way of knowing to what they would lead. Jack Devlin and his brothers are solely accountable for Serena’s death.”

Trenton didn’t look entirely convinced, but Mark hoped that he had planted the seeds of doubt deep enough so that with the watering of common sense and the warmth of family support, it should take root firmly.

The magnate seemed to be considering Mark’s words, then, with a decisive nod, he stood up. “I’ve taken enough of your time, Dr. Sloan. You’ve been more than kind. If there’s ever anything I can do for you, please let me know.”

They shook hands firmly and, emboldened by the offer of friendship, Mark decided to make one more suggestion. “Dr. Trenton, I’d like to offer one last piece of advice, if I may. You have lost a daughter, but you still have a son. This is a time when you need each other.” He would have liked to say more, to have shared the insight he’d gained from personal experience, but the words seemed too sententious, too intrusive, and he decided that hint would have to suffice.

He escorted his visitor to the door where they parted with mutual expressions of friendship, and Trenton was walking across the driveway when Jesse drove up in his newly recovered car. Mark watched as Trenton changed course, clearly spotting Steve in the passenger seat. At his approach, Steve carefully stepped out of the vehicle, the one crutch under his left arm taking a lot of his weight. Mark remembered the argument that had ensued between his son and Jesse over the relative merits of different forms of transportation.

Steve’s feet were still extremely tender and Jesse had recommended a wheelchair, a suggestion that his patient had immediately rejected, pointing out the difficulties of maneuvering such a vehicle around the stairs of the Beach House. His counter-proposal of crutches had been at first rejected by Jesse, since the injury to Steve’s shoulder made it impossible to bear weight with it. A compromise had obviously since been reached.

Mark couldn’t hear what was said, but Trenton exchanged some words with Steve, shook his hand and finally departed, leaving Mark to scrutinise his son’s approach. Having his feet bound up then enclosed in what looked like giant bunny slippers created a bizarrely comical appearance, but Mark was used to looking beyond the surface.

Steve was walking with no apparent difficulty, but his pallor and, perhaps more revealingly, the way Jesse was hovering beside him, betrayed the struggle behind the nonchalance. Mark appreciated that the effort was for his sake and had no intention of nullifying that sacrifice by
letting his own concern show. He greeted them warmly and led the way into the house, listening to the sotto voce conversation behind him.

“Be careful on the stairs,” Jesse hissed softly.

Steve’s somewhat irritated response carried more clearly. “I’ve been climbing stairs almost since I was born. See...how am I doing so far?”

There was an alarming thud. “Well, I’m not sure about your form, but major points for style from the Russian judge,” Jesse commented dryly.

Mark kept staring resolutely ahead, his mouth twitching at the commentary, yet the banter and the warmth of his son and friends’ presence seeped into his soul, allowing something inside that had been derailed to slide back into place. It was like a dislocated joint finally popping back in the socket -- there was a residual soreness, but the relief from the cessation of pain was immense.

The smile on his face was genuine as he rejoined Amanda, but as she raised a questioning eyebrow he just shrugged, picking up a few tomatoes and juggling them in a sudden excess of elation. He chased after one that escaped his attempt to catch it, arriving in the living room in time to witness the next power struggle between his son and the young doctor.

Jesse had seated Steve on the couch with his legs propped up on the cushions. “You need to keep off your feet as much as possible so get comfortable and stay.”

“Stay?” Steve parroted incredulously. “What am I - a dog?”

“A big, shaggy, black lab,” Jesse mused. “Loyal and obedient.”

“Which would make you one of those annoying, yappy, little mutts with the shrill bark and stubby little tails,” Steve retorted tartly. “And right now, you’re just like a mongrel worrying at a juicy bone.”

Steve was not nearly as bad a patient as Jesse liked to insinuate, but, blessed with a strong and healthy body, he tended to get impatient with his own infirmities and push himself harder than wisdom would dictate. Mark appreciated Jesse’s willingness to play the heavy, sparing him the necessity of doing so.

For now, Mark came to his beleaguered son’s assistance. “Hey, Jess, could you make that tasty salad dressing you were using at Bob’s last week?”

“Sure, no problem.” Jesse waggled a finger in Steve’s direction, mouthing ‘stay,’ once more. One glance at his son’s mutinous expression showed Mark the futility of the command, so he wasn’t surprised when they returned with the salad to find the sofa empty.

Steve hadn’t gone far; they discovered him on the deck, reclining on one chair with his feet supported by another, his face upturned to the pale sunlight that had finally replaced the incessant rain.

Jesse placed the salad bowl on the table and gently kicked his friend’s chair. “What part of ‘stay’ didn’t you understand?”

Steve didn’t bother to open his eyes. “I think we’ve established that I’m not always good at following orders. Newman had a lot to say on that topic as well.”

“Steve?” Mark broke in with concern, and the sound of his voice brought his son alert at once.
“It’s fine, Dad, honestly. He chewed me out, but off the record he also congratulated me on a job well done. I think he’s happy he hasn’t lost his best consultant.”

Jesse’s foot was tapping impatiently. “Your feet aren’t going to heal if you keep walking on them.”

Steve regarded him with a jaundiced eye. "It’s not like I went for a run on the beach. I just needed some air."

“You could have asked one of us to open a window. As a matter of fact, air has been known to actually make it inside the house from time to time.”

That sarcastic reply caused Steve’s mouth to curve unwillingly. “Are you this overbearing with all your patients or am I just the lucky one? You are totally unreasonable.”

Jesse smiled sweetly. “As a matter of fact, I’m a completely reasonable man. Just see things my way and do what I say and everything will be fine.”

“That’s your definition of reasonable?” Steve shook his head in spurious disbelief.

“If you’re so concerned about his feet, maybe you should carry him back inside,” Amanda interposed mischievously.

Jesse eyed Steve’s greater bulk with mock horror. “He’d squash me flat. No, luging bodies around is his schtick not mine.”

Mark caught the oddly apprehensive look thrown his way by his son at that comment, but didn’t acknowledge it, merely beaming paternally around at younger colleagues. “Let’s begin.”

It was the only false note in an extremely pleasant meal, and Mark’s feelings of well-being persisted throughout the evening as he wrapped the warmth and love of his extended family around him securely.

After the meal, Mark co-opted Jesse’s help in clearing up, watching in amusement as the younger doctor scowled at Steve as he smirked and gestured at his bandaged feet with a helpless shrug. Amanda was exempted from washing up after her efforts in preparing the food. She watched Steve settle back in replete satisfaction and broke the silence before she lost her nerve.

“Steve, I feel I owe you an apology.” Seeing the surprise and incipient rejection of the notion on his face encouraged her to continue. “I didn’t believe you when you insisted Mark was still alive. I should have been more supportive.”

Steve reached out a hand, and she allowed hers to be enveloped. “You’ve got nothing to apologise for. You may have had your doubts, but you were just looking out for me. You might have had reservations, but you still let me drag you from pillar to post. Without you and Jesse...well, I don’t know what I’d have done. Besides, you were probably right. It wasn’t that I was being logical. After losing... after everything, I just couldn’t accept he was gone. It was just sheer stubborn stupidity.”

“Well, I just wanted you to know that I’ve never been so happy to be wrong in all my life. There were times there that I was afraid we were going to lose you both.”

A sober grimace confirmed the legitimacy of her worry but Steve didn’t venture a comment, so she continued with a wry smile. “At times, I can’t truly believe he’s really here. I feel the need to poke him to make sure he’s real.”
This concept resonated with Steve, and he glanced towards the glass doors to check that no masculine ears would overhear his confession. “In the hospital...” he hesitated, continuing only after an encouraging nod, “each time I woke up I was disoriented. I could never figure out if I’d just woken from a nightmare and everything was alright or whether I’d just dreamt he was safe and I was waking into the nightmare.”

It was not an admission he would make to many people, and not even to her would he try to articulate the feelings that had haunted him in those split seconds of waking, the terror of emotional freefall, not sure if a parachute even existed.

Amanda was surprised only that Steve had admitted that much. Recovering consciousness after the shooting to be told Mark was dead was bound to leave greater scars than the accident that put him there. Despite the fact that he’d presented a front of unfaltering determination, never seeming discouraged, she knew that the doubt and fear had been consuming him.

Further conversation was prevented by the arrival of Mark and Jesse bearing coffee. Sensitive as always to atmosphere, Mark realised immediately that he’d interrupted communication of some emotional import. With a glance, he signaled an apology to his son and an offer to leave again, but a slight shake of Steve’s head and a crooked grin indicated it wasn’t necessary. Amanda watched the exchange with some amusement and the thought that no two people in the world could manage wordless communication better than these two.

The sun had set in a glory of pinks and purples by the time the visitors were ready to leave and, since a chill was setting back in, Jesse insisted on assisting Steve back to his snug position on the sofa. Steve listened with exaggerated patience to the repetition of medical do’s and don’ts, but as the doctor gave up and headed for the door, he called him back, “Jesse...”

The young man looked back warily, obviously expecting a resumption of the good-natured needling that they’d both enjoyed that evening, but all Steve said was, “Thanks.”

It was monosyllabic, yet contained a wealth of meaning and sincerity. Quite clearly it wasn’t just ‘thanks for patching me up multiple times’, but also, ‘thanks for being there and trying to argue sense into me’ and most importantly ‘thanks for coming after me that night’.

Jesse’s smile lit up his whole face. “I’d like to say ‘any time,’ but actually I’d prefer ‘never again.’”

Mark saw them out, then returned to peer perspicaciously down at his son. “Can I get you anything: coffee, hot chocolate...painkillers?”

With a sigh of resignation, Steve met his gaze. He’d thought he’d been successful in hiding his rising discomfort, but he should have known better. He weighed the merits of further obfuscation, but experience had taught him that the blue gimlets piercing him might as well be lie detectors, so he opted for tempered truth.

“My shoulder’s aching somewhat, but I really don’t want to take anything that’s going to make me feel dopy.”

For a moment Mark didn’t reply, as the image of how the original damage to that shoulder had been exacerbated flashed vividly in front of his eyes. The grating of what even he recognised as irrational guilt that ensued caused his voice to emanate more gruffly than he’d intended. “I’ll get you something for that.”

As he tipped a couple of analgesics into his hand in the kitchen, he gave himself a swift mental
kick. Allowing the shadow of constraint to grow between them again was no way to thank Steve for the sacrifices he’d made on his father’s behalf. The spectre of imminent death had hovered too closely to both of them to ignore the epiphany it had delivered. No matter the extent of grief and loss he’d suffered, gratitude for what he still had was stronger, and he couldn’t afford to waste more time not appreciating the family he had left.

He returned bearing the promised medicine. With only one hand available, Steve needed help juggling glass and pills, and Mark assisted quietly, handing over each item as required. Steve stiffened as an injudicious move sent a jolt of pain stabbing into his shoulder and although he stifled the automatic imprecation that rose to his lips, he looked up guiltily at his father, catching the concerned expression there.

“Dad, I’m fine, really. Don’t worry.”

Mark placed the water on the coffee table and seated himself on the sofa, careful not to jar his son’s injuries any further. “Worrying is just part of the job description of being a parent,” he commented ruefully. “And I’ve got pretty good at it if I say so myself!”

Despite the levity of his words, memories tumbled haphazardly through his mind, momentarily robbing him of breath. He struggled to pin down the squirming mass of his own thoughts sufficiently to find the words to express the welter of emotions he was feeling. He had always feared that one day someone would come to his front door to tell him his son had been killed in the line of duty, and he wasn’t sure he’d survive that. Would he really worry about Steve more now? Maybe not, but his fear would have a darker, more desperate edge, tinged with the painful reality of losing a child. Yet he had no intention of burdening his son with the depth of his fears.

He paused, trying to make sure his next words came out correctly, but in the end he let his instincts take over. “I worried about you...well, you’ve always done things the hard way. As a soldier and cop, you face danger every day. With Carol, it was the opposite. I worried about the choices she made. She tended to opt for the easy way out.”

Steve knew his father well enough to recognise his speech as a combination of apology and offer of amends. For all of his own surface openness and amiability, Mark himself kept back a great portion of his inner soul from the prying regard of others. He made no attempt to speak, partly because he was reluctant to interrupt Mark’s train of thought, but also because his father had brought up so many issues in just a few sentences that he couldn’t work out which to address first.

Mark’s voice was soft, almost abstracted as he continued. “It took me a long time to recover after your mother died, but somewhere along the way her loss transformed from a bleeding wound to that of a dull ache still lurking somewhere in the back of my mind, though not overwhelming me as it once had. I know that eventually I’ll come to terms with Carol’s death the same way. But it’s hard to get past the anger, that she died for such a stupid, useless, ignorant reason. She was so young and had so much to offer and...”

Mark paused again, his breath caught in his throat, oxygen suddenly too thick to draw in, and Steve moved to clasp his knee, needing to offer reassurance.

“If I had just done something differently, been more understanding at some time or stricter at another, then maybe she would have made different decisions and not been in that godforsaken town at that time.”

Mark looked uncharacteristically vulnerable, as if in trying to express his feelings he had shed a skin, leaving nerve-ends too near the surface, yet Steve was the one who felt exposed, his insides clenching with the intensity of his emotions.
“Dad, I understand how you feel. I feel guilty because I wasn’t there when she needed me, but of all the things to question, your parenting skills should be the last. I’m speaking from personal experience here.”

The slight incredulity in his tone was perhaps more effective than his words and Steve could see the haunting anguish in his father’s eyes diminish, so he pushed home his advantage. A natural reticence on emotive topics inherited from his father was now overcome by his father’s need.

“I mean, seriously, Dad. You have to be fishing for compliments here. You have to know that you’re the best Dad in the world. You’ve always been there for us.” He held up his hand to forestall the obvious protest. “No, you were there for Carol too, and she knew that. She always understood that if she ever needed you she could come back, but she made her own decisions, and they don’t alter the fact that she really loved you.”

Mark’s eyes were suspiciously bright, so Steve shifted subjects. “Moreover, when you talk about worry, you have to know that it goes both ways.” He didn’t state that his father had given him enough fuel in that department to ignite searing nightmares for the rest of his life, but the addendum lay unvoiced but acknowledged between them.

Steve’s blue eyes met those so like his own and saw the pain that lurked there, but also a depth of love that Mark couldn’t verbalise, but that had always told Steve all that he ever needed to know about his father’s feelings and all that Mark was unable to say.

Mark watched the son he cherished take a drink of water. He was touched by the mutual revelations, but felt the need to move to a lighter topic. “I was thirsty myself, but that was the only glass I could find.”

He could tell from the pink tinge that coloured his son’s ears when the reference registered, but Steve rallied quickly. “Now that’s a funny thing. You see, I was bored when you were gone and decided to teach myself how to juggle to pass the time.”

Mark’s left eyebrow expressed his incredulity by trying to crawl off his forehead, but there was a twinkle in his eyes as he listened to Steve enthusiastically embroider his tale, explaining how he had all the chinaware spinning in the air when he got distracted by a bikini-clad female strolling past the windows and everything came crashing down.

“Well that explains things,” Mark responded solemnly. A reminiscent glimmer suddenly lit his gaze. “You know what that reminds me of?” He sprang to his feet and dove into his study to return with several leather bound photo albums one of which he spread open on the coffee table in front of them. Flicking through a few pages, he found the picture he sought. A five-year-old Carol was covered from head to foot with a fluffy whipped cream concoction. Her eyes, just visible through the goop were caught in the transition from shock to guilt. “She was just trying to help,” Mark remembered fondly, “but the plastic bowl was too heavy for her and when it hit the floor, a wave of goo just splashed up and engulfed her.”

The next picture also triggered an anecdote, and soon the two Sloans were engrossed in the past as they turned the pages of the album. Steve contributed the occasional comment but mostly listened as his father recounted many small moments that were lost to his own memory. It was poignant, and yet the tales were mostly humorous, cementing together happy chunks of the past into an integrated whole. He relaxed fully as a quick glance at his father’s untroubled expression told him that the process of healing had truly begun.

Near the end of the third album, Mark discovered a copy of the same picture Steve had framed in his apartment. He stared for a long moment at the family preserved on that paper, intact and
enduring -- four people with almost identical smiles. He’d always liked the number four, finding it
redolent of security and stability like four legs anchoring a table. The loss of each precious life was
like losing a limb, requiring a period of adjustment, of relearning balance, but once the feel of it
became the normal tone of the body, a person functioned with it and ceased to feel the constant
ache consciously unless something prodded the sore spot.

Despite the loss of two of its members, two of his anchors, his little family had lost none of its
stability, thanks in large part to the boundless heart and indomitable spirit of his son. Steve would
not be restricted to the role of the hypothetical lone table leg. As he gazed at the photograph, Mark
realised that now he could be grateful for the time they had shared as a family and not just grieve
for its conclusion.

“Dad, are you alright?”

The concern that had crept back into his son’s voice woke him from his reverie, and Mark turned
to him with a smile.

“I’m fine,” he replied, realising as he spoke that, for the first time in a long while, he truly was.

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