Out of Touch

by Seaward

Summary

Sometimes things are just what they seem.

Other times, the girl next door has telekinesis, countries maneuver for a covert genetic breakthrough, and the people you need to meet do Scottish step dancing and glass blowing. Sarah starts with the best of intentions toward her boyfriend, her neighbors, and her mother’s cats, but she ends up chasing secrets that lead her across four continents, into places that most of us will never know exist.

Notes

This is a story I originally wrote in 2005 under the pseudonym Clara Ward. It has thirty-two chapters, labeled in the manuscript, but to simplify posting on AO3, I broke it into "Part One" and "Part Two" here.

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Part One

Chapter 1
February 2 – March 21, 2025 – Sacramento, USA

Sarah yanked a loose corner of carpet. The thin weave was stiff and shed a puff of acrid dust into her face. Some cats had objected to her mom’s laissez-faire attitude toward the litter box; so the carpet was disgusting. It was almost enough to make Sarah use her mind, not her hands. The temptation washed her like warm sudsy water, but left behind a residue of fear. No way to know the cost; no need to take the risk. She hauled the ripping chunk of carpet toward the door. It came off with a heavy jerk, a loud rasp, and of course, that stench.

The phone rang. Sarah tossed the carpet out and stopped to wash her hands. Then she enunciated carefully toward the ceiling, “Answer phone: hello?”

“Is Molly there?”

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“Tabitha,” replied the sandy voice.

“Are you a friend of my mom’s or is this business?” Sarah wiped her hands and prepared to go off speaker.

“A friend, dear. I’m just calling to wish her a Happy Groundhog Day.”

Groundhog Day, what was it with old people? Her mother had received two Groundhog cards by snail mail. Hallmark must love these women. Sarah grabbed a flimsy headset, not wanting to say the rest across the room.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you but, well, my mom passed away last week.”

“Oh no, what happened?”

“Liver failure.”

There was a pause, and Sarah wondered if Tabitha knew her mother’s drinking habits. Hanging the dishtowel with one hand, Sarah reached for the pictures she’d dusted that morning. Nineteen cats had lived here over the years, each photographed and printed in ink. The frames made a mosaic of larger and smaller rectangles as Sarah slid them around the dining table, here a matronly calico in a large silver frame, there a white kitten hissing in a fuzzy pink border. A trick of light reflected Sarah’s face from the glassed in photos, wavering across the middle of her design. Above the calico floated a blue eye with a deeply creased lid, but the other eye was lost between frames. The strength of her nose and high cheekbones seemed to skew, split between two different squares of glass, and her mouth and eyebrows were gone, leaving the expression ambiguous. What was she doing here, tearing up the home she’d left seven years before? Reggie called it capital improvement, but for now it was mostly destruction.

“I’m so sorry. Was she at home?”

“Asleep in her own bed.” With the words, Sarah’s vision of herself warped to the frailer face of her mother, gone pale and bloated, a black fluid oozing from her mouth. She’d learned not to mentioning the details or that she’d found the body. Not mentioning things came easy. She started to bite at her fingernail, then pulled her hand away in disgust as she stared at the soiled patch of carpet she’d removed.

Tabitha said, “What about the cats?”

“Oh, they need homes. If you’d like one or know someone who would—”

“Spooky, I think she would want me to take Spooky.”

Sarah was at a loss. Giving away cats was going surprisingly well, but she hadn’t expected anyone to want Spooky. “You know he’s seventeen-years-old, and, well—”

“I have a few older cats of my own, dear. I live in Fresno; so I can’t come by right away. But if you’ll take care of Spooky for a few weeks, then I’ll drive up to get him.”

Did all old people celebrate Groundhog Day and assume responsibility for each others’ pets, or was
this just another weirdness with her mother and her mother’s friends? How had her mom found friends who were weird like her and cared like that? Sarah concentrated on not saying too much and not sounding too childish. As soon as she was off the phone she closed all the curtains and crossed her arms tight.

A yearning like acid crept from her fingers and toes to her center. In that moment, she seemed ripped from the social fabric, separate, unraveling. She imagined the cat pictures, still spread before her, rising off the table in a kinetic patchwork, shifting and indecipherable.

But she didn’t make them move, even lost as she felt. What if someone could sense her difference, and what if something bad—her mind jumped past that worry, stitched her back into the house she had to clean, and the rules she’d made for seeming normal. She opened the curtains. They were older than she was and stained a nicotine yellow. Using her own hands, she took them down hook by hook.

A month-and-a-half later, someone called to Sarah at the gym door, “Leaving early, coach?” Torie was five foot seven now, mostly legs, with great lines on parallel bars and floor exercise, but pushing too tall for a gymnast. She looked all but grown up as she leaned by the concrete doorway of that plain concrete building with the extravagant reputation. The girls had seen Sarah leave early many times just before her mother died; maybe Torie was worried.

“There’s a cat who for once in his life needs to do what he’s told.”

“Just a cat? You’re sure it isn’t your rich boyfriend?” Torie said it like she’d tease a girl on the team. Sarah shook her head, reminding herself that she was twenty-six, not sixteen, and refused to rise to the bait. She dashed through rain to her car while the level nine girls were still packing up. Her faded leotard and work-out sweats were damp with rain and sweat. Hair straggled down her face where it had slipped loose from a ponytail. It shouldn’t really count as dark for another hour, but with black clouds clogging the sky and rain plummeting down, Sarah felt worry creep up her spine. Spooky could be just stubborn enough to declare it dark early on the one night he really needed to stay home. Tabitha was coming tomorrow.

Sarah remembered thinking Spooky was such a good name, when she was eight and the black kitten showed up in her yard. Back then they’d had only six cats, but Spooky had been a problem from the start. He scratched, bit, or avoided Sarah for the first two years. And if she didn’t get him in before dark, there was no telling when he’d come back or what cold, bleeding offering he might bring. Of the nineteen cats that had eventually lived with Sarah and her mom, Spooky was the least like a pet. Now he was the last cat leaving the house, and if Sarah didn’t get there before dark, he might refuse to come back in time.

Sarah hissed “pfft” as the car auto-increased its headlights. She didn’t much like cars. The one ahead of her, hitting the centerline on each turn, was a stodgy forest green color that Sarah couldn’t stand. Her mom had driven a forest green station wagon when they moved to the suburbs of Sacramento in 2001. There was a picture in the photo album from the day they arrived: dirty green car, dirty Sarah wearing just her diaper and popsicle ooze, and the tan, ranch-style house with geraniums and juniper hiding the bottom of every wall. Mom wasn’t in the picture, of course. Who would have taken it?

The green car skidded a bit on a muddy curve up ahead, and Sarah shook her head at the driver’s reaction times. Probably some distractible grandma or grandpa, even older than her mom, well, older than her mom would have been.

The steering wheel in Sarah’s indigo Honda chilled her fingers through, before she thought to turn up the heat. A pine needle stuck on the windshield just outside the wipers’ range. Somehow, the rain slamming into the car failed to move that pine needle. Was this some strange suction effect or something to do with fluid dynamics? No wonder people had once believed in water gods or mischievous, tricksy sprites.

She turned on the radio. It came up with a news station blaring, “. . . President Davies said this grant will allow the Keenan Foundation to offer its AIDS vaccine worldwide. Outreach efforts will follow the malaria immunization model in underdeveloped countries, while wealthier nations will be asked .
Sarah auto-searched for the next clear station, jazz filled the car and she shivered as it meshed with the beat of rain on moving metal. Still stuck behind the green sedan, Sarah followed the familiar curves of a road unimaginatively named Winding Way. This part of Winding Way was bracketed on the left by vertical dirt, held in place by roots, weeds, and not much else. In rain like this it seeped brick-red rivulets of slick mud. On the right was a pit filled with blackberry bushes that never gave up and a stream that frequently did. Sarah had once tumbled down there on her bike, and she’d never quite forgiven the road or the prickly, grabby bushes.

Tonight, rain was sloshing down her windshield hard enough to leave no streaks, not that her car was dirty or prone to streaking. Sarah took better care of things than her mother had. She was on her way to that no-longer-tan, ranch-style house, having removed most of the juniper bushes, trimmed the geraniums, and painted the outside a modern shade of lavender. As soon as she finished probate and had the inside fixed up, she could sell the place and get back to her real life, such as it was. But before she could deal with the inside, she had to get rid of the last cat, and to do that she had to get home before dark.

The driver in front of her should get home by dark, too. Sarah felt a twinge of worry under her ribs and slowed around a sharp turn. The other car had taken it a bit too fast, and for just a moment she’d seen its rear wheels glide before gripping the ground. It must be old, built before GPS. It wouldn’t be street legal in another three years. No voice told the driver the danger rating of upcoming curves. No buzzer signaled his velocity/reaction-speed mismatch.

Sarah hit personalized scan on the radio and it stopped at an old Indigo Girls tune, with a “Go, go, go,” that had nothing to do with driving, but seemed to suit the moment anyway. As she came to the curve just before the wooden bridge, Sarah saw the car in front sliding. It was too late to stop it. She hit her anti-lock brakes, pushed her car’s 911 button, and pulled onto a patch of muddy shoulder. The old car was on its side, falling into the pit, wheels up. How many times had she seen cars caught in this blackberry-shrouded creek bed during her childhood? But that wasn’t supposed to happen anymore. Why put GPS and driver warning devices in cars now, if not to prevent this? Why did people still insist on driving old, unsafe cars?

Sarah sloshed through mud and thorny vines toward the overturned car. The sound of rain falling down and rushing with the creek pounded in her ears. Mud sucked into her sneakers, and her feet were instantly cold. I should be shocked. A normal person would be shocked right now. Oh well, she’d wait and be shocked later.

The green car balanced upside down. It pressed into the blackberries showing the pit was much deeper than it seemed from above. The roof of the car had not collapsed, but the driver’s side door was crinkled like foil. Water was seeping in somewhere from the edge of the creek. There was only one person in the car. He hung from his seat belt, unconscious and upside down, his wrinkled skin sagging toward his forehead. The side window was shattered. Jagged marbles of safety glass glistened in his rusty gray curls. Sarah listened for breathing, reached in to feel for pulse. She never found his pulse but heard a rattling breath. Where there was breathing there must be a pulse. Blood seeped through his plaid shirt. You’d think a year in pre-med would give her a better idea what was wrong. But there was a reason Sarah had left pre-med, and it wasn’t that she was squeamish around blood. She imagined broken ribs, but couldn’t be certain. More blood leached out onto the old man’s clothes. No part of Sarah doubted what she should do or that she had to hurry. She tensed and brought her focus inward, then imagined wrapping a second skin around the man’s whole body, like a cocoon. She knew the emergency team would have a hard time getting him out of an upside-down car in a creek bed like this. He might not survive their rescue, so she had to hurry. Mentally holding his weight and unfastening his seatbelt, she placed her hands on his head and shoulder to help guide him out of the car. No other drivers had come to gape.

She floated the old man up the hill to where it was flat, keeping him wrapped in pressure to limit the loss of blood. She kept her hands more or less under him, imagining some chance witness rushing to phone the tabloids. Lowering him gently to the ground, she hoped he didn’t have a spine injury,
though she knew the paramedics couldn’t have moved him more smoothly. They wouldn’t know that though. They’d wonder how and why she’d moved him at all. It would really be a lot simpler if the car caught fire, obscuring the situation and making it clear that he was safer once moved. As she raised him a centimeter off the ground, easing him farther from the muddy edge, the green car burst into flames despite the rain. Sarah felt the warmth on her frozen fingers as she bent over the man to keep rain from pounding onto his slack face.

Letting her attention diffuse, touching the old man with just her hands, Sarah felt young and uncertain. She remembered her dreams of saving people as a doctor, using her mind to miraculously adjust problems seen in x-rays or MRIs before any surgeon needed to operate. She remembered the day her fear overcame her, knowing someone would eventually suspect, worrying that she might make a mistake. That year she felt so alone, imagining the harm someone like her could do, killing with a thought by collapsing an artery, toppling a building by splitting the foundation. She concluded there either weren’t any others like her or something happened to those who acted out, and she changed her major to anthropology.

Wiping raindrops and wet hair from the man’s forehead, Sarah carefully avoided the rest of his curls, in case there were hidden wounds or bits of glass. Hovering over this complete stranger, she felt like his closest relation, wanting him to live as if it was a personal favor to her. Then she laughed, even as tears started down her face. She’d never had such a moment with her mother, who’d died slowly in bed, from causes Sarah couldn’t affect.

Sarah saw the old man’s chest rise with a breath and felt the warmth of flames behind her as she heard the ambulance sirens approach.

By the time Sarah left the police station, it was eight o’clock. Her hair dripped onto her shoulders, and her sopping sneakers were the only pair of shoes she’d brought. The wetness soaked into her socks every time she pushed the gas pedal. She’d changed out of her wet sweats and into what she’d worn at the group home that day, green pants and a mottled yellow-green sweater. They were clothes designed to compromise, to not embarrass the teenager she drove to a job at the mall but to still look professional to police officers bringing back a runaway. Normally she’d wear a third set of clothes for a board meeting, but there was no time to fetch them. There was no point stopping to look for Spooky, either. It was long past dark.

She turned the car’s heat up full blast, causing pins and needles in her frozen fingers. She rubbed them over the dimpled surface of the steering wheel, finding the smooth patches where previous drivers had preferred to grip. Fast food signs made her stomach growl, which meant she really must be hungry. Just thinking about that greasy food made her mouth unpleasantly fuzzy. There was no time for dinner anyway.

Pulling into the parking lot at Pronoia International, Sarah saw Reggie’s convertible and paused to glance up at her rear view mirror. Her look tonight was pretty much “drowned rat.” It wasn’t that Reggie expected her to always look perfect. He was more likely to be annoyed with her lateness, but she wasn’t sure why it mattered anymore. Originally she’d been on the board because she helped set up the company and might bring in useful social work connections. Now Pronoia’s main project was bringing communications technology to rural Asia and Africa. They offered grants and organizational support to a few U.S. programs, but none that needed Sarah’s assistance. Like a non-digital camera, Sarah grew more and more out-of-place. She remembered Torie’s jibe about her “rich boyfriend” and cringed.

Tonight she fixed what she could, her hair. One pull of a comb brought back her part; two more pulls smoothed both sides. The shock she hadn’t felt earlier began to hit. Her shoulders tensed and her hand quivered as she put away the comb.

The front of Pronoia International was all glass, adding to the strip mall façade of the place. Sarah wiped her feet carefully on the front mat, then checked behind her as she moved to make sure she wasn’t leaving wet tracks on the sherbet-shaded pattern of the carpet. Their meeting was in the open area at the back, where all the furniture and partitions were easily, and frequently, moved. It gave Sarah a never quite settled feeling. She tried to enter quietly, but Reggie’s co-founder, Phil, an older
guy with long hair and the presence of an alpha ram, greeted her, “Glad you could make it Sarah. Hope there weren’t any natural disasters blocking your way?”

Before thinking, Sarah said, “No, I just stopped to rescue someone from an overturned car.”

Full stop. All eyes on Sarah. Why had she said that? She’d successfully played down the event to the paramedics and cops. Did she have some buried need for recognition from her colleagues? Super-Sarah: performs great rescues without letting the world discover her secret powers but still needs acknowledgement from others to boost her self-esteem?

Phil gave her the scouring “what does she mean by that?” look that she seemed to trigger so often from older men. Two more reserved committee members just froze with their eyes open a little too wide. Luckily, there was Reggie to break the silence, and the small smile that still managed to paint his whole expression showed Sarah he was relieved to forgive her for being late. “You know, if anyone else said that, I’d think they were joking. From you, it’s a credible excuse.”

“Thanks. Would it excuse me from wearing shoes? Mine are soggy.”

“Ah, I have just the thing.” Reggie swooped gracefully from his seat to his office across the room. His attitude seemed to spread and all faces around the table relaxed. A moment later he returned, presenting Sarah with a pair of black socks. “Not a glass slipper, but probably warmer.”

As Sarah sat down, Reggie knelt before her and began to remove her wet shoes. From anyone else it would seem awkward or overdone, but Reggie had a knack for carrying off whatever scene he chose to play. He could dramatically dry her feet with a paper napkin, and still seem most refined with his perfect posture and elegant clothing. Sarah gazed at the shiny black curls that brushed the collar of his sapphire peasant shirt and wondered why he’d stayed her boyfriend for three years.

The sappy thoughts dispersed as Phil asked, “Was the accident nearby? Is everyone all right?”

“An old car went into a creek by my mom’s house. I saw it, so I hit 911 and went down to check. There was just the man driving the car, and he’s in the hospital now. They say he’ll be all right.”

“You got him out of the car?”

“But what if . . .” the questions kept coming. Clearly the agenda had been dropped in favor of hearing how Sarah ended up at the meeting late and in soggy sneakers. She replied, trying to sound steady but plain, “I was just driving home . . . Anyone would have done the same.”

Sarah was glad her dramatic opening had been well received, but she wished she hadn’t said anything. People like Reggie, who ran places like Pronoia International, floated wit as social currency, but would rather be mute than appear to be trying too hard. Sarah generally kept to the sidelines as others competed with clever remarks and personal anecdotes.

She felt Reggie slide his wool dress socks over her calves. She knew he kept a suit at work, in case he needed to look impressive. Not that Reggie ever looked unimpressive, whatever he put on. Part of it was an innate sense of style inherited from his rich Italian mother. He only chose good clothes, and he always wore them well. The socks from his suit were wool, she knew; they had to be hand washed. But they were silkier than anything she’d ever called wool before meeting Reggie. They were also warm, or was that because Reggie was the one slipping them on her while she quietly described the events of the evening? Sarah felt herself begin to blush and hoped those listening would attribute it to her story.

Chill fog lingered the next morning as Sarah knocked on the carved oak door up the hill. There was a brass doorbell to the side and a heavy brass knocker just above center, but Sarah always knocked on doors with her bare hand first. She heard a click before the door opened, revealing a woman of Chinese decent who stood silently staring at Sarah.

“Hi, um, sorry to bother you, but I’m looking for this cat?” Sarah held up a photo she’d printed out.

“I think he sometimes goes in your yard.”

“You’re the girl from the house behind us? Come in. I’m Mei Mei Chen.”

“Sarah Duncan. Uh, glad to meet you.”
Sarah stepped in as a memory of her mother reminded her to never enter a stranger’s house. She slipped off her Birkenstocks where she saw other shoes lined up beside the door. Her feet pressed against the smoothness of marble as she followed her hostess through a dim entryway then turned toward light and white carpet.

The room before her seemed all Chinese, though Sarah had never been to China. Still, this must be what fancy Chinese restaurants were trying to imitate. There was a dining area to the left with a glossy mahogany table. The chairs had red upholstered cushions and ornately carved backs with lions in the design. The sitting area, ahead of her and a step down, had carpet almost entirely covered by a red Oriental rug, with another rug placed between two black couches. Her feet, already nestled in plush white carpeting, wriggled in anticipation of standing atop two more rugs on top of the carpet. There was more mahogany furniture, some of it with jeweled inlays, probably real antique stuff.

But Mei Mei motioned her to the window before Sarah had time to finish studying the room. The window took up the whole back wall of the sitting area. Framed by the light, Mei Mei in silhouette became the centerpiece for her sitting room. She looked like a sculpture of a woman, her hair a perfect smooth black, bobbed softly below the ears. Her skin was healthy and impossibly smooth, though slight wrinkles around her eyes and mouth hinted that she was probably fifty, at least. The flowing amber dress she wore looked like silk, and Sarah wondered if Mei Mei always dressed this well or if she was on her way out. That reminded Sarah that she was supposed to say something.

“What an amazing view you have, you can see my whole street. That’s my backyard there, a little to the left. I don’t see Spooky anywhere, though.”

Sarah was scanning the enormous hill, which sloped down from this window to the fence at the back of her house and others on her street. The lots up here were much larger than in her development. She’d seen them before from her side, but it wasn’t nearly so impressive looking up. Mei Mei was staring at her, but Sarah continued to look out at the smooth lawn and well-placed trees and rocks that made up Mei Mei’s backyard. It looked natural, if only nature planned for perfect views.

“I remember seeing you play down there when you were a child,” Mei Mei said, smiling briefly. “You haven’t changed much. You still look so strong and have such beautiful blond hair. When my Robert was born, I’d sit here and rock him and see you running in the sprinklers. You must have been five or six. I’d watch you turn cartwheels through the water or shape yourself into letters of the alphabet. When my children were older, I let them play in the sprinklers, but they never seemed to enjoy it the way you did.”

Funny how this elegant, refined woman nodded at the end of her stories, just the way Sarah’s mom had. Sarah slipped into the pattern of exchanging stories, but she mostly kept her eyes to the window, anxious under Mei Mei’s intense gaze.

“I once carved a fort out of those blackberry bushes along our fence. They were so dense I could just use yard shears and hack away anything I didn’t want. One of the tunnels I cut led to the back corner where I could see between the fence boards into your yard. I saw your kids; they must have been two or three at the time. The boy, Robert I guess, was wearing a white and blue sailor suit. The girl had a lacy white party dress. They ran on the grass, but never fought with each other or mussed their clothes. I’d like to say they reminded me of a famous painting, but at the time, I thought of it as a picture on a greeting card. Guess that’s my American heritage. But they did seem like wonderful children.”

“I wish you’d come by. I would have liked to meet you, maybe convinced you to babysit, but I thought it would be odd to go down to your house and ask. You didn’t seem to have many visitors. Your mother was a very private person.”

Sarah met Mei Mei’s eyes, trying to guess what she was really saying. What had this woman seen looking down into their lives? They’d mostly kept the curtains closed, but on summer nights Sarah’s room and the family room must have been lit like a stage. Their performances were probably disappointing. It was true that they never had visitors. Her mother didn’t date or socialize, and Sarah had usually been too embarrassed to bring friends home to a house overrun with clutter and cats.

Mostly Sarah had read or done homework, and her mother had watched TV and drank. This woman
couldn’t have seen Sarah do anything inexplicable. She’d always been careful about that, hadn’t she?
The other thing . . . well, how could anyone have known? Still, there was something about this meeting with Mei Mei. Sarah wanted to stay and learn everything, but she closed down that feeling, also knowing that she wanted to flee.

“Anyway, I shouldn’t take your whole morning. Let me give you this picture of the cat. It has my name and phone number on it. Someone’s coming to adopt him at noon; so if you see him, please call me.”

“Are you moving away? I thought you’d just come back.”

“You know my mother died?”

“I’m sorry. She was so young. What happened?”

“Liver failure.” Sarah had learned to say it without caring whether people heard it as alcoholism. No, she did still care, but truth was truth. “Anyway, I can’t take care of the cats or the house. So I’m just trying to get everything settled.”

“That must be hard. Let me know if you need anything.”

Sarah started back toward the door, feeling tense and rude. Her feet, while taking her where she wanted to go, seemed to be in a jubilant mood all their own, enjoying the layers of rug and carpet and finally the smooth marble. What would it have been like to grow up in a grand house like this?

A few days later came the start of spring, and Sarah went straight from her car to the mailbox. She planned to begin the season by removing wallpaper, but she was curious if card-sending minions marked this occasion, too. Her bottle of eco-enzyme wallpaper remover was impatient and split the bottom of its paper bag, sliding into the juniper bush by the mailbox. Sarah had never liked that bush, and now it was in league with the crowd at the hardware store and the meeting about shift changes at the group home. Figured.

The mailbox held a flier from “Pets 4 Less” and a card from MeiMei Chen, probably condolences. The top envelope was from the police, and Sarah opened it on the spot. Inside there was a small piece of paper folded in half. Curious paper, not at all like something official. Its texture was more like cloth, crisp, but heavy as linen. She unfolded it.

March 18, 2025
Dear Sarah Duncan,
I’m sorry I did not have a chance to speak with you and thank you in person. I fully appreciate what you did for me. Few people would have helped me so, and I am lucky you were there. I am doing quite well now.
I thought you would like to know that I have a new car. A friend gave me his 2004 Saturn. (He’s purchased an alternative fuel Toyota.) It runs beautifully, which is such a waste. I don’t anticipate needing it much.
I am more indebted to you than you can know. Please call on me if you ever have need.
Sincerely,
Daniel O’Reeley
333 3rd St.
Berkeley, CA
PS - The police officer says he can’t give me your address, but he assures me he will send this on to you today.

Sarah felt touched and suddenly knew where the phrase came from. The thanks from the letter seemed to reach out and touch her gently on the shoulder. It was a pretty note. Mr. O’Reeley had loopy handwriting that looked antique on his choice of paper. She especially liked the four threes in “333 3rd St.” It occurred to her she even knew where that was; she’d biked through that area with her cousins several times. Maybe she should visit. No, it would be awkward. She laughed at the part about the car, another old clunker with no GPS or warning systems. But at least he didn’t intend to drive it much.
Sarah pushed the letter back into the envelope and fished the wallpaper remover out of the annoying bush.

Something about the letter still fluttered around Sarah’s mind as she placed her hand to the palm lock by her mom’s, now her, front door. It didn’t click. What could be wrong? The palm lock had been one of those wild ideas teenaged Sarah had talked her mom into trying. It wasn’t like anyone would ever bother to rob their house. But Sarah had wanted to see if she could trick the thing without a physical touch. It turned out to be pretty easy, and now the lock just reminded Sarah of herself as a teenager.

She finally realized it wasn’t clicking because the door was unlocked. Strange that; Sarah always kept it on automatic. She opened the door and heard classical music traipsing playfully down the hall. Reggie.

She dropped her stuff on the kitchen counter and hurried toward the music. Reggie was artistically stretched across the floor on his stomach reading a book, knees bent and heels kicked up behind him. He was in some old-style tan and cream outfit. The pleated trousers had cuffs, as did the tailored, long-sleeved shirt. Beneath and beside him lay a picnic blanket spread with scones, tea, and tea sandwiches. It lay intentionally askew and off-center in the empty room, protecting the recently sanded hardwood floor.

As he stood to say, “Welcome, my dear,” she saw the book was poetry by Byron.

“I look more like Frankenstein’s creature,” she said, gesturing at her gray all-weather ensemble, what passed for office drag at the group home. At work the clothes seemed like comfortable camouflage, but beside Reggie she felt boxed in plain white with the word “generic” stamped in bold letters. Reggie kissed her. “Good to know one of us has been doing honest work. I was getting nothing done, so I decided to pick up lunch.”

“What did you park?”

“Around the corner.”

“Then why did you leave the door unlocked?”

“It was the first hint of my presence. You’ve said you don’t like surprises.”

“And why did you choose my mom’s old room for your picnic?”

“It has the best light.”

He was right. The room had a large corner window with a foot wide ledge for flowerpots. There was no flora on it at present, but the light streaming in on the white walls and unfinished wood floor was picturesque. And there was Reggie, dressed to the nines.

“Should I change?” Sarah asked.

“Only if you want to. Or we could eat first, then bathe. Then I could ravish you.”

“I coach gymnastics at three.”

“I have a meeting then myself. But if we eat quickly, there should be enough time for ravishing.”

Chapter 2

March 23, 2025 – Sacramento, USA

Reggie triaged 116 emails on his phone by 12:15, while waiting for his parents at Fat City. Each time the door swung open, sunlight glared off his display. He looked up; he looked down.

The hostess, an older woman in a black skirt and jade green jacket, greeted diners in English or Chinese. The bustling restaurant was an authentic piece of Sacramento history in a way the kitchy old-town surrounding it could only imitate. A framed article on the wall proudly chronicled, “In 1939, Fat City was a well-known politico hangout, backdrop for the capitol’s deal-making and intrigues.” The place felt authentically old. Red carpet covered the floor and looked more than well trodden. Oriental rugs adorned high traffic areas, probably hiding threadbare sections. But the heavy beams of the ceiling were old-growth lumber, and the wall hangings of lions and dragons showed
meticulous embroidery if not original themes.
His parents were late, as usual. Two sets of tourists had come through and been seated. Government
workers, in off-the-rack suits and sensible shoes, trickled in by ones and twos, directed to the banquet
room for someone’s retirement feast. Reggie wondered if the retiree had ever aspired to be a “well-
known politico.”
Reggie waited, straight-backed in the reception area. He imagined himself as Lord Macartney, the
British emissary to China in the 1790’s. He came here to greet representatives of an old and honored
culture, to try to accommodate their ways, for the future good of both peoples. Hopefully his
diplomacy toward his parents would outshine its historical precedent.
Allowing a fresh incursion of sunlight, father opened the door like nature’s own doorman, with even
a slight tilt of the head. His far arm swung with several shopping bags and his rumpled suit coat.
Mother breezed in as if she were thirty-nine, with a practiced repertoire for displaying youthful
confidence. Regular salon visits and botox eased all the wrinkles except by her eyelids and lips. Her
deep blue dress was wound with a glaring silk sash, probably the latest thing, somewhere. She
dangled one tiny shopping bag from her loosely curled fingers. Reggie stood to be kissed and was
handed the bag.
“This is for you, darling.”
Reggie caught the gift with one arm, gave his father a brief hug with the other, and nodded to the
hostess to seat them. His cell phone vibrated, and a quick glance identified the caller as Phil. Reggie
let him leave a message.
Once at their table he opened the bag. The tie looked fine, soft gray and emerald, but the label said
“Enhancement Wear”; so Reggie knew there was a catch.
“It’s an appointment book,” his mother said. “And if you say the key words, ‘I think I’m available’ it
records the next sixty seconds, extracting date and time information for the appointment. The lower
end vibrates if you have a scheduling conflict, so you can revise.”
A vibrating tie? Even the marketers must have bit their tongues. Acting as a diplomat he turned
restraint into sincerity and said, “Thank you, it is lovely.”
As they scanned their menus, Reggie listened to Phil’s message. The Greater Bay Area Scout
Council wanted a speaker on “entrepreneurial community service after high school,” and Phil wanted
to promote their umbrella program and states-based mini-grants. Reggie remembered the week he
wore a Girl Scout uniform to high school, when scouts were edgy, not nuevo-geek cool.
Transgender clothes were in already, but Reggie usually dressed beyond trendy, so he’d never worn
a skirt. Then he met these Girl Scouts who wanted to overthrow the old paradigm. If the Unitarian
and gay rights activists couldn’t reform the Boy Scouts, why not offer a better option? These girls
with gold and silver award, leadership torches, and service bars challenged their own organization to
change its bylaws and let boys form troops. In not too many years, Girl Scouts had boy troops, and
the upper levels of Boy Scouts were scrambling to reorganize.
“How’s that company you started with what’s-his-name?” Dad asked.
“Pronoia,” his Mother whispered.
“Phil and I are both keeping busy. The international division has gone all telecom. Any requests for
other help, schools, farming, etc. are referred to a local micro-bank network.”
“Who’s idea was that?”
Reggie paused to pour himself tea. Could his father sense that Phil had pushed him to give up some
of those projects? “The most honest way to help people is to let them steer themselves. We’d give up
our part in the telecom projects if there were enough donations locally.”
“If that’s how you want it.”
Reggie thought of the Girl Scouts. How could he explain the compromises of community service?
He looked at his father, shoulders set, neck wrinkling down like a tortoise. Perhaps the Scouts could
explain it to father.
“States-based micro-banking keeps us busy enough.”
“Who needs micro-banks here? You said costs were too high, and I’ve told you over and over again
how your grandfather and I came here after the troubles—“
An elderly waiter stepped up crisply, micro-pad in hand, and Reggie’s father dropped the Irish lilt he used for rants and placed their order slowly and clearly, pointing at the menu. “We’d like this luncheon banquet for three.”

“With tofu?” the waiter asked, with no Chinese accent and only a trace of amusement.
“No, thank you,” Father answered more quickly.
“Low carbs?”
“Carbs are fine.”
“Micro-nutrient boost?”
“No—“ Dad began before Mom fluttered her hand just above the table line, “Oh, all right.”
“Anything else?”
Reggie saw the waiter glance at Mom.
“Just tea,” said Dad. Everyone smiled, and the waiter left.
Reggie’s father was silent a moment, as if he’d lost his train of thought. “So how’s your sweetheart from the Peace Corps?”
“She’s fine,” Reggie sighed. After three years, his dad should remember her name. Reggie recalled the first time he wrote home about Sarah.

He’d been setting foundation forms for the school that day, and Sarah, who was supposed to be working, was sitting under a mango tree with some of the local girls. They seemed to be playing with pebbles. It was early morning, and the sun came in at such an angle that it lit one side of each girl’s salwar, while leaving the other in shadow. Sarah wore a loose tan dress, which camouflaged with the tree but stood out amidst the bright circle of children.

When they’d been working intently for nearly an hour, the smallest girl in the group climbed up the tree, then swung down holding a fruit. She pressed it into Sarah’s hands before all the girls hurried away.

“What was that about?” Reggie asked, as Sarah walked over, holding the mango to her nose.
“Just math. They’re good at working large numbers by finding an approximation, then adjusting. But no one’s ever written it down and shown them how to carry to the next place. Just sitting there we worked up to long division.”
“Are you in mathematics?”
“They figured out a way to carry with pebbles. They didn’t even write the second number down, just the larger one, shifted a few pebbles, and they had the answer.”
“And the mango?”
Sarah shrugged. “It smells really good, do you want some?”
She pulled out a pocket knife and in a moment had the pit removed and each half of the mango skin turned inside out with ripe cubes of fruit poking up like hedgehog spikes.

“How’s she handling the loss of her mother?” his mom asked, her fingers fanning, pinkie to index, as she lifted her teacup.
“All right, I guess.”
“Don’t you think it’s about time we met her?”
Reggie replied without missing a beat, “On weekends she works nights. She’s probably asleep right now.”
“At your place?”
“No,” Reggie cooed diplomatically, “At the house she inherited from her mother.”
“Is it a nice house?”
“The master bedroom has excellent light.” Reggie smiled. “How was your cruise?”
His cell phone went off again, but it was just a grant applicant, so Reggie didn’t even check the message.

At the end of their meal, Reggie and his parents walked along the river. The promenade of pebbled
paths and sculpted bushes was meant to lure tourist to the shops in old town. But the shops looked colorless and ill kept when paired with the Disney-esque landscaping, and the smells and sounds from the freeway overpass made walking outside seem like standing in line for Autopia.

Reggie’s father asked, “That company of yours, how big is it now?”

“Eighteen people in our home office, but hundreds who receive funds or refer people to us.”

“And this micro-loans business, here, at home?”

“There’s a restlessness in the country right now. People are questioning, getting riled up. There’s nothing concrete enough to bring them together, but if you give them a chance to follow their own insights—”

“You mean, give them money?”

“Sometimes. But some people just want to avoid the hassle of filing for non-profit status, setting up a business name, telephony, mail, web presence. Whatever help they need to fully use their talents, we try to provide that support. Speaking of which,” Reggie’s phone had begun to vibrate. He pulled it out, and saw the new text message. “I’m going to have to leave.”

“Is it work, on a Sunday?”

“Sort of. I’m part of a scatter-mob for an associate of ours. She has a great network of contacts and the media connections to make her findings public. But the government watches her so closely that she needs a mob of couriers to move the evidence from her sources to her contacts in the press.”

“Is this person working under Pronoia’s umbrella?” his mother asked. “You didn’t give her grant money, did you?”

“She’s not officially part of us. It’s more like the network of connections you telephone when you want something done. We help each other because we share certain intentions.”

“But if she’s in trouble with the government—”

“They just work for different networks with contradictory goals.”

“Let him go,” his father whispered.

“Oh Reggie,” his mother embraced him and kissed his cheek, “Is this really what you want?”

His father patted him on the back, “Go save the world, son.”

Back in his car, Reggie pasted the locations from his text message into the car’s electronic map. He was almost certainly a decoy. The way scatter tactics worked, all but one of them would be driving to a pick up location and then to a drop off point without carrying anything in between. He set his audio system to pick up the all news PBS station. If he was lucky, he’d at least find out what information had been leaked.

“Researchers at Harvard today announced human trials for an anti-aging treatment based on blocking calcium-activated potassium channels . . .”

Reggie muttered to himself, “Same old, same old.”

“China has declined to participate in the Keenan Foundation’s AIDS inoculation effort . . .”

“Possibly interesting, but not the news I’m looking for,” Reggie replied as he switched off the ignition in front of the downtown package center.

He clicked his car security and strode through an automatic front door into a plastic and vinyl room full of mailboxes. The Latina woman at the counter glanced up at him, her only customer, and he asked if there were any deliveries for “Christopher Indigo,” as specified in his instructions. She checked and shook her head. He was a decoy.

“Thank you, anyway,” Reggie nodded, and the woman behind the counter smiled enough to show braces on her middle aged teeth. Reggie smiled back and wondered if so few people said thank you. Then he went back to his car and drove toward the broadcast station in Folsom, as he’d been assigned. In case the government used EGPS to track every person contacted, the whole meat mob had to keep up the act.

The radio said, “Four more dead from a bus bomb in Israel,” but Reggie’s thoughts drifted back to Sarah and India.

They’d been wandering in a city market. Fruit was sold from carts with wooden wheels right beside
bootlegged hCDs displayed on a powered board with headphones.

He said, “Most people are selfish.”

“But what do we mean by selfish? Sometimes, I think selfishness is just not appreciating what you have.” Sarah fingered the hem of her shirt as her gaze flicked from person, to cart, to shop.

“You think billionaires don’t appreciate their money?”

“Some must. But so many people who’ve been painfully poor, when they have something later, they give it to a beggar or share with their neighbors. Don’t you think?”

“They probably sympathize more with those people. Or they might feel undeserving.”

“Maybe, or true appreciation and feeling that you can’t ‘deserve’ something could be the same idea, just with different words tacked on.”

At the time, in so many conversations, Reggie had found Sarah’s reasoning tangled and illogical, separated from his ideas about networks versus nodes and absolute benefits. But her words stuck in his mind, even now. He felt drawn into each brief discussion, though often uncomfortable or annoyed afterward. Sometimes later, he’d rediscover for himself part of what she meant and that she was probably right.

The radio recaptured his attention.

“Documents uncovered this afternoon may threaten President Davies’ ‘Genetic Crime Deterrence Program.’ Published work by Professor Sashima purported to show that over fifty percent of males with two copies of the ‘aggression gene’ would react violently in frustrating situations. Today, an anonymous source supplied documents from Sashima’s early research showing that in those tests, only fourteen percent of the ‘genetically aggressive group’ reacted more violently than average. After receiving a large government grant, the experiments were systematically modified to determine which cues affected the ‘genetically aggressive’ men. The source maintains that the situations generated to produce numbers closer to fifty percent were unnatural and manipulative. Comments to this effect written by experts in the field at the request of peer-reviewed journals have been produced. There is a suggestion that these commentaries were suppressed to promote government screening—“ Reggie strongly suspected this was the news his scatter-mob had been activated to deliver. Nonetheless, he pulled into the parking lot in Folsom and walked to the lobby of his drop-off location. He made a casual survey of the room, as if looking for someone he was supposed to meet. A polished blond receptionist asked, “Can I help you?”

“No, thanks.”

Reggie went to sit in his car and continued to let the news filter past him. The President’s genetic testing program scared anyone who’d heard of a slippery slope. Would this revelation be enough? Of course not, but it might fill the Genetic Defense League’s coffers for a month.

Just before starting his car, Reggie realized how close he was to Sarah’s mom’s house. She would be asleep still. He could sneak in and scatter rose petals around her bed, maybe climb in beside her and share a little nap.

No, he knew he’d never be able to sleep or let her sleep at this hour. He liked Sarah far too much when she was asleep. All the fine lines that marked her forehead, mouth, and chin when she was thinking, they disappeared with sleep. Her face seemed lighter and her cheeks more pink. Tiny wisps of hair curled around her ears while the rest flared out across her pillow.

Once she woke up, things were far less certain. There was something about Sarah awake. Even slouching into her clothes, there was a tightness and stretch to her movements, like a bird bristling its feathers to dry them. Her movements kept him watching, fascinated, but not always comfortable. Sometimes he wanted to smooth those feathers, even if he wasn’t sure how. Other times, he was content to let nature be.

Reggie paused a moment in uncertainty, caught between what he wanted and the situation at hand. He was supposed to wait until she showed up at his place. Then he could tell her the latest news about genetic aggressiveness. Sarah was strong on mental health issues and genetic privacy, but she didn’t keep careful track of the news. Reggie began to drive, plotting their probable discussion and other plans for the evening.
Chapter 3
March 23, 2025 – Sacramento, USA

At noon on Sunday, Sarah approached Mei Mei’s door again. She brought Russian tea cakes. Perhaps they were too messy to offer in such a grand house. But she had to bring something, and they were the only dessert she could make that was the slightest bit impressive.

Why hadn’t she said “no” to this invitation? Friday and Saturday she worked nights at the group home. Usually she slept through Sunday lunch. But Mei Mei’s invitation had said Sarah simply must come meet her children and her nephew while they were all in town. Besides, Sarah’s curiosity had been nagging her since her first visit. Mei Mei discomfited and intrigued her, and it wasn’t about the fancy house. Sarah wished she could have brought Reggie; he would know the right things to say and do. But Mei Mei didn’t know about Reggie, and he hadn’t been invited. Reggie thought she was sleeping.

Mei Mei led her into the sitting room, just as before. Sarah’s toes dug into the thick layers of rugs with gleeful recognition. But this time, Mei Mei’s daughter, Lisa, was there, framed by the light of the window. For a moment, Sarah was disoriented, reconciling the child she’d seen playing long ago with this woman, nearly her own age. Lisa looked just like her mom: perfect hair, straight back, smooth silk dress. But Lisa’s face, though younger and smoother, seemed more severe. The lips pulled a little tighter, the set of the jaw betrayed a bit more tension.

“You must be Sarah. I’m Lisa.”

Sarah nodded, realizing her hands no longer held the plate of cookies. Mei Mei had disappeared with them somewhere.

“Glad to meet you, I mean for real, you know?”

Lisa smiled at Sarah’s awkwardness, and Sarah wished she’d never come. Lisa took a seat near the window, and Sarah guessed she should sit across from her.

“What do you do?” Lisa asked.

Mei Mei reentered the room and sat beside her daughter, smiling in a practiced way that nonetheless reassured.

“I work with emotionally disturbed adolescents.”

“Are you a psychiatrist?”

“No, I just work in a group home. I have a bachelor’s degree in anthropology. And you?”

“Pre-med at UCLA.” Lisa looked smug. Sarah decided not to mention that she’d started out pre-med.

Mei Mei’s eyes flicked toward the window, “My son, Robert, is studying biology at Stanford.”

Through the big window in the sitting area, Mei Mei pointed out Robert. He had a squat, boxy build and short black hair. Standing just below the top step of a ladder, he tried to saw a crossing branch off the tallest tree in the yard. He did not look practiced or even stable as he sawed.

“My nephew, Howard, holding the ladder, is working on his MBA.” Howard was taller than Robert, maybe five six, with a narrower but still muscular build. His hair was also cut short, except for a tidy ponytail at the back. The way he stood, with his feet planted a bit too far apart, reminded Sarah of a movie Samurai. He looked up the ladder with strained concentration, as if he also doubted his cousin’s competence. His pants were tight and his shirt loose, and he didn’t seem as young as his cousins. Sarah realized she’d been watching the men a bit too long, and the room had drifted into silence.

Before she could panic, Mei Mei asked, “Did you find the cat?”

“Yes.” Sarah flooded with relief at the conversational lead, and wondered if lack of sleep was making her too emotional. Still, she flowed easily into offering a story. “It was rather strange really. When Tabitha, my Mom’s friend, showed up, I still had no idea where Spooky was. But Tabitha
breezed into the house, giving her own tour, although she’d never been there before. She talked about things my mother had mentioned, mostly fix-it jobs she’d never had time to do. Tabitha is a big woman, and she was wearing this loose dress and several bright metal bracelets. Every time she pointed to something, the bracelets would jingle. Finally, she opened the sliding glass door in the back, jingled her arm across, exclaiming about the patio, and Spooky paraded in and rubbed against her legs. I guess Tabitha is as much of a cat person as my mom was. Spooky stayed by her for the next hour while we chatted and drank tea. It made me feel much better about sending him off with her.”

Lisa sat wringing her hands and looking as if she’d missed part of the story, but Mei Mei nodded and met Sarah’s eyes. Then Mei Mei gestured toward the ladder outside and said, “I remember when Robert was about ten, he decided he wanted a dog. He sat for a neighbor’s Great Dane, and the animal truly adored him. But we—”

Sarah, listening to Mei Mei and watching Robert through the window, saw the ladder start to tip away from Howard. There was no way he could stop it, and it was a tall ladder. Sarah braced herself. Several times as a gymnast and later a coach, she’d cushioned a fall without giving herself away. The trick was to slow things just a bit until the final moment, then really ease the impact in the instant before the person hit the ground. In the confusion of an accident, no one ever noticed a slight loss of momentum.

Here, she didn’t even have to move Robert at first. She slowed the ladder little by little and trusted him to hold on. With a quick twist at the end, she made it fall to the side as she cushioned his impact just inches before the real ground, as if a thick gym mat had materialized for a moment. Only after Robert was safe did Sarah realize that Lisa had screamed and was running out of the room. Mei Mei stood strangely silent, her eyes fixed on Sarah. Sarah felt a wave of deepest terror but kept her face frozen. She stood, turning away from Mei Mei, and headed toward the back door that Lisa had left open.

Hurrying down the hill, Sarah tried to order her thoughts. She couldn’t guess what Mei Mei had noticed, though her face was hot and surely flushed. She felt she’d managed the save perfectly. Robert was already standing and dusting himself off. Maybe she’d kept him too safe, but no one had ever questioned such luck before. Sarah prepared herself to lie. Whatever Mei Mei or anyone suspected, there was no proof, and Sarah made a hobby of acting innocent.

The group was strangely silent as she approached. They moved normally, Lisa standing straight, Robert looking down as if his eyes might spy injuries he couldn’t feel, but there were no words. For a moment, Lisa and Robert looked exactly like Wednesday and Pugsly Addams, had the retro-TV kids been older and Chinese-American. For once, Sarah related to the normal people entering the Addams’ house, and felt the alienation from the other side. Then Howard lay a hand on Robert’s shoulder and gave him a friendly shake, still without words. Sarah slowed a little in her charge down the hill. She glanced back to see Mei Mei walking calmly behind her, careful in high-heeled shoes. Sarah faced forward again just in time to see Howard shake his head at Mei Mei.

Did she imagine Mei Mei’s stare on her back? She felt the urge to flee like a cold spike inside her, but leaving would be suspicious. Instead, she stood silently with the rest of them, not letting anyone catch her eye. Then she forced herself to look at Robert and ask, “Are you okay? That was quite a fall.”

He looked back at her with his mouth slightly open, as if he didn’t understand what she was saying. His mouth closed and his chin took on the hard set that meant a guy was either going to get angry or sulk. Sarah felt herself cringe just a little in anticipation, but then Howard spoke, offering her a way out.

“Wait. Sarah, come up to the house with me, to find some ice?”

He started walking, touching a hand to her back to get her moving. It was a very familiar gesture for someone she’d never met. What had Mei Mei told him about their previous encounter? It could just be a cultural difference, but it didn’t seem Chinese. She knew nothing about this “nephew.” Clearly he knew her name and felt comfortable using it and spiriting her away from a strangely charged
social situation. Maybe he was with one of those touchy-feely groups, you could never tell, especially in California. Anyway, she was grateful to him and let herself be led up the hill. At the back door, Sarah wiped her bare feet fastidiously on the mat. In her hurry, she’d run without shoes. Usually she loved the moist, prickly feel of grass on her feet, but this time she’d been too preoccupied to notice. Now she felt the dampness and smooth specks of soil trying to ride her feet into the immaculate house.

Striding in ahead of her, Howard didn’t rush for the freezer. Instead, he moved through the sitting area to one of the small mahogany end tables. He pulled out a neatly folded page of newspaper and handed it to Sarah. A glance showed her it was an old story about her car rescue. She didn’t want to deal with this. It was too rapid of a change after her awkwardness with Lisa, her babbling on about Tabitha, rescuing Robert, the strange look from Mei Mei, silence on the hill. She needed time to regroup, not another round of questions. And why was a stranger bringing this up now?

Howard waited silently, head tilted a bit, and one eyebrow raised.
“What?” asked Sarah.

The newspaper floated out of her hands and into his. Sarah stopped mid-breath. She’d given up on finding someone like her. Now all the childish hopes resurfaced, along with all the fear of being discovered or exposed.
“I was there to break Rob’s fall if you didn’t,” Howard said. It had been a set up, but she froze instead of running, not knowing where to hide. Would it do any good to deny it?
She looked him over again. His warrior posture and concentration from beneath the ladder were gone. He looked vulnerable, but he met her eyes. She could see his shoulder muscles tense beneath his shirt.
“Are you really Mei Mei’s nephew?”
“Yeah, but they’re not teeks, only teeps.”

The words were from books and movies, books and movies she’d wanted to escape into. But she’d given up on saying them or hearing them with real people. Or had she? How could she be what she was and truly expect to never use such words? She took a deep breath. Her hand and thigh braced against the side of a couch. Her voice sounded surprisingly calm in her own ears.
“Telepaths? What else exists? Do you know?”
“You really can’t hear us? They’re all too paranoid to deal with you now, but I saw how that ladder fell.”

Sarah gently flew the news clipping back to the end table. Howard smiled like they shared a joke.
“We thought all teeks were teeps,” he said. “My aunt thought she heard something from your house once. You would have been too young, but was your mother –“
Sarah shook her head. The initial shock had left behind a hollow space against her lower ribs. Her mind tangled with every question she’d ever wanted to ask and every thought she’d kept completely secret.
“Sit down,” Howard said, touching her arm lightly. “Should I call the others in?”
“Are you talking to them now? Can they hear our conversation? Can you hear my thoughts?”
“Shoot, I never thought I’d talk about this to someone who couldn’t do it.” After nudging her onto a sofa, he plopped down across from her, knees wide, back curved, hands in his hair, completely unlike Lisa who had sat there before. “No we can’t hear your thoughts at all. That’s part of why we thought you were a teep. Very few normal minds are completely silent, maybe one in a hundred.
And Aunt Mei Mei thought she’d heard clear telepathy from your house that one time. Then she saw the newspaper article, just after you came by. She thought you were refusing to answer her telepathically –“
“She tried when I came about the cat? Does she try everyone whose mind is silent?”
“We all do.”
“How many have you found that way?”
“None.”
“Oh.” Like a roller coaster suddenly stopped, Sarah looked at Howard, leaning back across from her,
hands tangled in his hair. But it felt like he was leaning toward her, like they were twins, separated at birth, but that was too tabloid. This was weirder than tabloids. Maybe she’d always wondered, but these people had been actively looking and found no one.

Or were they lying? Whatever she’d been feeling for Howard suddenly cut off, and she was scared by the connection she’d felt.

“Can they hear all this? Are they going to join us?”

“I only had time to tell them the highlights. I mostly told them to shut up. It’s like having someone on the telephone while trying to carry on a normal conversation. Confusing.”

His experience had been completely different than hers, whether or not he was telling the truth.

“Is everyone in your family both teek and teep?”

“My mom and dad were both teeps, but my paternal grandpa was both. The Chens are my only living relatives, and none of them are teeks.”

“What happened to your mom and dad?”

“You remember that airborne Ebola outbreak in New Zealand two years ago? My parents chose a lousy time for a vacation.”

“I’m sorry.”

The rear door opened loudly as the others came in. Howard’s back straightened and his eyes flashed across the room. Evidently eye contact was still the norm even when talking telepathically. Sarah also stiffened, feeling herself more on guard than she’d been before. Why did the only teek she’d found have to come from a family of telepaths?

Mei Mei came in and sat beside Sarah, turned toward her, knees almost touching. Sarah forced herself to meet the other woman’s probing gaze. “You really can’t hear anything? I’m sorry. We didn’t mean to be rude. You’re the first person at all like us that we’ve found in this country. My husband and I met in Hong Kong. It was still a few years before their National Health Index was started, but my brother heard rumors that the government was looking for certain ‘superior’ genetics. He and his wife decided to move to America. Business being what it was, we decided to follow them. That was before any of us had children. I hadn’t thought how hard it would be to find someone for them to marry.”

“Mother, please,” Lisa smiled behind clenched teeth. She hadn’t sat down, but stood just in front of her brother, just inside the room. “We invited her for lunch. Why don’t we set something out?”

The silence that followed seemed a little too long to Sarah. But soon they all went to the dining room and made small talk out loud as Mei Mei served cream of asparagus soup in real china bowls. Sarah’s mind had shut down. She enjoyed the warmth of the soup and the graininess of the bread. Her eyes had settled peacefully on a vase of crimson orchids in the middle of the table. She imagined buying orchids just to sit on her table in March. Then they started moving, as if invisible hands were fussing with them. She looked up to see Howard smirking at her from across the table.

“Should we talk teek or wait ‘til after lunch?” he asked.

“Do you always use it that casually?”

“Don’t you?”

“I thought, maybe, if the power source was limited or caused some side effect-- But do you know what makes it work? There must be a price.”

He shook his head, “It’s a gift. You never use it for fun?”

Sarah’s eyes tightened. Part of her scorned his recklessness; part felt needlessly deprived. “I did a few experiments at first. I’ve made some small tests around my relatives and friends to see if anyone would notice and admit they could do it too. But mostly I’ve saved it for when I was sure it was right.”

“Like with the car crash?”

Four pairs of eyes seemed to watch how she’d answer, and her own eyes studied the delicate soup bowl. In all the times Sarah had imagined telling someone about herself, she’d never envisioned herself as the guest at a family luncheon with fine china and asparagus soup. The dancing orchids weren’t far off the mark though.

“Well, by the time I saw the car was going to crash, it was too late to stop it. Earlier I might have
been able to nudge a tire or something. But I couldn’t possibly stop a moving car. Could you?”
“Dunno. I turned a parked Bug once,” Howard shrugged. Sarah gaped, but he said, “Go on.”
“Anyway, the car landed upside down in a ditch. The driver was unconscious, suspended by his seatbelt. I knew the rescue team would have trouble getting him out gently, and there wasn’t anyone around yet. So I wrapped him in constant pressure and floated him up to the road. I kept my hands under him; so if someone happened to see, they could convince themselves it wasn’t completely impossible.”
“What do you mean ‘constant pressure’?” Howard asked, leaning forward.
Sarah glanced at Lisa, wondering if the term was specific to her pre-med background, but Lisa only looked away. Robert and Mei Mei weren’t looking at her either.
“Well, you wrap a wound tight to stop bleeding, or hold a child tight to keep them calm. When I was just a kid I learned to use -- telekinesis -- to wrap myself up, like a caterpillar in a cocoon, so I could feel something pushing in all over me. I liked it, and I guess it became my model for how to move something carefully.”
“How old were you?” Mei Mei asked.
“Maybe ten.”
“Did you, um, had you become a woman then?”
Sarah felt herself blush, was embarrassed about blushing, and blushed more. “Well, a few months later, by the most obvious measure. Are they linked?”
“Yes, especially with girls. But I didn’t mean to interrupt. Why did you want to wrap yourself up?”
Mei Mei asked so innocently, like a perfectly nice person who had always lived a perfectly nice life. Sarah remembered how often she’d been terrified as a child and didn’t know how to explain.
“Howard, did you ever notice yourself being over-sensitive to stuff, especially touch? Like having to cut the tags out of t-shirts or being annoyed when your fingernails were rough?”
He shook his head but still leaned onto the table, giving her his full attention.
“Oh well. I thought it might be related to the other. As a kid I was oversensitive to touch. For a while I had to sleep with even my face under the covers because air currents in the room could wake me up.” No need to mention that despite years of trying to desensitize herself, she was still mostly that way. No need to mention the emotional part of her need to hide, either. No need to be telling these people anything really. What if it was all a trap, and she was showing them weaknesses to use against her? But for the first time she wasn’t a freak, or at least she wasn’t a freak alone. Beneath years of lying and hiding, she found a craving to be known.
“Sometimes, when I was sad or distressed, I’d curl up in a very tight ball, in the corner of a couch with a blanket over me. Something about being enclosed was comforting. So naturally, once I learned to touch things with my mind, I learned how to press a second skin around myself. I stopped doing that when I started to worry about where the energy came from or about someone tracking where it was used. But later, as a pre-med, I realized it could be a useful way to apply pressure to a wound, and the guy in the car was bleeding, and I didn’t want to hurt him any when I moved him. So I wrapped him up.”
When Sarah stopped, everyone started to speak at once, but Howard was the only one to finish his question.
“You can just wrap a second skin over someone else? How?”
Sarah opened her mouth, and then shrugged. “I could show you. Want me to wrap your hand?”
Howard started to hold his right hand forward, then switched to his left. Not quite so trusting, but that was fine. Sarah nodded and wrapped his hand with a gentle pressure. Howard bent and flexed the fingers experimentally.
“It moves with my hand. Do you have to think to move it?”
“I just think it onto your skin. It moves with the skin.”
“What else can you do?”
Sarah let Howard’s hand free. “I haven’t tried much. I can thread a needle, play percussion but not wind instruments, move things up to a couple hundred pounds. You?”
“I don’t think I can thread a needle, but I can lift a lot more. I can’t do what you just did to my hand,
even now that I know what it feels like, but I can do drums and piano, even a hundred feet from the
house if I know exactly where they are.”
A slight grimace from Robert implied he hadn’t enjoyed Howard’s experiments.
Lisa said, “Is everyone finished with their soup? I’ll bring in the tornadoes.”
Sarah was wondering if she’d heard correctly and what a tornado was when Robert asked, “So you
were pre-med? Where?”
He asked without raising his eyes from the table, and Sarah realized they’d skipped any introductions
before. She’d caught him when he fell off a ladder, and now he seemed unaccountably familiar, like
a dog-walking neighbor she’d seen pass many times but never met. He did not seem to feel the same
toward her. He’d stood behind his sister before, then stayed silent as the others talked. Now he
focused somewhere over her shoulder while waiting for her answer.
“UC Santa Cruz. But I switched to anthropology after one year.”
“Were you hoping to learn something about your telekinesis? I’m studying bioinformatics at
Stanford, myself.”
“Has it given you any insights?”
“No, maybe when I have my own lab and the field has developed more. But tell me, do any of your
relatives share your ability?” He still hadn’t looked at her, but when she glanced at Howard he was
watching her and smiled.
“They never reacted to bits of telekinesis I tried out around them. But maybe . . . How does it work
in your family?”
Rob started to answer as Lisa and Mei Mei brought in some sort of wrapped up pastry. Sarah ate
when the others did, wondering if they always had lunches like this.
“The telepathy could be explained by a simple recessive. So far, if both parents are teeps, all the kids
are. If one parent’s a teep and the other comes from a family of teeps, some of the kids are,
presumably the others are carriers. The teeks may not be so simple. All we know about is Howard
and one of his grandparents. It could still be a recessive. There are all sorts of rumors in our lineage if
you go back a couple generations, but until Howard it seemed more like a myth.”
“Were there rumors about any other powers, maybe teleportation or pyrokinesis?”
“No, nothing like that. You’ve been searching fiction?”
“Since I was ten. I scoured the SciFi channel and the SF section at the library. I once visited a
science fiction convention just so I could try tiny bits of telekinesis in front of authors who wrote
about it. I thought someone must be writing from experience, but none of them even noticed.”
“We should try that with telepathy.”
“How does it work?”
Mei Mei chose that moment to pat her mouth with a napkin, and Lisa was staring at Howard as if
some silent discussion were taking place. Sarah felt like a child who’d asked for too much sugar in
her lemonade, but with everything she learned, she wanted to know more.
“Fair enough,” Robert shrugged and only wrinkled his forehead a little bit. “From most people we
pick up random surface thoughts. Some people leak less than others do. A few are completely silent.
I’ve gotten to know some of those, checking to see if they might be like us, but none of them
acknowledged hearing me. Guess we could have had Howard check for telekinesis separately, but
we didn’t know it happened alone. You’re sure you never heard anyone’s thoughts and just
repressed it or something?”
Robert still wasn’t looking at her as he spoke, and Sarah could feel herself tensing in reply. She did
not feel like commenting on what she knew of repressed thoughts or what in her life might have
made her do such a thing. She shook her head and trawled for more information. “Is telepathy like
talking? Is it language specific?”
“It’s mostly words. With my sister I have some shared understandings, sort of implied words. But
Howard hears them as gibberish when he’s in the conversation. And if he uses Mandarin I hear the
sounds, but I’m limited by my own vocabulary. Thoughts carry about as far as natural voice, but we
can choose to only be heard by certain people in the room. That’s sort of rude though, like
whispering.”
The conversation drifted for a while from direct questioning to chatting about their experiences growing up. Sarah tried to be polite, neither too talkative nor too quiet. But her body was tingling with suppressed emotion, and her brain pulsed painfully full. Then Mei Mei brought in the Russian tea cakes. They’d been moved from the paper plate Sarah had brought to a cut crystal platter. Mei Mei tried a dainty bite of one, then used her napkin to blot powdered sugar from her face.

“My, these are very sweet, decadent. What sort of nuts are inside?”

“Hazelnuts.”

“Is this something your family makes?”

“Not really, my mother didn’t have much time to cook.”

“Tell me about your mother and your other relatives. I’m very curious about them. I’m sure one rainy night, just after we moved here in 2003, I heard someone shouting telepathically down there. It was the loudest thought I ever heard.”

“What time of year?”

“Winter, maybe nine or ten o’clock. It was freezing cold and rainy. I was pregnant and bundled up by the fire. Jayu was working late, and I didn’t think I could fall asleep alone in the house on such a noisy night. I’d only been here for a few months, and I didn’t know anyone. Had I heard something like that later, I might have rushed down just to see if I could find the person. But I was still worried that the Chinese or American governments might be watching us.”

Sarah finished her own cookie and wiped her mouth in time to say, “What made you think that?”

“You can’t imagine what it was like in Hong Kong at the time. Everyone pretended all was well. China had promised a hands-off approach. But my brother-in-law heard rumors. He worked for a pharmaceuticals company. And suspicious requests came in from the mainland. There seemed to be research into certain mental conditions, ways of simulating them or controlling them. A strange virus appeared, and rumors said it was genetically engineered. He heard someone joking about a program to conscript telepaths for government work. There was no way to know if there was truth behind the joke. He quickly found a job in the U.S. and moved. Jayu and I did too. None of us could stand the thought of being tools of the government. Perhaps, having known such precarious freedom all our lives, we valued it even more than most Americans.

“Jayu finally went back, a few years ago. He was going to make discreet inquiries with a few of our ancestors’ families, for the sake of the children. We were beginning to doubt there were any telepaths in the U.S.. We were worried for our children’s futures. Who would they marry?”

Lisa scowled at her mother, but she said nothing Sarah could hear. Robert and Howard seemed content munching cookies.

“Then Jayu died in a plane crash between Beijing and Taipei. At first I thought the Chinese government had taken him. But then surely they would have sent someone to recruit us. So finally I accepted that he was dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thank you. But, I have my children, and my nephew.” Mei Mei spared a pouting half smile for Howard, caught with powdered sugar on his nose and chin. “It’s better to be safe and free.”

“Don’t you worry, with all the genetic tests and so on, that we’ll be targeted here?”

“I can imagine people finding out telepathy exists. There could be trouble. But so far the U.S. has upheld people’s rights to not be tested for being gay, having mood disorders, tending toward violence. It’s reassuring. I can’t imagine the U.S. running a secret program to kidnap or conscript people like us.”

Sarah wasn’t so sure. She’d been watching genetics legislation and court decisions since the election, but she didn’t want to say anything too political. As for trusting her government, among her mongrel heritage was at least one Native American great-grandmother. When Sarah did a grade school project on the Trail of Tears, she took it personally.

“But as I was saying,” Mei Mei continued, and Sarah tried to look attentive, “When I heard something that night, I didn’t know I’d never hear anything like that again. Years later, when Lisa and Robert were old enough to participate in the American Halloween holiday, I took them to trick-or-treat at your house and some others on your street. Your mother’s mind was silent also. I tried
speaking to her telepathically, but she showed no sign of hearing. I thought I must be wrong or that whatever I’d heard came from a visitor, maybe a relative?

Sarah was caught up in her own thoughts and failed to answer for a moment. If her mother had been telepathic, would she have hidden it from Mei Mei? From Sarah? Could she have been worried about government detection? Could Mei Mei be working for the government, either U.S. or Chinese? But then she wouldn’t have told that story, or would she?

Sarah pushed back a tired swell of emotions. She’d come too far to turn back now, so she trusted her gut reaction, “What did you hear the person yell that night?”

“I believe it was, ‘Shut up!’”

“My aunt and uncle.” Sarah said it without meaning to speak her thoughts aloud. But what else could she do? How else could she ever find out? “I can’t really remember; that would have been when I was four. But there were a few times my mother’s sister and her family stayed at our house. They live in the bay area, and sometimes the airports there close for bad weather and they end up in Sacramento. They sometimes stay with us until the weather clears.” Sarah realized she’d said “us” as if her mother was still alive, as if her mother could have been here to answer these questions herself. Maybe this was all just a dream and it didn’t matter what she said. “They have four kids; the older three would have been teenagers by then. If they were all telepaths—anyway, I could imagine my Aunt or one of them screaming ‘shut up,’ on a rainy night, cooped up in my house.”

Sarah’s mind began to cascade with images of her cousins: playing games with rules she couldn’t follow, biking silently in the Berkeley Hills, putting on Christmas plays where only she forgot her lines. Sarah was always the outside one, the younger one, just a cousin. But could there have been something more? Were they all teeps? She’d tried her telekinetic tricks in front of them several times, hitting a key on the piano, making mistletoe drop on someone’s head. Were none of them teeks or did they just not tell her because she couldn’t hear them? Sarah felt a childish urge to run home and bury herself under blankets until she sorted things out.

But she knew better than to eat and run. She let herself be led back to the sitting room.

“Do any of those relatives come to visit now? Maybe we could meet them and find out if they hear us.” Mei Mei spoke gently, no excitement in her voice. Where was the emotion? If they’d been looking for people like her for so long, shouldn’t they seem more excited? Then again, some people were like that. The Chens all seemed quite reserved, sitting primly on the furniture, but Howard kept shifting positions, leaning forward like the Thinker, putting his arms down, clasping and unclasping his hands. And he kept smiling and staring at her. Sarah realized she’d been rubbing her little finger against the smooth leather couch. She stopped.

“My aunt and uncle drove out when my mom died and when we scattered the ashes, but I doubt they’ll visit again. Only one of my cousins still lives in California, and she has some problems of her own. So she doesn’t travel much.” Cousin Ashley was supposedly schizophrenic, but Sarah distrusted that label, since Ashley had always been her favorite cousin.

She remembered her last real discussion with Ashley, almost ten years before. They’d walked along the Sacramento River and tried to skip rocks. Sarah had been sixteen, confused, depressed. They’d talked about alienation, about not feeling part of the world at large. Sarah had been speaking obliquely about her telekinesis. What if Ashley had been talking around telepathy? She’d felt so close to Ashley that day but never suspected anything. She hadn’t even tried moving the rocks without a touch, having given up such tests by then.

Sarah could barely pay attention to the present. Her eyelids felt greasy, and her social skills had been pushed to the limit. Her mind was exploding with ideas and memories she needed to sort out. Much as she wanted to know everything about the Chens and to not seem rude by leaving, she had to have time alone.

After many minutes of polite good-byes and promises to talk again soon, Sarah made it to the familiar ground of her shoes. But even as she escaped out the door, Howard managed to assign himself to walk her home.

“Let me walk with you. I’ve been inside too long.”

“Oh, you don’t need to—”
“I want to.”
There was an uneasy silence for a few moments as they headed down the street.
“Sarah, I was wondering if you’d like to go out sometime, with just me? I’m mostly down at UCLA now, but maybe the next time I’m up?”
Sarah suspected Howard was asking as a guy and not just as the only teek she’d ever met. But it was tempting. “I dunno. My boyfriend, Reggie, might not understand, and well, I couldn’t really explain —”
“I didn’t mean, uh, how long have you been going out?”
“Three years.”
“And he doesn’t know?”
“How could he? I’ve never told anyone.”
“And you never . . .”
“Never what?”
“Well, you know. You never used what you could do to make things a little more interesting?”
Sarah noticed Howard’s voice was a little higher and he’d pushed his hands into his pockets.
“I told you, I didn’t know where the power came from or if it could be traced. I don’t use it casually.”
“You still feel that way?” They’d reached Sarah’s house.
“I think so.” Sarah made no move to invite him in.
“Well, many things may change now that we’ve found each other. Let’s wait and see.” Howard smiled and touched her shoulder, then headed back to his Aunt’s house.
Sarah locked the door, closed all the remaining curtains, and hid under a pile of covers on the only bed left in the house.

Chapter 4
August 7, 2024 - Zurich, Switzerland

“B on 2306 ordered by D for political reasons.”

When James found the note, it was folded in half and lying a few inches inside his hotel room door. His mind was busy restructuring his assumptions about the immune system to incorporate some Polish results supporting a cheaper pseudomonas retrovirus fix for those still living with cystic fibrosis. He was sure the gamma globulin problem they’d encountered could be used intentionally, to advantage, in other gene therapies if the relevant portion of the pseudomonas genome could be spliced into a safe carrier.

James tried to interpret the note as a scientist, to connect it to something at this conference on genetics and chronic disease. Instead, it distracted him, like a ring and post puzzle that looked easy but was not.

On hands and knees James put his head to the industrial carpet where the note had been. He couldn’t see a crack under the door. He stood up, closed the heavy hotel curtains, and turned off the light. He knelt exactly opposite where he’d been before and put his head down in the same spot, again facing the door. A clear gap showed light. It would have been easy enough to slide a note through. Security cameras in the hall must have recorded someone doing it. But EU privacy laws would protect those recordings from anything short of a criminal investigation. And even if he could somehow access the recordings, solving the conundrum that way would seem like cheating.

James stood and began to pace. He smoothed his hair with one hand to make sure the cowlick in back wasn’t sticking up. He paused, on the verge of turning, and stared at the note. He remained frozen like that for half a minute in the frigid hotel room. Then his mind connected “B on 2306” to the fact that Joseph Brandenburg, from his father’s old lab, had died on June 23rd.

His mouth opened in shock, then his jaw clenched in doubt, but his thoughts raced ahead, trying to
solve the puzzle using Brandenburg’s death as the first piece. The controversial “D” in the news right now was Darrel Davies, a podium-thumping American presidential candidate. Globally, there were many possible “D’s” in politics, but Brandenburg had lived and died in the U.S. Could Davies know about the family business? Or was D someone closer to the lab that his father, and then Brandenburg, had run?

James studied the note. The words were printed in Arial by some generic printer on standard weight white paper. He could have printed it himself with a cheap attachment for his outmoded pilot. The hotel might even have a message delivery system with printouts like this, and surely no one would have left useful fingerprints or DNA on such a note. Nevertheless, he placed it in a ziploc bag. Who would send him this? Surely a professional spy would use something more subtle. Was it someone who’d known him when he still worked with his father? A wave of resentment washed through James, thoughts of the work he might have done if not entangled by his father’s petty genetic conspiracy. He let it go, there was no one from that time who would contact him now. Brandenburg had been the only employee who knew what was really going on. Brandenburg was the only one who stayed with them in 2007 when the U.S. government took over.

He would have been in his eighties now. James pictured him still with a mustache and a full head of hair, though he hadn’t seen him since leaving the U.S. fifteen years ago. The man had been competent, likable, not someone to insist on his own way or trample others to reach the top. James had read the notice of his death in a newsletter and assumed it was from natural causes. He remembered Brandenburg patting his shoulder when his father passed away and saying what a pity it was he died so young. James hadn’t been sure he agreed.

Now he strode into the hallway, down to a bank of elevators, and pressed the lower button with his knuckle. He slid the bag with the note into his jacket pocket but was unwilling to let his hand lose contact. He used only his free hand to straighten his pressed blue shirt, first on one side, then the other, and watched the elevator light rise and pause on the fifth floor.

When his father died, a year after the government took over, James had tried to distance himself from that whole conspiracy. Contributions of his personal genetics stopped immediately. But recruitment spinners from homeland security kept trying to re-enlist him, to pressure him during his studies at MIT, even after he fled to Oxford. Could anyone from those years be trying to contact him? Could they imagine he’d care about their internal politics now that he worked for Thailand? Maybe someone wanted a conduit to pass information to the Thai government. Should he tell Alak about the note? But any call or email he sent could be intercepted.

The elevator arrived, and James had it to himself riding down to the conference floor. As the hand in his pocket rubbed the plastic covered note, he copied the motion with his free hand, stopping as the elevator stopped. He stepped out, meeting the eyes of scientists waiting to board. Those eyes all slid past him, as did their thoughts. He walked through the hall to the poster presentations. Keeping his head and eyes up, three colleagues nodded to him, but there was no special meaning behind the acknowledgements.

The poster section was a crowded mix of tri-fold poster boards, laptops, and gratuitous 3-D rendering. It was also a jumble of other people’s concerns. Why use spotted arrays when the chip resolution’s so much better? Has this been replicated? Is that holographic display battery powered? They gave her a grant? What does he think I am, an imbecile?

James was quickly overwhelmed and couldn’t bring himself to look everyone in the face. He realized now how habitually he averted his gaze, how rarely he saw other faces directly. If he didn’t focus on anyone, didn’t interact, he could avoid this clamorous barrage of thoughts. Looking down, he noticed carpet fibers stuck in the black leather seams of his shoes. He stood as if studying a poster involving genetic correlates to low verbal intelligence in psychiatric patients with high visual/spatial intelligence. Taking a deep breath, he accepted that he was entirely unqualified to look for suspicious behavior or covert acknowledgments. He didn’t even like being close to this many people.

He noticed someone looming behind his shoulder, glanced up, and met the eyes of a silent, serious, and rather pimply young man. His conference badge said, “Nigel Radford, Cambridge, England.” For a moment James was caught staring at Nigel, not knowing what to do. Nigel wasn’t averting his
eyes, but James had no idea what he expected. A Brit wouldn’t send him that note, would he? Surely the English wouldn’t send anyone who would give him information. Should he try to communicate telepathically? The British government already knew what he was, but if this man wanted to contact him, this would hardly be the place.

James’ gaze traced the lines of the high ceiling, finding a security camera in the nearest corner, mostly hidden by wavy, ornate molding. Continuing around all sides, he noted old chandeliers refitted with tiny, corkscrew-shaped fluorescent bulbs, a track with adjustable spotlights for when there was a speaker at the front, and three more cameras. For symmetry, his eyes traced the same route back again.

Why would someone leave an unsigned note then approach him so openly? Does he understand the analysis? Why doesn’t he say something? Nigel thought, as he looked directly at James and smiled.

Nigel wasn’t a telepath. His mind wasn’t even silenced. James glanced at the intelligence correlates poster and the name “Nigel Radford” popped out. With a dry mouth James said, “Nice analysis.” “Thanks,” Nigel bobbed his head. “It was my thesis work, but I added the cluster analysis and ran another set of data with the new groups.”

James tried to look at the analysis section of the poster. Tried to formulate an intelligent reply. He couldn’t, and he felt there was no air to breath. “Excuse me, I don’t feel well.” “Maybe later.”

James left the room, hurried down the hallway, and up the stairs to the mezzanine, just to avoid a group milling around the elevator. He stood with his back against a wall, breathing hard. The hotel, so traditional in every other way, had modern plastic sculpture jutting out from the wall around him. It was like standing amidst a display of Halloween masks from his youth. A green swirly oval slanted out on his right. A dark face-like distortion seemed to glower from the left.

He had just made a fool of himself in front of, who, an English post-doc? Had anyone else noticed? Would Nigel Radford even remember the encounter? Why had his mind refused to focus on the puerile poster?

Had someone really ordered Brandenburg’s death?

August 9, 2024 – Bangkok, Thailand

“Alak, I have a question for you.” James held the note upright, still bagged, between his index and ring fingers.

The government man stood silently at the far side of the lab bench and nodded. He was a young, unremarkable bureaucrat of mixed Thai and Chinese ancestry. His face seemed chubby above his narrow shoulders and clinging suit. A navy blue briefcase bag weighed down his left shoulder, creating a disturbing asymmetry. James had never before seen a point to Alak dropping by after each foreign conference. As a scientific liaison, Alak was inadequate to understand the new research findings, as a government minder, he must be bored silly – until now.

James flipped the ziploc with the note back and forth between his fingers, used to the feel of it now, the uncertainty it represented. “I wasn’t sure what to do with this.”

James flipped the bag to a rhythm that might be his heartbeat, ten, twenty, thirty times. Surely an American functionary would have interrupted by now. “I think I’ve figured out what it means, but I need to know.”

“How can I comment until I see what it says?” Alak spoke softly, in a voice like a shrug of the shoulders, but without the shrug.

“But then, or later, you must tell me if you find out.”

“If you want to find out—“

“That’s your business not mine. I wouldn’t ask, unless I needed to know.”

Another thirty heartbeats, James flipped the note between his fingers. He almost hoped Alak would never tell him. Could he satisfy his curiosity and still imagine himself free?

He handed the note to Alak who kept it in the bag, read it, stared at it, then asked calmly, “You think
you know what it means?"
"Joseph Brandenburg, who worked with my father, died on June 23 of this year."
"And D?"
"My best conjecture is Davies."
At that, Alak’s eyebrows rose, he slid the note into his dark bag. The bag was a hybrid of a purse and a briefcase and might look sporty, if it wasn’t always overfilled. James couldn’t stop staring at it once his note was inside.
"I’ll pass this along."
"And tell me what you find."
Alak bobbed his head in either agreement or a pretense of respect. He left, and James missed the feel of the note between his fingers.

January 26, 2025 – Lucerne, Switzerland

On the day Alak confirmed Davies’, now President Davies’, involvement, James gave himself a dot on his calendar. Then he added the new encryption software to his pilot. Alak stood by, but James wouldn’t let anyone else touch the old machine. A later palm pilot series offered half the weight with five times the memory. But his could hold complete genetic profiles for 300 subjects, plus annotations, and it was the physical home of his personal calendar for the last seventeen years, the only other data set he wanted accessible locally at all times.
So when James returned to his latest hotel room, head aching from his presentation and the not quite on-topic questions he’d had to field, he just picked the new note off the beige Berber carpet and pulled out his pilot. As soon as the machine and the new encryption routine were ready, he used the hotel LAN to transcribe, encoded, for Alak:

“Minerva to buy 6Y14P294 rights for D’s scheme.”

He decided the interpretation was too obvious to explain. James hit send and lay back on the tidy hotel bed, sucking in the smell of bleachy over-washing. His right foot thumped against the bed frame; so he thumped his left twice and his right again.
Minerva was a states-based biotech company. 6Y14P294 was the identifier for a bipolar correlate James had patented in 2015. That was the year the WTO Special Conference on Genetics decided no one could patent an actual DNA sequence, but you could patent reading an understood sequence with any known chip, pore, gel, or other techniques. So, effectively, he’d patented the ability to easily scan for that bipolar sequence, but not the exclusive right to interpret it when looking at a patient’s full genome.
Financially, it had not been one of his hotter discoveries. When the new laws triggered a clinical diagnostic gold rush, James was well positioned to specify several recently interpreted sequences. His current Thai biotech empire was built on past patents for single recessive depression, addiction susceptibility, and immune system irregularities. They sold test kits to medical providers and took samples by mail from concerned parents or spouses who didn’t want to involve their national health systems. The bipolar correlate wasn’t something anyone tested for separately, and it wasn’t needed to rapidly screen a large population. It was just one of several sequences that increased a person’s risk for bipolar disorder. What would it have to do with the “schemes” of a new American President, particularly one who killed Brandenburg?
James needed to arrange an exchange for more psychiatric population samples. He’d noticed a couple of open-minded types at his talk today. He’d noticed a couple of open-minded types at his talk today. Maybe one of them would like to collect some patient samples for a collaborative arrangement. If there was a reason the Americans wanted those rights, James should be able to discover it in lab.
Approaching new people was asking a lot of himself right after a talk, but he tucked both feet against the bed frame and pulled himself up.
Downstairs he drifted for half an hour, listening, planning an approach. Just as he was about to corner a junior professor from Bulgaria, he saw Nigel Radford hovering by his new poster. James
had read it earlier. It analyzed immune system peculiarities in subjects with various affective disorders, and seemed cleanly done, if a bit basic. James knew exactly how he could test his pseudomonas spliced retrovirus idea and use the gamma globulin interference to rebalance immune responses in one of the psychotic sub-populations Nigel studied. But he didn’t want to discuss the idea with Nigel. Not only was he embarrassed from their first encounter, but he knew the English followed America’s lead in not working with him or Thailand, so there was really no point.

At that same moment, Nigel spotted James and waved for him to come over. Enduring embarrassment like heartburn, James walked toward him. Nigel smiled brightly. He wore a peppery red sweater and his acne had cleared significantly since the last conference.

“How’re you doing, Dr. Morton? I hope it wasn’t my poster that made you ill last time.”

James tried to laugh, guessing he was supposed to. “If so, this one’s safer. I read it this morning with no ill effects.”

Nigel nodded. Now what does he think?

“And actually, your work is quite good.” James made a quick decision to give away his pseudomonas insight, demonstrate a bit of cleverness this time. “In your analysis you mention several drawbacks to gene therapies targeting the immune system, but have you considered using part of the pseudomonas genome, spliced into a safer carrier virus, to alter gamma globulin production in this sub-population?” James pointed to the poster to show just which group he meant.

Nigel seemed stunned for a moment. James was used to such reactions when he tossed out ideas this way. He couldn’t help judging people by their recovery time, and Nigel made a quick recovery. “Linsky’s talk in Zurich! You’re working from their problems with gamma globulin, but does anyone know which sequence triggers that?” Nigel’s mind raced forward loudly, mapping out steps he’d take to identify the sequence and test its usefulness. His enthusiasm was magnetic and drew James to tell him more.

“I have a suspicion,” James said, and he pulled out his pilot to explain.

Several minutes later, James had a chance to test his own recovery speed after an unexpected suggestion. “You’re part of the Academie Suisse, aren’t you? They’re funding my current study of schizophrenics, and I could send you samples without violating confidentiality. You could test the pseudomonas splice yourself, at least in culture.”

James was officially part of the Academie Suisse, as were most of the speakers at this conference. But he’d always considered it a token position within a grant writing agency. He knew why the U.S., Thailand, and to some extent China preferred genetics conferences held in Switzerland. He wasn’t sure how many Swiss understood the triangle balancing the three countries, but he knew they kept certain hotel staff suitably discreet, and of course, the directors of the Academie Suisse. Nigel’s mind was now loud with ideas for new experiments. In the mix James heard, In five minutes he shared more insight than my advisor has all year.

James sighed, wondering if Nigel’s advisor was just aloof, or if he was consciously protecting unpublished ideas from broadcast. But if he knew, why send Nigel here without protecting his thoughts? James wanted to wash his hands, feeling grimy for the ideas he could steal, even though he knew he wouldn’t do it. Still, he couldn’t give up the offered samples.

“If you want, we could write up a research agreement. Over coffee?”

Yes! James heard it like a shout, and wondered if there were any other telepaths in the room who might notice. He ushered Nigel out and into the lobby coffee shop.

The shop only had windows on one wall, but there were plants scattered along two others, as if to imply the room had enough natural light. Each table had a bulb shaped vase with white flowers overshadowed by blocky, wooden salt and pepper shakers. James chose a table on a wall, far from other diners. He sat with his back to a large fern, leaving Nigel a seat by an azalea.

Nigel perched on his seat without looking around. He’s a name; he’s sharp; and since it’s mostly my research, I might get to be first author. I wonder how I’ll mention that? This pseudomonas idea is brilliant. We could write that part up separately and I could be second author. If it works . . .

Nigel’s mind ran on to possible applications for techniques that, if they worked, would take years to test. But he was young, and he wasn’t blathering on out loud. James tried to remember when he’d
last run with a new idea and imagined outlandish possibilities. Last year he’d found an enzyme that could break the telepathy sequence, altering protein production to both disable telepathy and create mildly toxic byproducts. There was a moment when he felt pumped with his own discovery, floating almost godlike with the power of what he knew. But then his fingers had tapped hard for weeks, on the keyboard or just letting off steam as he imagined possible vectors and designed adaptable counter-measures. Who could he tell? Only Alak, and that with misgivings. But he’d decided years ago that anything he discovered working alone in Thailand must be far enough behind China and the U.S. that it would only be valuable defensively. Nigel was still noisily thinking about future immune applications when a tiny blond waitress leaned over their table. Nigel’s mind, without losing volume announced, What amazing breasts! James couldn’t help but look. The woman’s breasts were quite large, especially compared to the rest of her body, which was petite and tightly wrapped in a peach and turquoise polka-dotted, rather short waitress dress. The dress bothered James, and the waitress was not his type, too frail and angular. But with Nigel’s mind shouting out, If I could touch those breasts, I bet they wouldn’t even fit in my hands, James couldn’t help but think about touching and what it would be like to seduce the waitress hearing her every thought. That idea led quickly to high school memories that kept him safely away from such women. He focused on the waitress who observed the direction of Nigel’s gaze and thought, Little boy, I hope you’re the one leaving the tip, as she asked, “Can I take your order?” “Just coffee,” said James. “Coffee,” said Nigel, managing to look up from the cleavage. As the waitress walked away, James searched for and found the necessary Academie Suisse collaboration agreement. He turned his pilot so Nigel could see and asked, “The schizophrenia study is under your name?” They talked details and Nigel’s thoughts quieted down. With only one serving of coffee they completed and submitted their request. James only half believed anything would come of it. But so long as Nigel kept his mind on science, James enjoyed talking to him, hearing both verbal and mental enthusiasm for his work. “Your advisor must be somewhat supportive, to send you to this conference,” James said as they were leaving. “Oh no, he was dead set against it. But I had my new poster ready, frequent flier miles banked, and the Acadamie grant that got me invited.” So what could he do? Nigel added in his thoughts. What indeed, thought James, and hoped their agreement wouldn’t get the kid in trouble.

March 23, 2005 – Bangkok, Thailand

James scanned the offer again, noting how average it seemed. A brown clad courier had brought it to the lab door and waited in the bright, white hallway while James signed a receipt. It interrupted his day, but in a perfectly normal way. Alone again in his lab, James sat forward on a hard chair, he centered the papers on the heavy blotter that lay centered on his metal desk. The terms looked standard, his patent lawyer could verify that. The money was good, but not amazing. The bipolar sequence they wanted exclusive rights to was significant, but not groundbreaking. The courier’s delivery would have been just one more annoying interruption if some anonymous informant hadn’t warned him to expect it. James tapped the offer papers back into their envelope. He set the envelope squarely atop his pile of new mail and sent Alak a brief email. Then he rattled around his lab, bouncing between his six private work spaces, each set of equipment its own shiny metal island in a sea of white and blue sound absorbing tiles. Running three state of the art computers at once, he tried a variety of new analysis routines against his bipolar data, but came up with no statistically significant results. Insufficient sample size. Not enough affected phenotypes. James tapped his fingers hard against the counter, then swung back around to a computer and tapped
his fingers equally hard while typing.

It was only an hour later when another courier, this one wearing teal, delivered the samples Nigel Radford had promised. James couldn’t believe his luck, couldn’t believe the deal went through. He opened the box carefully, using no sharp objects, even preserving the shipping labels. He saw the sample boxes he’d been promised and his fingers twitched, but he forced himself to read the enclosed letter first. As he’d suspected, Nigel had been pressured out of the collaboration, and yet, here were the promised samples. The last paragraph of the letter explained:

“I hope to have a lab of my own soon, in which I will be able to honor my own commitments and conduct my research as I see fit. Based on my personal interpretation of the agreement we signed in Lucerne, I am sending you this set of samples. I think the mechanism you suggested for immune system correction is very promising, and I hope you will be able to pursue your ideas even if I cannot.”

James felt very old, because the letter sounded so young. Could Nigel really be that naïve? Did he think he’d have freedom in a lab of his own? Then James looked around his lab. He looked from left to right, and then from right to left. He looked at the box of samples and put the first one into the sequencer.

Chapter 5
March 29, 2025 – Berkeley, USA

Sarah had the urge to bolt and run as she turned onto the private drive. How had she agreed to introduce the Chens to her aunt? She glanced over her shoulder to make sure the others were still following. Lisa and Howard had flown into San Francisco, and Rob had driven them out to Berkeley. Sarah had driven Mei Mei from Sacramento. For some reason, they all wanted to be there to find out if Sarah’s aunt was like them, and they felt better arriving together. Sarah just wanted it to be over. She was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt and felt underdressed next to Mei Mei’s tailored dress and jacket. Even taking strangers to meet her relatives, she felt like the unwanted guest at a party.

“I see the house,” said Mei Mei. “It’s just like in the book, a stone castle on a hill.”

Sarah’s excuse to her aunt for bringing the Chens was that Mei Mei was a great admirer of the architect William Jones. Aunt Jane’s house had been the last design completed by Jones before he died, and it featured prominently in a book Sarah had given Mei Mei to study. Perched on a large lot in the Berkeley Hills, the house stood like a modest medieval keep, complete with a tower and a stone wall surrounding the garden. In the wall were spy holes she’d peeked through as a child. Honeysuckle grew over the stones and along the heavy arch where the driveway ended. Later in the year, the air would be full of sweet honeysuckle and rose, but today it just smelled wet. The flagstone walk was slippery with last night’s rain. Sarah slouched like a country cousin on a required visit, but the Chens kept their heads high as they approached the heavy oak front door.

Sarah tapped the doorknocker, knowing it was useless to knock bare handed on the thick door. She stepped back a little and then felt warm, dry air as the door began to open. Her Aunt was wearing a cashmere cardigan over a calico dress, her face tan and wrinkled, framed by chestnut curls worn short.

“Hi, Aunt Jane.”

“Sarah.” Her aunt smiled tightly and pulled the door wide. Sarah stepped through and over to her aunt’s side, not wanting to let the warm air out while she made introductions. The Chens followed her in, but everyone still stood with the door open as Sarah named and gestured to each.

“We appreciate your letting us visit,” said Mei Mei, holding the book about William James as if it
were a written invitation.
“Glad to have you. Come, make yourselves comfortable.”
Aunt Jane ushered them into the cathedral-style living room with its vaulted wood ceiling and huge picture window. “Here, Mei Mei. Take this seat by the fire, from here you see the details in the brickwork as well as the lay of the room and the window.”
Lisa came around behind her mother, and they made a show of examining the bricks while Robert plopped down on a couch and Howard pulled over a high-backed chair. Aunt Ruth settled into a rocking chair, completing a sort of circle as Lisa joined her brother on the couch. Sarah hovered near a metal chest, feeling that even if she sat on it she would be outside the conversation.
The fire burned in a fireplace the size of a walk-in closet. Sarah had never noticed the brickwork, but as a child, she’d been sure Santa could fit his whole sleigh through there. The Chens accepted Aunt Jane’s offer of herbal tea, and Sarah tagged along out of the room to help fetch it.
In the kitchen Aunt Jane asked, “Did these people know my sister?”
“Not really,” Sarah said, feeling useless as tea things were pulled from cupboards that defined three sides of the room. She picked up the teakettle, already boiling on the stove. “Mei Mei had met her many years ago, but I only got to know them when one of the cats went missing before its adoption.”
Aunt Jane’s nostrils flared at the mention of the cats, but she picked up the tea tray without a word. Back in the living room, Sarah was too nervous to sit, and she didn’t like her aunt’s tangy, sweet teas, so she hovered to one side by a built-in bookshelf. Picking up a hand sewn Roo toy she remembered from childhood and a small brass train, she fingered each item, then put them down differently, gradually shifting the arrangement of items on the shelf. The conversation became silent for too long, and Sarah knew her Aunt must be a teep.
A chill ran up her spine. It seemed to flow through her arms and freeze her hands, which held a carved figure of a woman weaving a rug. Her aunt gazed calmly around the room, as if pursuing polite conversation. Lisa was the only one who looked distressed, clutching her hands, arms tight to her side. Robert and Howard faced each other, and Mei Mei kept shifting her attention between Jane and the others.
Sarah had been preparing for this all week. Now she felt trapped outside, like her new friends and part of what made her special had been stolen. But this had been going on all her life, and she’d never known. She set down the little carving of the weaver.
“I need to use the bathroom,” she said and escaped down an arched stone hallway. She stopped just before the bathroom door and leaned with her back against the cold stones.
When Ashley appeared from the other direction it made Sarah jump. Her cousin’s hair was down, and not fully brushed. She wore a bulky turtleneck under a gunny sack dress. On her feet were boots that laced to the knee, but the laces were uneven and full of knots. As far as Sarah was concerned, Ashley’s unkempt personal appearance was the only evidence of her supposed schizophrenia, and it was nothing compared to some of the guys she’d met in the Peace Corps. Ashley’s eyes looked older and more wrinkled than Sarah’s own, but the face might almost have been hers, right down to the crease between the eyebrows.
“I know what’s going on in there,” Ashley said.
“Then you’re one too.”
“And you’re telekinetic. You hid it so well. Come, we need to get ice cream.”
“What?” Driving down the hill for ice cream was a long tradition with Sarah and her cousins, but not on chill days in April with puddles on the ground and black clouds still in the sky.
“Come on, you’re driving me into town. I’ll tell my mom as we leave. She hates having me here anyway.”
Sarah ended up in her car with Ashley, starting down the hill.
Ashley thrust her hands into her hair and said, “By the time we return, there will be government types in suits to gather you and your friends. If you go with them, they’ll own you for the rest of your life. They’ll test you, scan you, and sample your DNA. They’ll implant a GPS transmitter so they know your every move. Maybe they’ll only call you in now and then, but they’ll always be watching. You’ll become bait, just like my mother and all of us. She’s calling to report your friends
right now, and she had to report you because they told her what you can do. It’s okay for us, we were raised to it, but I know your mother raised you free. I loved your mother. I always thought she was lucky not to know about her family, that it would have killed something in her. I know you think I’m crazy, and maybe it’s somewhat true. But that happened after they started saying it, after I started taking risks.”

This had to be crazy talk, didn’t it? But the day she and Ashley shared their loneliness by the river hung like a heavy blanket on her shoulders. Would Ashley have reported her if she’d found out alone? Sarah reconsidered, as uncertain as the tin man trying to analyze the scarecrow. “I’m sure you’re trying to help me, Ashley. But what could I do anyway?”

“You can run. You never had a GPS implant, did you?”

“No.”

“I knew you wouldn’t. Your car has one though, and if you take it offline, they’ll notice fast. You still have a fold up bike in the trunk?”

“Always.”

“GPS or not that expensive?”

“No GPS.”

“Well, if you took off on it now, you’d have a good head start. But if you need to see for yourself, then stash the bike by the bridge up here. They’ll have to drive that way to take you in. When they stop at the stop sign, make a run for it. Can telekinesis stop bullets? Well, I don’t think they’ll shoot at you.”

Sarah felt herself numb with the extreme calm that protected her in times of crisis. But this couldn’t be a real crisis, could it?

“What part of the government are you talking about? How many people know?”

“The ones who will collect you come from CDC Special Investigations. They’re all telepaths. They can detain you or disappear you as if you carried some new disease. Beyond that, there are definitely other agencies involved. My mom’s done some pretty serious spy stuff. But I don’t deal with them. I’ve been asked to check for teeps in mental ward, but I didn’t try very hard, and I don’t behave like a drone. So mostly, they leave me out of it.”

“But what’s the government’s goal in all this?”

Ashley rolled her eyes, not just once, but twice, “They’re control freaks with delusions of grandeur. They’re politicians.”

By the stop sign before the bridge, Sarah knew she’d made a decision. There was no one around.

“I’ll hide the bike. Wait here.”

Without turning off the engine, Sarah went to the trunk and pulled out the folded bike. If Ashley wasn’t crazy, this would be an ideal place to make an escape. There was a bike trail along the creek that passed under the road here. Sarah scrambled down and just around the next bend, then hid her bike in some bushes. There was a non-zero chance it would be stolen in the next few hours, but she would have given it to Ashley if asked. So it seemed fair to risk it on the chance Ashley’s warning was true. Quickly Sarah hopped back in the car. If anyone were tracking her car by GPS now, that stop would only have been a little too long. She drove onward toward the ice cream store.

“So my mom wasn’t telepathic?”

“No, you know she wasn’t really grandpa’s child?”

Sarah had never been sure about that rumor, but she nodded. “Everyone else was? And she never knew?” Sarah asked.

“Your mother was curiously kind to me after they started saying I was crazy. I always wondered what she knew or maybe suspected. Maybe she was telekinetic like you and kept it hidden. Who can guess in a family like this?”

“Is anyone else telekinetic?”

“Not openly. CDC thought it very rare and only found in telepaths. They’ll find you interesting.”

Sarah didn’t want to be found interesting. Like gum stuck under a table, she didn’t want to be found at all, and she was starting to believe everything Ashley said. It all seemed to fit, but she wasn’t sure enough to run away. If nothing else, she couldn’t abandon the Chens. And she couldn’t give up her
whole life without some kind of proof.

“Ashley, if I escape on my bike, how hard will they look for me?”

“I don’t know. You’d certainly have to hide. They work with intelligence, so they’d probably check your home, work, car. I don’t know. They might question your friends or bug their phones. They use my family as spies. You know all of us and you have telekinesis. I think you’d need to leave the country and hide pretty damn well.”

Sarah pulled into a parking space. “Can you get the ice cream? I want to run an errand.”

As Ashley walked with self-possession and apparent sanity into Chris’s Crystal Cream, Sarah headed down the street to the local branch of her bank. She almost called back to her cousin to get some butter pecan, but decided Ashley deserved to choose the flavors today.

As they pulled back into Aunt Jane’s driveway, Sarah saw two black cars parked behind Rob’s VW and her aunt’s rebuilt Bentley-hybrid. The black cars screamed government conspiracy, and Sarah had to swallow a laugh. She parked to the side and began to think about covering for Ashley.

Then, as they followed the slick flagstones through Aunt Jane’s garden, a burst of sunlight cut through the clouds. Ashley threw her head back, breathed deeply and closed her eyes. For one moment Sarah remembered being a child here, steeping in the beauty of this place, and not questioning if she belonged.

Then Ashley opened the front door and shuffled through to the kitchen clutching the ice cream. Sarah drifted through behind her and didn’t have to fake her moment of shock as she fell back into reality.

“Please, have a seat,” said a smiling blond man with slight shoulders and a polyester suit. Sarah sank onto a chest near the Chen’s, reflecting their concerned looks with a glance.

“Name is Matt Watkins. This is Jack Cahane. We’re here to welcome you to the American teep community.” Watkins shifted his weight as he talked, looking restless and excited as he flashed a poster child smile. Cahane stood inert and serious to one side, not acknowledging Watkins, who continued to speak with a slight southern twang.

“Got a couple things to tell you, first the serious stuff so we can end on a high note. You all are what’s known as ‘born classified.’ Knowing about telepathy or telekinesis is just like knowing about advanced cryptography or prionic enhancers. Divulging what you know to uncleared persons is a federal crime. Furthermore, anyone cleared at this level is considered at risk for abduction, and needs to be GPS trackable at all times. That’s it for the serious stuff.” He winked.

“Good news is, you’re now entitled to the best medical care the US can offer, best in the world. I’d urge you to take full advantage of that, since our specialists know about some teep-specific conditions you wouldn’t want treated by any other doctor. We can also fix you up with employment opportunities most folks only dream about and offer you access to a community of, um, like-minded individuals.”

Cahane spoke then, playing the shadowy bad cop to Watkins good cop. “For now you’re all in protective custody and will be accompanying us to the city to complete some very important documents. That’s a legal order and disobeying it would be a felony.”

With that they were escorted out to the two black cars. Aunt Jane and Ashley were nowhere to be seen. Mei Mei, Lisa, and Robert ended up in the car with Cahane. Sarah had found no way to communicate with them before they were bundled away.

She wasn’t sure she liked being in the car with Watkins, who smiled as he held the door for her, but she was glad Cahane’s car took the lead. So far, she’d pretended to go willingly, not wanting to lose her chance for escape. Howard slouched beside her in the back seat. She tried to think of the best way to help him escape, at least. She’d already figured how to control the door locks from the driver’s panel, just in case they were using the child lock feature on the back doors. If they had some special security or way of blocking telekinesis, Sarah didn’t know what she would do.

As they came to a stop before the bridge, Sarah released the locks, opened both back doors and seatbelts, then broke the front door and window controls.

“Last chance to escape!” she yelled to Howard as she ran out her own door and scrambled toward
the creek. Dirt and pebbles slid under her feet. She grabbed a bush to steady her fast turn and sprinted down the bike trail. One last glance over her shoulder showed Howard sitting there stunned. Oh well, if the guy could turn a parked car with a thought, he could arrange his own escape.

Watkins, on the other hand, could use some help. He was trying to squirm over the front seat to get to the open back doors while talking furiously into his cell phone. Sarah imagined it as a TV ad for wrinkle-free suits, “The wardrobe that keeps you looking good, even when your day turns bad.” Then she carefully crushed his cell phone, but left the rear doors open out of fairness to Watkins and in case Howard ever got around to escaping.

Around the corner and out of sight, Sarah pulled out her own cell phone. Losing all her stored info. sucked, but there was no time, and it had trackable GPS even when turned off. She mentally crushed it, then threw it into the creek. A stab of grief surprised her but was followed instantly by a rush of freedom. She was cut off from everyone, unprotected, unencumbered. And no one could call while she was using the bathroom or listening to her favorite song. Time to put her plan, such as it was, into action.

There was a way to reach 333 3rd street without taking more than a couple major roads. Sarah fastened her bike helmet, hoping that would make her less identifiable, if anyone was looking. She sped off down the bike trail. Was she being too paranoid? Ashley had warned her that the government was sending people and that they’d drive her across this bridge on their way in for processing. If Ashley thought further government pursuit and surveillance was likely, Sarah didn’t plan to take any chances.

Biking all out, it took less than fifteen minutes to reach O’Reeley’s door. He answered at her first knock, with a spryness that belied his age and recent injuries.

“Sarah?”

“You recognize me?”

“There was a picture with the police file.”

“Oh. Sorry. Can I come in?”

“Certainly. Can I get you something to drink?”

The front door opened directly into a worn but clean living room. An overstuffed easy chair faced a boxy old TV with a doily and a box of tissues on top. Somehow, the room smelled like tobacco without smelling of smoke. There was a tinge of vanilla and cloves. The carpet looked worn to threads, especially near the door.

“No. Sorry, I’m in trouble. I need to ask a big favor of you. I need a car without GPS. I need it now, and I’m not really sure if you’ll get it back. I brought the pink slip for my car.” She knew she wasn’t supposed to keep it in her glove compartment, but after collecting her money from the bank, she’d been glad it was there for the taking. “It’s a 2018 Honda with GPS and all sorts of safety features. I’m going to sign it over to you and give you my aunt’s address and phone number. The car’s at her house. If you’d just wait a few days before you contact her, I think there’ll be no problem. I’ll give you a number for Eva, too. She’s the executor for my Mom’s will. If there’s any fuss about the car, maybe she can reimburse you out of the estate.”

Sarah scribbled a quick note to Eva, another old woman with too many cats. O’Reeley stood by silently, not asking any questions. The wrinkles by his mouth curved with habitual amusement, but he didn’t smile or joke. Sarah felt herself shiver with adrenaline, but forced herself to finish writing.

“As you okay with this?” she asked. Looking at the calm of O’Reeley’s lined face, she wondered if he wasn’t a little bit cracked.

“I gladly give you my car. In good time I will contact these people and try to assure that all is taken care of. I wish you luck.”

Sarah didn’t know what to make of the old guy, but she was in too much of a hurry to worry about it. He handed her keys. She thanked him, put her bike in the trunk of his new old car, and said goodbye.

Three hours later, Sarah reached Sacramento. She’d gone south to 580, then over and up, hoping to avoid anyone who might be looking for her. She’d found an old flannel shirt and an English cap in
the back seat of the car. Like a kid playing dress up she’d donned her disguise while driving. The
clothes smelled like O’Reeley’s living room, and Sarah found the scent soothed her as she drove.
Now she left the shirt and cap with the car in a parking lot by a coffee shop. She pulled her bike and
helmet from the trunk and pedaled the last couple blocks to the gym.
The parking lot was empty. The gym was closed on Sunday, but it had an old key and bolt lock.
Sarah enjoyed opening it telekinetically. In the sixteen years she’d been coming to this gym, she’d
never thought of using her ability to break in. Until today she’d most often thought of herself as just
Sarah, a gymnast, a gym coach, a group home counselor, an anthropology major, a disappointment
to her mother.
Today, she was first and foremost a teek. Her own government was chasing her. She didn’t dare go
back to her Mom’s house or to Reggie’s place. It could be dangerous to contact anyone she knew.
She was ready to head out into the world with almost nothing, just so she could use her abilities as
she saw fit, ready to give up her home, her jobs, her friends, and her first real love. Perhaps it was
stupid, but it sure felt right. Or noble. Sarah felt noble.
She gazed out into the dimness of the gym. She imagined herself on the floor exercise mat the day
she first came to this building. She’d stood with her hair braided into two little loops and done the
routine Nadia had won the Olympics with decades before. By then it was just enough to get a nine-
year-old onto the best gymnastics team in the state. At nine, Sarah had been sure she could win a
gold medal like Nadia or Carly Patterson. By the time she was twelve, her mother still believed it, but
Sarah had doubts. As the 2016 Olympics approached, Sarah was the best in the nation on bars, but
she failed to make the US team. Her Mom thought she could try again in 2020. But Sarah thought
she’d be too old, and anyway, she’d decided to become a doctor.
Sarah took a deep breath of the sock-smelly air. She imagined the grit of chalk on her fingers. She
remembered her coach smiling when she was a kid. She remembered crying with joy when the girls
she coached won their first meet. She remembered taking them to Canada for their first international
competition last month and sitting with them as they fretted over nervous mistakes.
She remembered the day she first saved a teammate from a dangerous landing off the vault. The
feeling of greatness and the fear of discovery flooded her again. In this gym she had found a way to
use her strange ability. She had never used it to cheat, only to prevent injury. It had bonded her to
gymnastics when she wasn’t sure she cared enough to keep training. It had given her a secret and a
purpose.
Now Sarah left her bike and shoes just inside the door and strode up to the staff lockers. She ignored
her own, for the moment, and reached for one in the upper right corner. It had been empty before she
took her girls to the meet in Canada. Then she’d used it to store her overnight bag. In addition to a
toothbrush and change of clothes, it held all her travel papers as well as those for girls on the team.
She hugged the bag and felt tears come to her eyes as she glanced around the gym. It was time to go,
and this was the only home she could say goodbye to.

As Sarah drove south toward LA her eyes drooped. Bot’s dots bumped into her wheel. The thump-
thump-thump snapped her back awake. But the adrenaline began to fade in minutes. There was no
way she could make it to LA without sleeping. Friday and Saturday she’d worked her night shifts at
the group home. Sunday she’d slept three hours and driven Mei Mei to her Aunt’s house. She’d
planned to sleep another three hours before meeting Reggie. Right now, her body was set to be
asleep.
Instead, she was driving a car with no modern safety warnings down the most boring stretch of
freeway in California. I-5 down here was straight and flat, surrounded by cars and cotton she could
barely see in the dark. The air was hot and muggy with exhaust. The freeway had just enough cars to
form a slalom course for the occasional idiot, but few enough to keep the pace even, the taillights
hypnotically soothing.
Sarah pulled into the left lane to pass a line of trucks. Passing the second truck, she saw a police car
closing fast behind her. Wakefulness hit so fast, it seemed like she’d never really been awake before.
How had they found her? She hadn’t been speeding, not more than a couple miles per hour, and that
couldn’t count. Had they already traced the car and notified the CHP to watch for her? There was no GPS. Had she been spotted miles back when she was too dopey to notice? The police car was right behind her, lights flashing. Presumably there was a siren, but she couldn’t hear it over the truck next to her. She signaled to merge between two trucks. It occurred to her she was not thinking like a teek or like a fugitive. But sabotaging a police car seemed not only wrong but dangerous. It would give them a real excuse to arrest her if she was caught, and out here, where could she hide from the CHP if they called for help? Maybe she’d risk it to cross a border or not get shot, but not here and now.

As she merged into the right lane the police car sped by. They hadn’t been after her, just trying to get past to catch someone else. Terror still pumped in her arms and behind her eyes. What if she had done something to give herself away? What if her paranoia had caused a traffic accident where someone got hurt?

Sarah considered pulling off the freeway to regroup. But she didn’t want to waste her chance to drive now that she was wide-awake. Cautiously, she escaped from between two towering semis and finished passing the truck caravan.

Then her mind was full of Reggie. She could have called Reggie while she was in Sacramento. He might have rushed out to join her in this crazy escape. But what if they were waiting for her to call him? Ashley seemed to think they’d tap phones to find her. And if they’d left town successfully, what could she tell him? Even a free spirit like Reggie couldn’t give up his old life without any explanation. But if she told him and then a telepath heard him thinking about it . . . There was just no sane way she could bring Reggie into this. He was sure to think something terrible about her, and there was no reasonable way to tell him otherwise.

Tears filled her eyes, and Sarah knew she was being stupid. Dwelling on this would do her no good. Still she let her mind paint pictures as tears began to leak down her face. Would someone contact Reggie when she didn’t show up for work? No one at the group home had his number, and calling her phone wouldn’t do them any good. If you crushed a cell phone and threw it into a creek, did callers still get the same stilted “unavailable” message?

What was she going to do with her life anyway? Were there countries she could live in where the US wouldn’t find her? What kind of work could she do? Surely they’d look for her at any job involving gymnastics or anthropology, if they were even looking at all, if such jobs were even a realistic way to support herself.

Maybe she’d be better off dead. So far she’d carefully kept her DNA out of any database she knew of. Maybe the CDC could use hairs found in her car or someplace to study her, but maybe not. If her abilities were really so rare, she’d hate to be the data point that let them genengineer more teeks. That had always been a problem with Reggie. He wanted kids, no time soon, but he definitely wanted them, and how could she explain her reluctance? Maybe it was just as well she’d been found out and forced to leave. She couldn’t have kept lying to him forever, and she couldn’t change what she was.

Rather than a major soak in self-pity, Sarah tried to make her mind look ahead. She needed to get out of the US and then out of the free-trade sector. If she was still miserable and free in a month, she’d make some rational decision then. Yeah, right.

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Chapter 6
March 31, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand

This time, he had it. James rechecked his gene chips. Three of his new paranoid schizophrenic samples seemed to have the markers associated with the telepathy phenotype. They were homozygous for markers 8N31F856 and 8N31F857. Those markers were only three thousand bases apart, and the critical 2346 bases for telepathy lay between them.
For the thousandth time James wished he could put the telepathy sequence on his own custom chip. He could, of course, make spotted arrays in secret, but what good was it to build a biotech empire if he couldn’t use it all at will? Alak said it was a security risk. He didn’t say exactly which government peon felt qualified to weigh their risk against his science. There were problems with being the only real geneticist in Thailand cleared to study telepathy.

James took his three samples and began sequencing the section between the two markers. It was tedious work. Each sample took several minutes to process. He’d only once before found a telepath in a psychiatric sample. It had been one of the multiple personality cases in a local hospital. The finding was interesting, but not statistically significant. This new finding was extremely significant. Three telepaths out of sixty-four subjects! It was a British sample, too, not many people of recent Chinese descent there.

While the first sample was sequencing he glanced at the other results for his sixty-four schizophrenics. Fifteen had another sequence in common that only matched 8% of the general population. That could be meaningful. Paranoid schizophrenia might well include several genetic subtypes. He’d personally found three completely separate sequences that correlated with mood disorders, and they only explained half of that population.

Better yet, twenty percent of this sample had the bipolar correlate he’d refused to sell to Minerva, including all three of the possible telepaths. Was he about to solve that conundrum?

There was a knock on the lab door.

“Yes?”

A tech popped her head in, “Lunch, James. Want anything?”

“No.”

“How 'bout a tuna sandwich?”

“No. I’m busy.”

“As usual. Suit yourself.”

She left. The first of the three samples was finished processing. James went to his computer. He fumbled the keys as he called up data. Not a perfect match, but almost. The new sample was missing a small section of the telepathy sequence. James brought up the relevant segment. The telepathy sequence included a ninety base section repeated three times, the new sample had those ninety bases just once. That was the only difference. It could be a deletion, but more likely, this new sequence was older, a predecessor.

Until now, it had seemed that telepathy appeared only two or three hundred years ago, probably in China, but with carriers moving almost immediately to the U.S. The lack of genetic drift supported that time frame. But something so complex shouldn’t just pop into existence fully formed.

Now James had found a simpler genetic form. What if modern telepathy had appeared when a group of ninety bases accidentally copied three times? He pulled up the calendar on his pilot and added a dot in today’s square.

On his main computer, he pulled up data for the second sample, which had just finished sequencing. It contained the same shorter variant. The third did too.

So the genetic precursor to telepathy, possibly in combination with the other new sequence or his old bipolar sequence, seemed to correlate with paranoid schizophrenia. Were these people telepathic? Did they really hear voices in their heads? Were the voices weaker or intermittent because their sequence had only one copy of those ninety bases?

What did those ninety bases do? James had studied the telepathy sequence for eighteen years. He’d artificially produced its protein, variants, and antibodies. He’d screened these against a panel of all known cell types, grown up from stem cells. He knew the structure of the protein and what many of its sub-units could do when active with other proteins.

But he still didn’t know how telepathy worked. The ninety bases that repeated three times were one of the most ambiguous sections. A close analog in other parts of the genome served a timing function. Perhaps a repetition could affect the rate at which this protein did whatever it was supposed to do. But so far, it remained inactive with samples of all cell types, and any timing activity was only hypothetical.
Did the Chinese know? The U.S.? James wished for a free exchange of ideas, even as he braided his mind through his latest discovery. If his samples from telepaths hadn’t turned up this older variant, then it probably wasn’t coding for telepathy as he knew it. What did it do? Did it work together with his bipolar sequence? He’d checked his genetic database of telepaths for the bipolar sequence, and they were no more likely to have it than the general population.

James walked three steps across the room, turned and started back. It would be nice if he could study the three patients with the other telepathy variant. Three steps, turn. But he’d been lucky to receive the samples at all, and there was no way he could go to Britain. Three steps, turn. The Brits may not have their own program, but they were in tight with the Americans. Three steps, stop at the computer. If he pursued anything about those samples, someone might guess what he was looking for. He needed samples he could follow up on.

He wondered if he could replicate his findings among European paranoid schizophrenics. At the next Swiss conference he could try to make arrangements.

Another knock sounded at the door. What was this, a teaching lab?

“Come in.”

Alak stepped sideways through the door, holding his bulky briefcase shoulder bag out of the way. He lowered his head slightly and said, “I hope I am not interrupting.”

James didn’t answer. Of course Alak was interrupting. How could intruding on the lab not be an interruption?

“Chinda said it was a good time.”

James crossed his arms, holding himself still as he tried to place the name.

“She told me to make sure you ate something. A good woman to have around.”

Of course, James should have remembered the tech’s name was Chinda. He’d been told that several times. He crossed to his desk to jot it down before he forgot. On the way he waved Alak to a swivel chair he saved for visitors. At his own stable, wooden seat he scribbled “Chinda” on a post-it, set down the pen, picked it up again, added “tech – lunch orders,” and slid the note into the center drawer of his desk. Alak waited, politely not watching what he wrote.

James brought his focus back to Alak. “You didn’t come to see if I was malnourished.”

“No, though if Chinda asked me to lunch . . .” Alak smiled and raised his oily eyebrows. James smiled back weakly and waited for Alak to state his business. He had no desire to swap innuendo with Alak, even if the tech was rather attractive now that he thought about it.

“You don’t happen to have understood any more about the Minerva offer?” Alak asked.

“Maybe. Have you?”

“What?”

Alak sat up straight now, as if he hadn’t expected James to offer anything. James didn’t really want to explain yet, his partial discovery was still too tentative. But if Alak wasn’t expecting anything, then why had he come?

“I found a correlation, in a small sample. It might not be anything, but why did you come?”

“A correlation with what?”

“Between the sequence they want and a variant on the telepathy sequence.” James replied telepathically. “Do you know if they’ve found a variant? Is that why you came?”

“A variant? What do you mean?”

James steepled his fingers and they began to tap rapidly. Alak didn’t know anything and wasn’t giving any information. “It may be nothing, a sequence I found in three foreign subjects. You’d probably learn more spying on the Americans, unless you can get me more samples. Now what did you come for?”

“What do you mean?”

“Please, explain what you’ve found.”

“There’s nothing to explain yet. Now what else.”

“I heard you declined the offer from Minerva.”

“Yes.”

“We’re trying to share information with you on this. We need to keep channels open.”

How stupid. James would have told them his plans if he’d thought of it, but he wouldn’t have them
telling him what to do. That was the point of his arrangement with Thailand. “When they make a new offer, I’ll let you suggest replies.” “Assuming they try again.”

James shrugged. He almost hoped they wouldn’t. Alak was reminding him of the American recruiters during his student days and his father before that. His arrangement in Thailand was supposed to be different. He’d built their biotech industry on the strength of his patents and research. They’d facilitated genetic sampling from their significant teep community and promised him scientific freedom and support. He’d hoped other researchers would follow him to Thailand, but that hadn’t come to pass. There was local talent, good minds in genetics and manufacturing. He hadn’t built biotech into Thailand’s fourth largest industry alone. But no other teeps, refugees or semi-native, had joined in his genetic research, and that work had been mostly stagnant, until today. “Alak, I may have a lead here, but I can’t follow it without more subjects or more information.” Alak sat back quietly, without his usual nod or other acknowledgement. He was quiet for a full minute, then pushed his chair back and stood. James followed him as he headed toward the door. “I’ll see what I can do,” Alak said, reaching for the handle. Then with the briefest of nods, he was gone.

James stood uncertainly in his own lab. He walked back to the computer where he’d discovered the attenuated telepathy sequence. He stared at the results, but his earlier triumph felt hollow. He pushed his palms hard against the edge of the counter and tried to focus his thoughts on the meaning of ninety bases.

Chapter 7
April 2 – 8, 2025 – Sacramento, USA

Reggie opened his refrigerator and glared at the leftovers sitting from Sunday night. He’d made cannelloni for Sarah, because she liked it and Sunday was the one night he had plenty of time to cook for her. She worked Friday and Saturday nights, then slept the weekend days at the house she was inheriting. Sunday night each week she returned to Reggie’s, completely phase shifted but ready for whatever Reggie had prepared. The rest of the week she lived with him, but Sunday was sort of like a date. Except last Sunday Sarah didn’t show up.

Reggie had waited until the candles burned low wondering which of Sarah’s peculiar acquaintances might have arrived on her doorstep needing help or which of her mother’s old friends might have called needing comfort. With Sarah, bizarre problems seemed to crash and recede like waves on the shore. She collected needy people as if they were stray kittens. But she usually managed not to let them take advantage; she passed through their troubles unscathed. And until now, she always arrived where she was supposed to be, eventually.

At nine on Sunday Reggie called her cell phone. He couldn’t get through and didn’t leave a message. He put away the cannelloni, blew out the candles, and ate salad and bread in the moonlight. He thought about calling the police or activating a scatter mob search party, but it was too soon and Reggie refused to panic. He listened to Ekova, creators of the inventive language remix movement, until he’d played every hCD they’d ever made.

Now it was Wednesday morning. The cannelloni still sat in the fridge. Bright sunlight burst through the window that covered one huge wall of the loft. Reggie pulled toast and coffee from his preprogrammed appliances. It was good organic, fair-wage coffee from Chile, but he hardly tasted it. Instead, he drifted through the loft, touching each piece of fabric Sarah had brought back from India. Pinks, blues, yellows, and oranges, all bright and intricate, all with patterns to touch as well as to see. Sarah’s cloth covered the sofa, the table, the top of the bookshelf. She’d made some into a bedspread and pillow covers. All the beauty Sarah seemed to overlook, the colors and subtlety that she’d never
wear, were in the fabric she’d found and brought back from their time in India. Reggie looked at his photos on the wall. Only one showed Sarah. She didn’t like seeing herself in pictures. But they showed the school and roads they’d helped build with the Peace Corps. They showed the village girls who had flocked to Sarah day after day. They showed the cows no Hindu would eat and a well that no longer gave water. They showed the village cell phone and computer that ignited Reggie’s ambitions for Pronoia International.

None of their history seemed real since Sarah disappeared. It tangled with his imaginings of himself, the grieving boyfriend called on to identify her body at the morgue, or the jealous former lover catching a glimpse of her years later on someone else’s arm. Reggie almost wanted to be jealous, to play the part of one spurned. But he couldn’t really believe Sarah would run off with someone else, not without a word. He remembered their last week in India.

“So, have you and Phil decided where to start?” Sarah lay next to him in bed, red and amber quilted spread heaped at the bottom, mosquito net sagging inward. The air hung damp and still, steaming with spices and rot. Both of them lay naked on their backs, too sweaty to touch more than fingertips. He imagined himself as a member of the intelligentsia, entering a part of his life where ideas would draw followers, sculpt a quiet revolution. “We have leads in key cities. Phil wants to introduce me to some people, get the unofficial news from around the U.S.”

“I could find temp work for a while, until you choose a place. Unless you want me to come along? I could look for office space or transcribe stuff for you.”

As a mature, forward-thinking innovator Reggie said, “Sarah, you can’t plan your life around me. Think about what you want, who you want to be.”

She rolled up to sitting, silently running one finger down his damp arm. “I could be who I want anywhere. If you want me, I’ll go with you.”

He looked up at her from his back, too hot to even move his arm. “We can keep in touch, get together sometimes, but life will be different back in the states. I’ll need to put everything I have into my work, and that wouldn’t be fair to you.”

Sarah climbed through the netting then, wet a cloth to rinse the sweat from her face and body. There was no point in drying off with the heat that day. Reggie didn’t know how she found the energy to move. He watched her pull on clothes and leave, all the time seeing himself as the big, practical man, making the only responsible decision.

It wasn’t until he was back in the states and realized there were no woman half as interesting as Sarah, that he replayed the scene, casting himself as the typical American guy, afraid of commitment and not appreciating what he had.

A month later, he convinced Phil to base Pronoia in Sacramento; it was the capital of a relatively progressive state, a fine location for their work. He called Sarah for lunch, as if he’d chosen her city by chance. She leaned her elbows on a white restaurant tablecloth, and told him about her work at a group home and coaching gymnastics as if she were a serf and he a lord. She let him back into her life as if he’d never hurt her, as if she’d never expected to be treated any better. And somehow, he never switched the roles, never went down on his knees and begged his lady’s pardon.

Now Reggie didn’t know if he’d see her again. He pulled on a boat neck sweater, poured the last of the coffee into his cup, and headed down the street to work.

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“Reggie Malone, Pronoia International. Can I help you?” Reggie spoke toward the speaker phone trying not to rustle the project overrun analysis he was folding.

“Hi Reggie. This is Scott with PAD. We met last fall at the Ashland conference?”

“Sure. How are you doing?”

“Fine, fine. Look, I don’t want to say too much now, but what’s your policy on stock donations? Do you sell immediately?”

“Usually, yes. But we are flexible if the donor has special—”
“No, no. How fast are you? If I fax a transfer form to you without any notice or special instructions, what will happen?”
“During exchange hours, I can turn it over in minutes, half an hour at the most.”
“Great. Here’s my fax number. Send me whatever forms you need for a stock donation. I can’t promise you anything, of course.”
“Certainly, I appreciate you thinking of us.”
“Sure, Reggie. Keep up the good work.”
Scott hung up and Reggie stared for a moment at the fax number on his phone screen. There had been a definite subtext to that conversation. Was PAD in trouble? Serious enough trouble that their stock might crash and their CEO wanted to siphon some out to a charity with an immediate sell policy? But it couldn’t be a hostile takeover or he’d be holding on to the stock. Maybe a lawsuit with real teeth? Could someone finally bring down the company that coined the term Personal Access Device? A company that owned the only private global satellite network, bandwidth rights in almost every country, and a private island that was all but recognized as a sovereign country?
PAD’s business model allowed for perpetual lawsuits. They’d survived almost a decade as the only provider of truly anonymous global telecom with their hybrid satellite/cellular phones and their ability to reset their SIM card ID’s according to an algorithm only they could trace. When Reggie started college everyone in the counter culture had a PAD. It soon became illegal to sell them in the U.S. and other uptight countries, but enough of Europe and Asia valued communications immune to U.S., U.N., and Chinese spying that the company survived. What would fill the niche if PAD died?
Reggie also wondered for a moment how much stock Scott might send their way. He checked the stock price. It was down ten percent in the last week, but that certainly didn’t reflect the kind of concerns Reggie was entertaining. If Scott sent him stock and he sold fast enough . . .
Reggie shoved the paper he was holding into an envelope and set his phone to interrupt him high priority if Scott called, faxed, or emailed at any time.

Noon on Wednesday meant pizza with Phil at Pizza Pop. Reggie had no idea why his fifty-year-old business partner with cropped gray hair, subdued Hawaiian shirts, and Birkenstocks had such an ingrained pizza routine. It was good California pizza, but he had to wonder if Phil didn’t also fancy the owner, “Pop.”
Reggie and Phil walked down the sunny sidewalk from Pronoia inspecting the youth culture near the capital. Reggie wondered for the umpteenth time how he could harness teenage angst to power a progressive microeconomy. Maybe some video game with advanced sim characters interacting on a global scale—
“I bet you don’t even get the reference on that kid’s shirt,” Phil muttered.
The “kid” was probably eighteen, with well-defined muscles and a rather tight black t-shirt. Scrawled as if in chalk on a blackboard was, “This is my soccer mom,” with a picture of a spread-eagled stick figure, hair standing on end and eyes sprung out like slinkies. Beneath that was, “This is my soccer mom on drugs,” and a picture of the same stick figure dancing and shaking her hair back. On the bottom it said, “Decriminalize marijuana now.”
Reggie said, “Well, I understand the retro ad trend for issues that have been around a while, and I know the legalization of cannabis is still a political football at times.”
“Yeah, but that image was a spin off from before the war on drugs. They used to have public health ads showing an egg and saying “This is your brain.” Then they showed a fried egg and said, “This is your brain on drugs.”
Reggie gave Phil an incredulous look.
“Seriously, I think it predated Reagan.”

Reggie was just biting into his triple mushroom with Thai basil when Pop motioned him over to the counter. Pop was a big guy, just going gray and soft. He was wearing a red and white checked apron and holding out the phone.
Why would anyone call Reggie on the phone at Pizza Pop? But Reggie went to take the call.
“Don’t react. This might sound nuts, but you may be watched and your phone may be bugged. I was going to leave you out of this, and I probably still should. But well, Reggie, I miss you.”

Sarah was talking fast. Reggie tried to not react. He leaned onto the counter, as if he always received calls at the local pizza place. He imagined himself in a leather jacket, leaning against a jukebox in some long ago diner. If Sarah was really worried about surveillance, calling this way might make sense. She knew he ate here with Phil every Wednesday and the number was all over the TV ads. But what kind of trouble could justify this?

“‘Miss’ doesn’t begin to describe my side of it. What’s going on?”

“Our government’s after me, officially the CDC, though not for any reason you’d expect. Genetic persecution is real. But if I tell you more, you’ll be in at least as much trouble as I am.”

“If you told me you’d have to shoot me?”

“I’ve ditched my phone and car, everything that might have GPS. I can probably never go back to the U.S., but I, I had to at least call you.”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“Someone has to.”

“Thanks. But we can fight this. I have—”

“It’s not like that. I really shouldn’t have called you—”

“Do you want to offend me? I’m yours. I would do anything for you. Tell me what’s going on.”

“Reggie, I love you, but there really are battles we can’t win. So far I’m just trying to stay alive, well, to stay free. I want you with me, but you’d lose everything: job, money, stuff, anything tied to the U.S. at the very least. And they might keep hunting us elsewhere. I don’t know. Think about it. I’ll tell you how to meet me, but then promise you’ll really think it over first?”

“This is crazy. You have to tell me what’s going on.”

“I can’t. Knowing could cost you everything, and you’d be trapped there.”

“No one would know if you told me.”

“They’ll know. That’s why I can’t tell you. Anyway, if you want to meet me, go to the place we first had our names carved together. This time a week from now, okay? Be prepared to lose everything you can’t carry casually on your person.”

“I need to know more. I’m sure there are arrangements I can make. The CDC doesn’t have that kind of pull.”

“It’s more than just the CDC. It’s spies and state secrets and stuff you wouldn’t believe. If you really want to come, try not to be followed and ditch all your GPS. But you have a whole life to live there, and you do a lot of good things. So think about it before you throw that away. I should go. They’ll get suspicious.”

“You didn’t call to tell me not to come.”

“I called because I’m selfish and weak.”

“Not likely. I’ll think first, but I’ll be there. This all seems much too interesting.”

“You’re hopeless and impossible.”

“I can’t be selfish and weak, too?”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Reggie set down the phone. Pop nodded at him and raised an eyebrow. Reggie nodded back and tried to smile reassuringly. He walked to the table where Phil was eating.

“Well, was it something about Sarah?”

“No, nothing real. Let’s say it was an over-imaginative friend who thought she knew something.”

Phil continued to eat in silence. Reggie started chewing and wondered how much of what Sarah said he could believe. Could the government really be after her? Could they really be spying on him? He wouldn’t put it past Sarah to go insane. She was very high strung to begin with. But somehow, he didn’t think she was delusional. He was sure she wasn’t lying. Perhaps she was overly paranoid. She’d always had strong feeling about genetic privacy. Had she been keeping something secret all this time, something she knew the government might want to control? But what? Obviously she wasn’t gay or criminally aggressive, the usual political targets. If she carried genes for autism,
dyslexia, or schizophrenia, she would hardly be hunted in a secret government pogrom. Maybe she was a mental code breaker or something along those lines? She’d certainly demonstrated a talent for languages while they were in India. And she had a very good sense of direction and memory for floor plans and city layouts. Still, she’d never seemed extraordinary about any of it.

“Hey, Reggie, don’t think so hard, you’ll hurt yourself.” Phil had finished his pizza and exchanged a few meaningful looks with Pop. Now he was gazing out the window at signs posted on a lamppost. In addition to numerous rooms for rent, there was one for computer tutoring signed “AI”. What some people would believe. Hmm, perhaps he was being hypocritical.

Reggie realized that if he couldn’t be honest with Phil, he should at least try to be social. “You think my brain’s that easily damaged?”

“Fragile as an egg.”

For an hour on Friday night, Reggie convinced himself he wasn’t going. The whole phone conversation seemed unreal. Reggie streamed nouveau punk music, not because he liked it, but because he wanted to bang his head. He played it loud and the neighbor below retaliated with psychedelic rock and live drums. Reggie turned his music down, knowing better than to fight with a drummer. A courteous silence ensued, and Reggie knew he was going to follow Sarah.

Over the weekend, he packed all his stuff into boxes. It was surprisingly easy. He set out twelve boxes to form a grid in the living room. Boxes he’d want if he ended up in a tropical climate he marked with a red line. He almost marked the cold weather items with blue but decided that was too traditional and used black instead. Packages he’d most want in a third world economy he marked with a three. Anything with GPS he set aside to donate. It was all outdated anyway, each the latest fad to explore for a month. He ranked the priority of boxes within each economy/climate type alphabetically.

Sarah’s fabrics he ranked very high and his photos very low, partly out of devotion, but also because he was tired of the photos. He set the picture with Sarah in it aside, along with the two pillowcases she’d made. Even traveling light, he had to bring something that each of them cherished. And the pillowcases could always be stuffed with their clothes to give a bit of comfort while living rough. His billowing self-satisfaction faded as he reconsidered his role as devoted boyfriend. What if he was instead Sancho Panza, tagging along with a crazy person to avoid his own responsibilities? Part of him clamored for the adventure, for sudden change and risk, regardless of what was happening to Sarah.

He packed good insect repellent and some water purification tablets. Best to be healthy, even if charging at windmills.

Online Tuesday, Reggie transferred half his assets into international stocks with accounts based outside the US. If Sarah’s troubles turned out to be exaggerated, he’d lose a bit in transaction fees and risky economies. But his choices all reflected his political ideals; so that was okay.

At four o’clock Tuesday he left an envelope on his desk for Phil, on the assumption Phil wouldn’t look around until Reggie failed to show up the next day. He tried to be as fair as he could without giving away why he was leaving. He merely said he needed a sabbatical for personal reasons. He left notes for whoever took over his duties as treasurer and board member, and a signed paper giving up his stake in the organization if he failed to return within two months. He pulled the SIM card out of his cell phone and left the rest in a barrel Pronoia kept in the lobby for just such donations. Part of their business was refurbishing cell phones for use in unwired places.

Carrying a daypack with two pillowcases, one photograph, and a few necessities, he went out to hail a cab to the airport.

April 9, 2025 – Montego Bay, Jamaica

Reggie cleared customs in Jamaica at ten on Wednesday morning. Thus far, there had been no indication that anyone was following him or noting his presence. He’d used three short air flights
rather than one to make his trail harder to follow, and also to make it less suspicious when he paid cash for his tickets. But he’d departed from Miami and landed in Montego Bay under his own passport. He could play the fugitive to humor his girlfriend, but he wasn’t ready to break international laws, at least not yet.

His clothes were rumpled, but that was why he’d chosen dark nubby cotton. He made a quick stop in the airport restroom to comb his hair and shave then negotiated with a taxi for a ride to the open-air market. He knew his timing would be close, but Jamaica was no place to be in a hurry.

The casual blocking of roads and the smell from petroleum-fueled cars hadn’t changed since his last taxi ride in Jamaica. But cell phones and holo-ads had arrived with a vengeance, a cartoon exaggeration of U.S. cities. A street corner might project a fashion model strutting above pedestrians heads, but even if passers-by looked up, they were all talking to someone not present, using a visible phone or not. Even better were the people talking on phones beneath swirling holographs of competing phones.

The market was a ghastly tourist trap. Thousands of little booths huddled together sporting flashy fabric roofs or kitchy bamboo poles. No holo-ads though. Reggie liked the shopkeepers who called out to him about t-shirts, hats, and GPS-protected jewelry. He knew there were ways around the GPS security. Perhaps if he was to live on the lam, he would learn to hack the chips. With pseudo-professional curiosity, he wondered which items for sale had already been hacked. Then he glanced at a newsstand to laugh at the limited and outdated collection. His hand clutched automatically for his discarded cell phone with its personalized news updates. It was isolating to have no news or interruptions for so many hours.

Moving alone through the chattering crowd, Reggie found he enjoyed the scent of overripe tropical fruit and even the stench of cigarettes so rare back in California. As he sauntered through the massive market, he couldn’t help spotting an outstanding batik shirt for Sarah. It was black with turquoise in the few places where wax had not been poured and the many places where wax had been intentionally cracked. It was darker than Reggie would have chosen on his own, but three years with Sarah had taught him to avoid too much vibrant color, no matter how well it set off her eyes and hair.

The fellow minding the booth stared at Reggie as he glanced at the shirt. The vendor immediately rearranged his jowls into a smile, wiped sweaty palms on his baggy pants, and set in for the kill.

Reggie haggled knowing he could happily walk away. When he tried to, the squat man chased after him until Reggie deigned to buy the shirt for a quarter of the offering price. It still wasn’t a great deal, but Reggie liked to give people pretty things. Reaching the far side of the market at last, and relatively sure he hadn’t been followed, Reggie hailed another cab and headed out to the water caves where he and Sarah first had their names carved together.

There was no sign of Sarah at the entrance, so Reggie bought a ticket for the noon tour. He studied the other people waiting. To a person they looked like they just fell off the tour bus: two families with kids, a young couple probably on their honeymoon, and several older couples in outlandish holiday attire. If he had to guess someone on the tour was a government agent, he’d guess himself. Smiling, he leaned on a post, and let the sun flow into him.

On the tour, they floated through cool dark caves on a remarkably dry raft. There were advantages to making one of the first runs of the day. The guide rattled off the story of how the caves had been discovered and used over the years. The spiel seemed unchanged from two years before when Reggie had taken this tour with Sarah and her mother.

They hadn’t known then that Mrs. Duncan was ill, but perhaps they should have guessed. In some ways she projected the same vibrancy and restlessness as Sarah, but it was buried deep beneath bitterness and alcohol. She walked with the same taut posture that had first drawn Reggie’s eye to her daughter, as if her spine and each of her limbs were pulled by invisible elastic. But Mrs. Duncan was no longer graceful, if she ever had been. She was a sixty-year-old woman who looked closer to eighty. She wore a lot of polyester and rayon, bought gag gifts for friends at the office, and tried to provoke arguments with her daughter almost every night. But she said she’d always wanted a vacation in Jamaica, and she said she wanted to know her daughter’s first “serious” boyfriend.
Sarah told Reggie he was the only guy she’d dated that her mother approved of. Despite the fact that he had joined the Peace Corp and spoke openly about a life of service through NGOs (which he carefully explained meant non-governmental organizations), he was an MBA from a wealthy family who knew how to charm almost anyone. And as mothers went, he found Sarah’s mostly likable and amusing, so he’d done his best to keep everyone in good spirits during their one-week trip together.

At the end of that cave tour, it was Sarah’s mom who asked the man selling maracas to carve “Reggie + Sarah” into one. It was not the sort of souvenir they would have chosen for themselves, but they’d appreciated the gesture and made good use of the instrument when singing silly songs later that night. Reggie was pretty sure Sarah had kept it, though he didn’t know where. He’d remembered it immediately when Sarah designated her meeting place over the phone.

As the boat reached the refreshment area at the end of the current tour, Reggie stepped off into the cavernous cantina and looked around. The maraca booth still squatted in the same spot. No sign of Sarah, though. He went with the rest of the tour for his complementary glass of punch and sat where he could keep an eye on the maraca seller.

From his seat, he saw a wiry rasta guy in a brilliant yellow shirt come through a service door. The guy glanced around, spotted Reggie, and walked straight to him.

“Hey mon, don’ wanna hurry you, but if you wanna meet your lady in time, we need to go.”

Reggie smiled and raised an eyebrow as he set down his punch. “The time suits me fine.” With his pack over his shoulder again, Reggie followed the man in the flowing yellow shirt out through the service door and up a gritty stairway into the blinding afternoon light. Before his eyes adjusted, they came to a dusty cab, and the rastafarian, who appeared to be the cabby, opened a door for him.

The person inside had short black hair, a wide brimmed white hat, and a white tourist t-shirt with plastic beaded trim, but it was still obviously Sarah. Reggie climbed in without saying a word and the cabby started driving. He gazed at Sarah, wondering if she looked so great because of her tan, the hair, or the time they’d been apart.

Just as he was about to speak, Sarah cut him off by saying in Urdu, which they hadn’t used in almost two years, “How well do you remember this language?”

He thought, “Shit, I was never as good as you at languages.” But in Urdu he said only, “A little bit. I can try.”

She hugged him tight across the backseat, and he lost all comprehension of the words she murmured in his ear. His body reacted very strongly to seeing her again. But when she stopped at just a hug, he let her disengage and then asked in careful Urdu, “Could you repeat that?”

Then the cabbie, without looking back said, “We got a car following us. You wanna lose him, no problem.”

“You can do that? Thanks, man.” Sarah answered, fixing her eyes on the rearview mirror.

Reggie settled a hand on her thigh and just enjoyed the ride as the cab hit town and began suicidal driving maneuvers, the likes of which he’d last seen in Delhi. They cut between cars, made sudden turns, and spit through and out of narrow alleys. The driver maintained a relaxed attitude throughout, giving a short laugh when it was clear they’d lost their tail. Reggie saw Sarah pulling money out of her pocket, wondered if he should chip in, and decided he’d just be interfering.

The car jerked to a stop by the same open-air market he’d passed through before. Spies could save themselves a lot of time by just covering this market well. But he followed Sarah out as she paid the driver with an enormous tip.

“You got a normal t-shirt in that bag?” Sarah asked, in Urdu, of course, as she threaded her way through the now crowded market. She pulled off her sun hat and tourist shirt and shoved them into her tote bag. She was wearing a tight yellow tank top underneath, and Reggie was suddenly quite sure she was not wearing a bra. A moment later she had pulled a loose navy blue t-shirt over it, and Reggie tried to think back to her last question.

“Yeah, like the tank top, by the way.”

“Hold that thought for later. When we step around this corner, go ahead and swap to your t-shirt. I’ve got two snug straps around my midriff right now that I’m going to slide up to make me look more like a guy.”
Reggie was wondering about the usefulness of such disguise, but as they reached the specified corner he fumbled in his pack for a nondescript shirt. The place she’d chosen for them to change was an alley full of rotting garbage. Overflowing cans provided some visual privacy, but Reggie suspected the odor was what really turned spectators away. He swapped shirts in thirty seconds while Sarah reached under her shirt and managed to quite remarkably hide the fact that she had breasts. She then handed him a worn looking baseball cap, put one on herself, and continued across the market to the main bus stop.

The wait at the bus stop stretched longer than their whole walk through the market. All around them locals and tourist kids crowded onto other buses. Sarah kept quiet and didn’t make eye contact. Reggie leaned against a pole trying to look like a tourist and think like a private investigator. A heavyset black woman pulled a screaming kid by the arm, then finally picked him up like a sack of potatoes and shoved her way onto a bus. A dirty white teen with dreadlocks and the blank expression of American privilege slouched his way onto a packed bus and stood without holding on. Behind them a thirty-ish man who looked half-black and half-Hispanic stood waiting. He seemed out of place. His casual clothes appeared pressed; his shoes, too new.

At that point Sarah pulled Reggie onto an overflowing bus. The out-of-place man didn’t follow them; he was talking on his phone. Reggie focused his attention on the crowd crammed in beside him.

He liked foreign bus services. American buses carried either despair or machismo. Cities with subways had a bizarre underworld charm all their own, but there was nothing like riding a bus in a country where people took it for granted as part of their daily life and community. Conversations flowed with these people from their work, onto wheels, to their homes. The stories were loud and either unabashed or told for thrill value. The locals didn’t care what the trampers and hostlers heard, probably assuming they weren’t fluent in the language. Here much of the conversation was in Spanish, some in English. Reggie’s Spanish was much better than his Urdu; he could follow it without effort. When he finally glanced at Sarah he saw she was a study in nonchalance, much like the American kid at the bus stop. The French knew ennui. The American version denied the possibility of interest. Reggie realized Sarah was more of an actress than she’d ever let on. She also was quite passable as a boy, which left a slightly uneasy edge on Reggie’s attraction to her.

People left and joined the bus, but gradually it became less crowded, less raucous. Reggie looked out the windows more. The area was a strange combination of cheap construction from several different decades. Prefab buildings with peaked roofs pressed next to pseudo-Mexican stucco and foam blown vacation huts. The air carried a whiff of salt, and Reggie vaguely remembered something about a boat from Sarah’s litany in the cab.

He glanced around the bus trying to remember who had boarded with them. Of course, that man, or someone they didn’t even suspect, could have called ahead to another stop. So anyone present could be assigned to watch them. He followed Sarah off at the next stop, studying the passengers who disembarked behind them.

All of a sudden his pack was pulled from his shoulder, and a young Asian man was running off with it. Reggie grabbed for him, swore in English, then started to give chase. He was pissed at himself for being so careless after all his travels, but realized quickly that he didn’t want a scene.

Sarah huffed up beside him, “Did you need it?”

“No.”

“ID, in it?”

“No.”

“Sorry, then. Let’s go.”

Reggie was stung for a moment by the indifference of this mysterious dark-haired pseudo-boy who used to be his girlfriend. But he’d chosen to come here. They walked a couple blocks to a beach with a small dock where three boats were tied up. The nicest was a motor boat with a polished wood deck and navy blue sides. It was tied in sideways with a plank out for boarding. Sarah walked up noisily and called out, “We’re here.”

A very tan man with a short ponytail stepped out. He shook Sarah’s hand and reached out to Reggie.
“Hi, I’m Joe.”
“Reggie.”
“Glad to meet ya’. Jill was ready to go without you if she couldn’t track you down. Must be quite a dig you’re going to.”
“We hope so,” Sarah, or “Jill”, chimed in. “Anything we can do to help get going?”
“Nah, I’m all ready. Not that much to do on a boat like this.”
“Well, you mind if we go down below then? I think I’ve gotten a bit too much sun the last few days.”
“You better get used to it if you’re going into archeology. But sure, you two scoot on down and have some time to yourselves. I’m sure you’ve got a lot of catching up to do.”
Joe gave Reggie a knowing wink as Sarah led the way below deck. Reggie smiled, unsure just what the cover story was, and followed Sarah down. A cramped flight of stairs led into a tight cabin with a small kitchen area, table, and bed. There were no personal effects, any dishes or clothing were stored in closed cupboards. The only smell was ocean and a slight hint of mildew. The bed was covered with a rough brown blanket, tucked with military precision at the corners.

Joe was ready to launch a humorous tirade about being one of Bo Peep’s returned sheep when Sarah took his hand and flooded him with an explanation in Urdu.

He managed to grasp that they were supposed to be archeology students who’d wrangled an invite to an exciting new dig in Belize. Sarah seemed to have negotiated their passage for cash and a promise they’d report back about the new dig site. Joe, probably not his real name, had his own reasons for being in Dangriga, Belize before dawn, probably smuggling something out, possibly archeological artifacts.

“Are you crazy?” Reggie asked, in a harsher tone than he intended.
“No more than usual. This is moving too fast for you, isn’t it? I didn’t really think we’d make it this far without being caught.”
Sarah pulled close to him, her whole body pressed against his. The urgency of his physical attraction hit like a full body slam. “My luck’s rubbing off on you. Do we really need to speak in Urdu?”
“He might be listening, but you can say normal stuff in English if you want.”
“If that’s what you’re most curious about, sure.” She fumbled with the bands under her shirts, then pulled off the camouflaging loose blue t-shirt. She was in fact not wearing a bra and the clingy yellow tank top suited her slim figure well. Reggie ran his fingers down her back enough to feel the two bands now around her ribs and midriff. He slid his hands under the tank top and felt, then peeked at the lower one. It was a three-inch wide piece of stretchy nylon that it took him a moment to recognize.
“What a curious use for a head band,” Reggie said.
“I hardly need it for my hair now.”
Reggie slid the hand that was under Sarah’s shirt up above the hair bands. His other hand glided gently across her almost bristly short hair. “I like it. Dark hair looks quite exotic on you. About this boy thing though, I prefer your figure as it is.”
“I see that from the boy thing in your jeans,” Sarah quipped as she rubbed her hips against him and began to remove his shirt. There wasn’t much need for English or Urdu for a while.

After an urgent but quite spectacular round of sex, Reggie found himself lying naked on the bed with Sarah asleep, mostly naked, mostly on top of him. Normally, he was not the sort of guy who would object to that, but it occurred to him that Joe might eventually want to use the inside cabin. Besides, now that one sort of passion was temporarily sated, his curiosity was rising with its own passion.
He stroked Sarah’s newly shorn hair, enjoying the sensation, and also hoping it was a fair way to wake his light-sleeping girlfriend.
She stretched on top of him and said, “I guess a good night’s sleep would be too much to ask?”
“Naked in the cabin of Joe the smuggler’s ship?”
“If you’re going to say things like that, use Urdu,” she said in Urdu.
“I don’t have the vocabulary. Besides if he was going to listen in, I’m sure he found the previous segment much more interesting.”
“Little you know.”
“So tell me.”
“You sure you’re ready?” She slid next to him, still in full contact, and gazed at him with chillingly cold eyes. “Careful what you say.”
His shirt, from the floor, floated over to him. Then his jeans and the money belt he’d worn under them. Finally, his underwear did a little jig through the air. Aside from being impossible, it was pretty impressive. Words, especially in Urdu, deserted him.
Sarah rested her head against his shoulder and waited a while in silence. Then she asked in a shaky voice, “So, are you okay with this?”
“The woman I love, just let me in on the secret of the century, and you wonder if I’m okay with this? More than worth fleeing the country, can you do that again?”
Sarah stretched her arm into the air and her own clothes flew to her in a ball. Reggie kissed her, and she smiled back. But her sigh as she smiled was more than half sadness. So much for enjoying the moment.
“Why don’t we get dressed, and I’ll tell you a little more,” she said.
Once they’d cleaned up a bit and put themselves together, Sarah sat down solemnly on the bed. She hadn’t managed to tuck the blanket back to military perfection, but the wrinkles around where she sat obscured the fact. Reggie perched himself facing her, ready to hear what came next. He took her hands and waited.
In painfully careful Urdu she said, “There are other people who can do what I do, but not many. They can also hear thoughts. There are even more people who can hear thoughts but not move things. Some of the people looking for us may be able to hear thoughts. For some reason, they can’t hear mine. But they can hear most people’s. They can probably hear yours. That’s why it was so bad for me to tell you.”
Repeating in English Reggie said, “Maybe you shouldn’t have told me, for your sake. As for me, so what if it puts my life at risk? That’s what life’s for.” He smiled and squeezed her hands. He felt ten feet tall and strong enough to protect them both. To his great pleasure, he saw his joy spread to Sarah. Soon she was sitting on his lap as they whispered into each other’s ears, covering recent events far better than they could with any other form of language.
“But why’s it secret, and how could it be kept secret so long?” Reggie whispered as his mind started racing toward a plan.
“I don’t know. I guess the governments want it that way.”
“Okay. But what if we go public? If we put this out into the technosphere, a new movement would coalesce, a network to fight whatever secretly exists already. You’re concrete evidence, and I have the connections.”
Sarah didn’t move at all for many seconds. With her face by his ear, Reggie couldn’t tell if she was just thinking or about to pull away. “There’s so much we don’t know. It might start a war, a holocaust. I can’t risk something like that just for myself. Promise me you won’t?”
Sarah’s fingers ran down his back in what could be a clawless version of long, deep scratches. Reggie didn’t want to promise, but knew he should drop the suggestion for now. He could think about details while Sarah got used to the possibility. And he could get used to having a telekinetic girlfriend.
Reggie was just wondering if Sarah could remove clothing telekinetically when she said, “Maybe we should check with Joe about how he wants to handle dinner. He told me not to worry about food.”
Reggie had been lying awake in the dark for a long time. Sarah was asleep beside him, buried completely beneath the covers. Joe was up above steering. He said these were the hours he liked to keep and he was used to making this run alone.
Reggie didn’t trust Joe. He wasn’t quite sure what to do about Sarah. She’d told him the events of the last month involving the Chens, her relatives, and the people from the CDC. He hadn’t even
suspected. The part about telekinesis seemed fair, in a way; he just couldn’t question a choice like that. But while visiting the Chens was part of the same secret, he felt a little betrayed, like she’d been sneaking around, and he wasn’t ready to assume her relatives’ government connections were the only larger powers in play. The Chens could have other allegiances. He even suspected Sarah a bit. She hadn’t told him where they were going once they reached Belize or anything about future plans. Reggie wanted to know. What if they were separated? What if she’d overlooked something? But he swallowed his pride and resolved not to ask.

Anything he knew could be used against them. He’d decided to use their travelling time to practice thinking in Urdu or maybe Hindi. The effort might be enough to keep his mind away from dangerous subjects or at least broadcasting gibberish to any mind readers that happened along. Sarah believed telepaths had to be in shouting distance to hear someone, and even then they only caught the clearer thoughts, and only if they knew the language.

The boat began to slow. Given the time and the calmness of the waters, Reggie guessed they were preparing to dock. He snuggled down under the covers to wake Sarah with a kiss on the neck. She woke instantly, grabbed his neck, and held him tight. They both felt the boat stop, and without words she released him. Reggie turned on the lights as they put on shoes. Sarah adjusted her clothing to her boyish disguise. As a boy she looked no more than seventeen, a full decade younger than Reggie. He wondered what people would think seeing them together. She pulled on a baseball cap without bothering to brush her hair, and Reggie did the same. Before they could go up on deck, they heard Joe’s boots coming down.

The smuggler came in with his jaw set further forward than the day before. He closed the door behind him, then leaned against it with his arms crossed.

“Look kids, I think there are a few things you didn’t tell me when we arranged this trip. I didn’t want to get tangled up in any trouble.”

Joe moved a hand to his jacket pocket. He pulled out a gun, not pointing it at them, just handling it and waiting.

Reggie wondered why anyone would pull a gun on someone who could move objects with her mind. But maybe Joe hadn’t thought it through. Maybe he’d used some spyhole to watch them last night and seen Sarah move their clothes across the room. Or maybe he was a telepath and had read the whole situation from Reggie’s thoughts. Maybe he already knew how to block telekinesis or knew he was strong enough to resist whatever Sarah could do.

Reggie felt terror and defiance crash through him. His muscles tightened, primitive man ready to attack or escape, but he didn’t know what to do. Beside him Sarah stood frozen, mouth slightly open, hands clenched tight on the hem of her shirt.

“So, you don’t deny it then.” Joe seemed to be focusing on Sarah now, the gun held loosely in his hand, pointed vaguely in her direction. “You’re obviously running from someone, dressing as a boy, rushing to meet a friend you weren’t sure would show up, eager to reach Belize right away. Somehow I don’t think you’re planning to check in with immigrations either. Now, I’m not a man who’s averse to a little risk, but I expect to be compensated. You make me an offer I can’t refuse, and we’ll both be on our ways.”

He didn’t know. This was just a regular scam. Joe had probably smuggled passengers across before and given them the same spiel. But he couldn’t afford any real trouble if Sarah was right and he was here to pick up illegal exports.

Reggie began to imagine telekinetic revenge. Sarah could turn the gun on its owner while they made their way out. Or she could leave him tied and gagged in his own bed sheets. Of course, either of those actions would probably put anyone looking for them back on their trail. Maybe she should just make a crack in the hull and let the boat sink.

“I’m sorry if I didn’t tell you the whole truth,” Sarah said, the picture of sincerity and innocence. “But we really are archeology students, and if certain people don’t want us to be together, then they’re just jealous and cruel and don’t understand. But still, if you want I can give you a hundred dollars extra, to make up for not telling you.”

“A hundred bucks won’t cover it.”
“We don’t have much more. Reggie’s pack got stolen. Look I’ll give you all I’ve got.” Sarah pulled folded American money from her front pocket and began to count. Reggie would have thought she’d been taken in, if he hadn’t known she had more money hidden with some papers inside her pants.

“Here, it’s the rest of what I owe you plus two-hundred and twenty dollars. Take it, and maybe we can do you some other kind of favor someday.”

Sarah was holding out the money, and for a minute it looked like Joe wouldn’t accept. Was he really planning to shoot them in the cabin of his own boat?

But the tough guy shrugged, took the money, and said, “Get going.” Sarah and Reggie, hurried past him, up the stairs and onto the dock.

By Reggie’s watch it was four o’clock. The sun wasn’t up yet. The sign saying “Dagriga Port” was not lit, and the town seemed mostly asleep. Reggie had never been to Belize, though he knew Sarah had. He followed her toward what seemed to be the main thoroughfare. The buildings there were more sturdily built, though they still had the weathered, rickety look common to poorer places near an ocean. Moss grew between roof shingles and peeling paint completed the fuzzy motif on the windward side of many buildings. As the scent of the sea lost out to the stench of decaying fish, Reggie’s mind chugged through more Urdu to whisper, “It would serve him right if his boat had a leak now.”

“Oh really, you’re offended by his bribery after all we saw in India? Let him have the money. It might lessen my guilt if any other trouble comes his way. I have no idea what risk we’ve put him at.”

Reggie wanted to argue but instead looked around the dark street and mentally described the fern-like trees with bursting red flowers as well as he could, in Urdu.

Chapter 8
April 11 - 12, 2025 – St. Ignacio, Belize

Sarah woke the next morning warm and safe, curled up against Reggie who was still asleep. His realness resonated through her body, even her dreams while sleeping. She shouldn’t have gotten him involved. It made life much more dangerous for them both. The problem was, she couldn’t stand to leave him behind.

As Sarah slid into her stew of self-doubt and moral angst, she slid altogether away from sleep. The bed that had seemed a refuge last night, now pressed at her with every spring and cut into her skin with wrinkled sheets. Carefully she slid from under Reggie’s arm. It was amazing how soundly he slept. She pulled on clothes and sneakers and quietly snuck out the door.

Outside it was full daylight. Their little cabin was one of eight surrounding a clearing at the edge of the rainforest. Sarah could smell polenta cooking by the open-air dining hall. Diana and Ken Piper provided their guests with three heartening vegetarian meals a day. They were American ex-pats who had come to Belize on the back to nature wagon thirty years ago and found their niche running a rainforest guesthouse and spiritual healing center.

Sarah had met them just after high school, the first time she went looking for herself in faraway places. She’d drifted to the guesthouse with a gypsy skirt, a scarf around her hair, and a request to work for room and board. The Pipers, who probably hadn’t needed her help at all, took her into their home. They told her how they met in a teepee at Burning Man, morphed into respectable civil servants, then ran away to Belize to reinvent themselves again. Sarah told them how she’d given up gymnastics, dumped her mother’s liquor, and run away from home. They listened, told stories, and shared their favorite music. When college started in the fall, Sarah was there, stable enough to pass her classes and to find a job coaching kids’ gymnastics.

The Piper’s never knew her biggest secrets, but when she needed a safe place to hide, they came instantly to mind. This time she could even pay. The rates were low now that Belize wasn’t the trampers’ fad of the year.
Sarah stretched briefly, leaning down along each leg, pulling each foot up behind her. She needed to run and let her mind shake out. The meditation trails through the shaggy forest were just the place for a jog in morning dew. Vines dripped above her like swimsuits in a bathtub. Instead of chlorine she smelled algae and mud as rich as meat.

Remembering old lessons, Sarah dodged beneath low tree branches. She frenetically avoided any limb that might shake a tree where a Tommy Goth snake could lie contracted. Though she’d never seen one, as a troubled teen she’d been fascinated by the idea of these clever reptiles that held their snaky muscles tight until some large beast fumbled by below. Then the Tommy Goth would suddenly extend, propelling itself off the branch like a spring suddenly released. Having landed on its victim, the snake was, of course, poisonous.

As she made the river at top speed, Sarah felt clearer. Memories of the previous day’s bus rides and hiking had melted into images of a beautiful night with Reggie, which then distilled into two questions. One was what she should do with her freedom now that she seemed to have it. The other was: where might she and Reggie be safe? It would have to be someplace remote enough that no telepath would stumble across Reggie, someplace obscure enough that the government wouldn’t find her. It wouldn’t hurt if they had some way to earn money or take care of themselves besides. Pictures of primitive British fishing islands came to mind, but Sarah suspected she and Reggie wouldn’t fit in, besides Britain had strong ties to the U.S.

As if she’d been struck by a Tommy Goth snake, Sarah froze in the middle of the trail. Standing before her, dressed in a red silk shirt and black leather pants, was a young Chinese man. He leaned nonchalantly against a tree of love, a parasitic plant that smothered its host. In his left hand he held Reggie’s stolen backpack.

“Sarah Duncan, at last, so nice of you to arrange this meeting.”

“Shit.”

“No, but you can call me Tom. And before you get too panicked, your government didn’t send me.”

Sarah tried to catch her breath and restructure her thinking. Part of her was still definitely panicked, but there was something oddly captivating about this Tom person. His eyes were deep, steady, surrounded by dark lashes. As he slouched against the tree the muscles of his arms and even some under his shirt seemed flexed for show. The bangs curving over his forehead had been styled with gel. Men like him only showed up on jungle paths in perfume ads and pornography.

“I guess you’d like an explanation.” He spoke clearly but with a noticeable Asian accent she couldn’t place. “I took Reggie’s bag, because the U.S. government had tagged it. I placed devices of my own on his shirt and trousers; so I could meet up with you later. Then I escorted the bag up the coast, carefully removed all foreign devices, and deposited them in the ocean, well away from where you two departed. I checked your trajectory, saw it confirmed my initial predictions, and caught a plane to Belize City, where I rented a jeep. I would have contacted you last night, except that you were constantly with Reggie, who already knows far too much and has no need to be broadcasting information about me.”

“Do you think you’re the only one who’s found us?”

“The American’s trust far too much in technology. After placing their transmitters during the customs inspection, I don’t think they had anyone keeping a visual watch. I doubt they’ll even trace you to Belize. Of course, any thoughtful person would check your electronic spending history and realize you’ve previously traveled in Belize and would be likely to feel comfortable here. But frankly, most agents are dull cogs who never try to do anything innovative and probably wouldn’t be allowed to follow up anyway.”

“Were you the one following our taxi?”

“What taxi?”

“Before the bus in Belize. Our taxi driver thought we were being followed. He did his best to lose them.”

“What nationality? What kind of car?”

“I don’t know. It had dark windows.”

“Not the U.S., I’m sure. And I don’t think the Chinese are out here. So either your driver was
mistaken, or there’s another player. Interesting possibility. But satellite pictures show no one following your bus except me, and they won’t be able to tell the transmitter was in the pack I took. Even if they thought to check satellite pictures of your boat trip, they’d probably lose track of you in the dark hours when you disembarked. No, I think this is as safe a place as we can get until Reggie learns to be quiet.”

“He can learn that?”

“If I’m going to deal with you, I think I’d better teach him.”

“Why are you doing this?”

Tom’s face lit up. He cocked his head a bit to the side and flourished his hand like a model on a game show. “Your prize, should you choose to accept it, is an all expense paid trip to Bangkok, where you would be welcomed as a political refugee escaping persecution for mental differences. In our enlightened domain, we do not believe in conscripting teeps or teeks, although several employment options are available. We’d be satisfied just to keep you out of the hands of the competition.”

“You work for the Thai government?”

“Not officially, but yes. Though I am supposed to be on vacation at the moment. I just happened to be the lucky telepath in Jamaica when the U.S. let slip Reggie’s flight choice.”

“I’d have to discuss it with Reggie.”

“Only after I train him. But I’d rather he didn’t even see me until he agrees to close his mind. Tell him it would probably mean a couple days with me listening to his every spilled thought and slapping his hand until he learns to shut up.”

“That’s really how you do it?”

“You’d rather I use electrodes?”

“Can anyone learn this? Why wouldn’t he want to?”

“Only a telekinetic without telepathy could ask that, which makes you unique. You’d be surprised how much people hate mind readers. The training only works because it’s so unpleasant.”

“I’ll ask him and then come back.”

“No need. I’ll know. If all goes well, leave the back window of your cabin open while you’re at breakfast, and I’ll sneak in. Bringing back some food for me would be a nice gesture. If Reggie says no, I’m sure you’ll both be leaving right away. You’re not stupid, are you?”

After breakfast, Sarah and Reggie approached the cabin slowly. They had muffins and fruit for Tom, and Diana had agreed to pack a lunch they would supposedly take hiking, which they could pick up in half an hour.

Sure enough, when they opened their door, Tom was sprawled out across their bed. Spread out in front of him were the contents of Reggie’s pack. Reggie tensed up immediately.

“Oh really, Reggie, I’d already gone through it for transmitters. And yes, your thoughts are coming out loud and clear. You’re so easy when you’re annoyed.”

Tom stretched the last words and flicked his eyelashes in a dramatic manner. He drew himself from the bed with catlike hauteur and sauntered over to Reggie. Sarah thought Tom was much too large of a presence to be contained inside their room. Despite his stylish clothes, the spy fit better in the rain forest.

“Hold out your hand,” he said to Reggie. Reggie held out his right hand and Tom slapped it with quick, stinging precision. Reggie managed not to pull it back, but Sarah saw the muscles in his face tighten.

Then Tom smiled and warmly shook Reggie’s hand, gently covering the top of it with his left for a moment, as if to ease the sting of his own slap. “I’m Tom. Pleased to meet you.”

“This will really work? Permanently?” Reggie asked.

“I haven’t seen it fail yet. No one likes having their mind read.”

Slap.

“And yes, I’m gay, too.”

Slap.
“Poor liberal California guy. I know your type. I attended Berkeley, you know? I think you’ll learn very fast.”

Slap.

“A stereotype? I’m just doing my part to uphold Thailand’s reputation for something more interesting than biotech. More fun too.”

Half an hour later, Reggie showed marked improvement, or at least he was getting slapped less.

Sarah, however, was about to explode. Tom was deliberately provoking and insulting her boyfriend, presumably as part of the training. But Tom did it all in such a smooth and seductive manner, it was easy to believe he enjoyed his work. Reggie showed no objection to being slapped, but Sarah’s brain was wild with instincts to defend him or escape or do something. So she excused herself to fetch the lunch Diana had promised to pack. The heat outside and the fragrance of rosemary growing in the kitchen window box assured Sarah she’d just left the twilight zone. Stepping into the kitchen was like returning to her right mind.

“You okay, dear?” Diana asked as she opened the refrigerator.

“More than. Your kitchen is a magical place.”

“All good kitchens are. But really now, you look . . . distressed.”

“Compared to when I was a teenager?”

“No, no. Never that again.” Diana laughed and set a bag of food on the table next to Sarah. At a glance, it was clear they would not go hungry. It was also clear the older woman was inviting Sarah to talk, but wouldn’t press.

Sarah reached out to clasp Diana’s arm. “You’re ready to step right in and mother me again, aren’t you? No wonder I came back to this place. But really, all I need is a few quite days. It’s so good just to be here again.”

Diana gave her a quick hug, and Sarah carried the food back to the cabin.

She opened the door to find two grown men wrestling on the floor like boys. Tom’s right hand immobilized Reggie’s left at the wrist. Reggie was half on top of Tom swiping ineffectually with his other hand. Tom was blocking and trying to grab, but he didn’t seem to be attacking. In the instant when Reggie looked up toward the door, Tom pushed straight up and flipped them both over, landing himself on top and managing to pin Reggie’s right arm to the floor. The position was quite sexually suggestive, and Sarah was very glad that her thoughts couldn’t be read.

“Bit noisy if we don’t want anyone to know Tom’s here,” she said.

Tom smiled and shook back his hair like the alpha lion. “There are many roads to enlightenment.”

“He told me I could hit him back if I wanted to. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“Yes.” Slap. Tom managed to slap the right hand and re-pin the arm before Reggie moved. “Of course I’d know you were turned on without the thoughts. I’m lying right on top of you.”

Reggie blushed.

Sarah felt her face warm too, but inside she felt sympathetic pain for Reggie’s embarrassment. “You know, it’s bad enough for Reggie to have you hear his thoughts without you repeating them to me.”

“Bad enough, perhaps, but not nearly as good for conditioning.”

Sarah was ready to object again when Reggie said more quietly, “If he has to know, I’d rather you know too. I’ll stand accountable for my thoughts.” Then in a louder, less serious tone, he glared at Tom and said, “Speaking of standing . . .”

“Are you sure that’s what you want? We could bring her down here, too. I wouldn’t normally do a woman, even in a three-way, but I could make an exception for a teek.”

There was a pause then – Slap. “Such a dirty mind. He was imagining you could ~

“What is it with guys and teek sex fantasies? I don’t want to know, and I don’t want to try it. Now if you two would ~

“Guys? You say that like there were others.” Reggie turned his full attention to her, and Tom raised one eyebrow before easing himself off the floor.

Sarah thought back to Howard’s casual insinuations the day she was discovered as a teek. She
remembered his lack of action when she escaped from the CDC car.

“Tom, was the U.S. looking for anyone other than me?”

“A few drug lords, some terrorists, and Elvis. Did you have anyone particular in mind?”

“Do you know about others collected at the same time they tried to get me?”

“No, were you part of a group?”

Sarah wondered how much to tell. She ran away to avoid becoming a spy, well, actually to avoid becoming a slave. Perhaps some exchange of information was not only fair but useful. “I met a family of telepaths a few weeks back. I don’t think they want to work for the government either. Is there any way Thailand could help them?”

“If they show up and request refugee status for mental differences, they’ll get it. But we can’t recruit people within U.S. territory. Even I’m not that cocky.”

Slap. “Pun on cocky,” Tom said to Sarah.

“Oh, the humiliation of having lines I choose not to use heard anyway,” Reggie gave Sarah his best little boy frown.

At bedtime, Tom made it clear that he intended to sleep close enough to slap Reggie if his thoughts leaked out during dreams. Not that any thoughts had leaked in hours. Tom had grudgingly admitted that Reggie was a fast learner, at least in conjunction with the right teacher. This didn’t stop him from making a play to climb in bed with Sarah and Reggie.

Sarah was exhausted after a day caged in with Tom. He was like a puma: beautiful, strong, and not something she wanted to sleep with. Given the bits of Reggie’s thoughts that had been repeated aloud, it seemed he felt the same. Sarah wasn’t surprised that Reggie also found Tom attractive. Some people just had that kind of charisma, and anyone who wasn’t totally repressed would respond. But she wondered how Reggie really felt after having someone like that read his thoughts. She would have liked some time alone with her boyfriend, to snuggle close and stroke his ego. Instead, they pushed the smallish couch from across the room up next to the double camp bed, gave Tom a blanket and pillow, and tried to go to sleep.

After several rounds of someone shifting position and then the other two rustling around in sympathetic discomfort, Reggie said, “Should we just play cards or something?”

“You have any cards?” Tom asked.

“You have a better ideas? Never mind,” Reggie sighed.

“At least I’m only hearing you speak.”

“Do you prefer that?”

“Other than being able to mimic perfect sexual intuition, hearing people’s random thoughts is mostly annoying.”

Sarah inferred traces of deeper emotion, though Tom’s face was a shadow in the moonlight. It was strange how people opened up in near darkness. “Did you know about telepaths when you were a kid, Tom, before you could hear people’s thoughts?”

“My parents were both teeps. They waited until I was old enough to keep the secret and then told me the same day we had the whole talk about puberty. Completely overshadowed my concerns about being gay.”

“Did they work for the Thai government, too?” Reggie asked.

“A bit. My grandparents emigrated from China and were all high and mighty about independence and family honor. But my parents and I grew up in Bangkok. We’re less idealistic. And better paid.”

“Is it only China, the U.S., and Thailand using telepaths as spies and such?”

“Oh no, but they’re the three main players. Some of it’s genetic. Most telepaths are of Chinese descent, though there may be a separate line in the U.S.. It’s unclear.”

“Hmm. I’m such a mongrel it would be hard to know,” Sarah offered.

“Were your parents telekinetic?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know much about my dad, but my mom certainly never let on.” She didn’t feel obliged to mention her other relatives yet.

“So how did you discover it?”
Now it wasn’t a matter of protecting others. These were her own secrets she wanted to lie for. A stab of alienation pierced Sarah’s chest. “I was just looking at something, and it moved. So I tried it again, and again, until I believed it.”

“Did you tell anyone?”
“No, not until I met those telepaths a few weeks ago.”
“No one?”
“I can’t explain it. I just knew it would cause trouble.”
“Well now you have an audience. With all I’ve gone through for you, don’t I deserve some kind of demonstration? What’s your best trick? Can you ruffle my hair? Run an illusory hand down my back?”
“I can thread a needle in mid-air.”
“No needle, and it’s dark. Come on. It doesn’t have to be sex, but something personal.”

Sarah tensed with discomfort, but decided they really did owe Tom a lot. Streaks of moonlight around the curtains were enough to show Tom lying on his side, head propped up by an elbow. His black hair glistened, and she mentally smoothed it back as if she were petting a cat.

There was a moment of silence.

“Wow, that gives me goose bumps even knowing what you are.”

Sarah felt a cold lump in her stomach. She expected Reggie to ask what she’d done, but he didn’t. She wondered if he felt left out. But if she reached out to him that way, wouldn’t it seem secondary? Besides, if it startled him into thoughts that Tom could hear, he’d feel doubly indignant.

“So what’s your hang-up about sex anyway?” Tom asked. “You both seem pretty sporting. Is it about threesomes, homophobia, me?”

Reggie answered, “Contrary to popular beliefs, being open-minded does not require open-relationships.”

“Your control is really good now. Earlier in the day, your thoughts would have screamed at that.”

Sarah was glad her thoughts only screamed in her head. She’d just realized that telekinesis was very much like sex to her. She wanted to keep it private, choose when to share it, trust who she shared it with. But should she feel that way?

She asked, “Don’t you think it’s part of human nature to feel sort of ashamed of anything we keep secret?”

“I’m not ashamed of anything,” Tom drawled theatrically.

“I don’t mean really ashamed. Just having some little corner of yourself that feels something must be bad or else you wouldn’t have to hide it.”

“Is this about being a teek? Do you have any idea how lucky you are? I can’t tell you any numbers, but teeks are rare. So rare I’ve never managed to bed one, and believe me, that’s saying something.”

Sarah shook her head in frustration. “That doesn’t change the feeling.”

“I could help you work through those feelings, no slapping involved, unless you’re into that.”

Somehow, by voice alone, Tom could make that line sound like a come-on. Sarah wondered if he was really that focused on sex or just didn’t want to deal with other issues. Either way, she didn’t want to deal with him right now.

“Not tonight. I have a headache.”

With that, the three of them settled down to try to sleep. After a moment, Sarah felt Reggie reach out a hand to rest on her side. If Tom hadn’t been in the room, she would have scrambled to Reggie for comfort and whatever came next. As it was, she felt her bad feelings drain away through the warmth of his touch. She slid her hand on top of his. What if she had been telepathic and able to hear people’s thoughts all these years? Could she enjoy that touch so well? Could she believe in Reggie or anyone the way she did? Or was she just trying to rationalize about not being a telepath? And how would all the non-telekinetic non-telepaths feel if they knew what they had missed?

The next morning they were all up early. Sun beating through the windows promised a hot day ahead. Each of them washed and dressed without much conversation.

As Sarah combed her hair Tom told Reggie, “I think you’re done. Nothing came out of your mind.
while you slept. Bit fast, but some people are like that.”
“So now we go to Thailand?” asked Reggie.
“Sure,” said Tom.
“No,” said Sarah. Both men looked at her. “I have to go back to the states and tell the telepaths captured with me that they have a choice.”
Reggie glared at her and half turned his palms up. She guessed he was flashing back to his plan for going public, but now that his mind was unreadable, that hardly seemed necessary.
Tom cocked his head, raised an eyebrow, and asked, “How?”
“I’m thinking I’ll turn myself in on the condition that they let me meet with all my friends to ask if they’ve been treated well.”
“And you’ll believe what your friends say?”
“No, I’ll ask if they want to escape with me.”
“How will you ask privately if you don’t have telepathy?”
“I solved that problem yesterday while you two were busy. Did you ever write notes on your arm?”
Sarah displayed the underside of her arm where the skin was pale and almost paper white. By imagining little lines of suction on her skin, she brought up red letters saying, “Want to escape?”
Tom’s head pulled back, but his eyes stared intently. “And your plan for escaping, with or without your friends?”
“I’ll think of something. Any useful suggestions?”
“Suggestions? You’re talking about letting them catch you, breaking out of an area they control, maybe flying out of a U.S. airport? You don’t need suggestions, you need therapy.”
“Yesterday morning, I had little hope for myself, let alone my friends. Now, I have hope, and I have debts to pay. I realize I owe you too, but you said you’d be happy for anyone taken away from the other side. And you can take Reggie with you; so you know I’ll do my best to get out.”
“I may not have any . . . powers,” Reggie cut in, “But I’m going with you, not with him.”
“It’s not safe—“
“If I wanted to be safe, I would have stayed in the states to begin with. You’re the one who invited me on this adventure.”
“I could show you adventure,” Tom said, with a melodramatic flick of his wrist, “Besides, you’re still just a liability, even if you’ve closed your mind. They can threaten you to keep her in check.”
Sarah’s mouth fell open, “Ick.”
“I will never be ‘just a liability.’ I’m an innovator. I find ways to make things happen. If Sarah feels strongly about this, then I’ll help her find the means to deal or a way to work without those means.”
“If you tried to escape and take others with you that could be called treason,” Tom leaned against the wall, unusually still. “We’re not just people, you know. Were assets, state secrets.”
“You really want this, Sarah?” Reggie asked.
“Yes.”
“Fine, then I’m coming with you. Tom, thanks for your help. We’ll try to make it worth your while. Here are the two devices you left on my clothes in Jamaica.” Reggie pulled two small black burs from his pocket and handed them to Tom.
Tom glanced at them and said, “Well, I’d better take the rest if you’re really going to hand yourselves in. They don’t need to know you contacted anyone.” Tom gently removed small devices from Sarah’s waistband, Reggie’s shirt pocket, and clothing in both of their packs. Sarah knew she should be annoyed, but the tenderness of Tom’s movements captivated her. She could only feel indebted to him.
“I’m really glad you found us, Tom. And we’ll do our best to get to Thailand. I’ve never been to Southeast Asia, and I want to see Chiang Mai and Ankor Wat.”
“Visit exotic Thailand,” Tom pressed his palms together mimicking a travel ad.
“You know that’s not what I meant.”
“I assume you’ll want to be someplace else before you call your government, a few hours at least?” Sarah nodded.
Tom gave her a quick kiss on the mouth before she had time to react. Then he flashed Reggie a coy
smile, looked up at him with big eyes, and kissed him on the mouth too. “Come to Bangkok, I’ll show you my town.” Then he opened the back window and with a fine show of muscles, hoisted himself out.

Chapter 9
April 11, 2025 – Geneva, Switzerland

James sat in the back of a large conference “glade” at the Hotel Geneva. The light was a bit bright and the acoustics carried coughs and chair creaks better than spoken language. He pushed his feet in small, simultaneous circles along the floor beneath his chair. The livegrass™ carpet was designed to be as even as traditional flooring, but James was sure he detected lumps. Maybe there was just enough give to let him notice differences in how he moved his feet. Either way, he wasn’t in favor of this fad for bringing the outside in. What about people who liked being inside? The luncheon speaker was an older French geneticist. He leaned against the wooden podium and wheezed a bit when he spoke. It was clear from his words that he hadn’t kept up with recent advances in the field. It was clear from his thoughts that he’d never lived up to his reputation and had “fixed” some of his data. James considered, not for the first time, how teep peer review might improve the level of academic discourse. But that wasn’t likely to happen, at least not on a large scale, any time soon.

Were there other teeps in this room? Were others listening as this esteemed researcher’s thoughts exposed his duplicity? James surveyed the anonymous suit jackets and long-sleeved shirts in front of him, the shoulders that slumped away a bit from the straight-backed chairs. He listened for thoughts from the man seated just in front of him until he caught a surprised, “Is that Jackson over there?” James skipped to the next mind, two chairs left and one row forward. There was a long silence before the words, “Expense it, maybe,” drifted past. The next man up emitted a mental muttering in German deriding the speaker that James understood just well enough to make it hard to ignore. But the mind nearest to the mutterer remained silent for quite a while.

From experience James knew about twenty percent of attendees at such a prestigious Swiss conference would have closed minds, much higher than population norms and almost certainly induced by teeps working with their governments. The U.S. and Thailand wove it into their security clearance protocols. It was easy to stage training sessions involving mild electric shock, supposedly to build resistance to interrogation or torture. Whatever the “trainee” thought was being trained, there was really just a telepath sitting in the next room applying shock whenever thoughts leaked. It worked eventually, even if the person seeking clearance had no idea what was going on. Heck of a job for a telepath though.

James gazed at the fuller rows toward the front of the room. A stray thought of, “Oh, heartburn,” reached him, but he was not inclined to focus person by person. There were a few familiar faces that he knew from past interactions would emit no thoughts. But there was no way to query about telepathy without exposing himself first, which of course he didn’t do, and neither did they.

That afternoon, James went to listen to Nigel Radford, his idealistic non-collaborator. He was prepared not to approach him, and he knew there was no way to follow up on the three near matches for telepathy. Still, he owed the postdoc some show of respect. The man was bright and probably deserved a fuller audience than he would get. Besides, James might pick up useful side information from either Radford’s words, if he knew nothing, or what he didn’t say, if he suspected. The talk was in one of the smaller conference rooms. The floor was solid, though the wallpaper was leafy. Radford was not there when James chose a seat.

An older, rounder man soon shuffled to the front of the room. “Good afternoon, I’m Dr. Philip Sanders. I’m here on behalf of my colleague, Dr. Radford, who was unable to attend.” Sanders mind was unnaturally silent for a man introducing himself before an audience. James
doubted this was a coincidence. Was Radford now forbidden from attending Swiss conferences? Was this just for associating with James, or had someone else identified the three predecessor samples he’d found? Had the Americans told the Brits something about the bipolar sequence that was also prominent in the sample?

James wondered if they would have checked Radford’s subjects independently, or if they’d only looked when someone realized James had British samples. If so, they might not have noticed the other new sequence shared by fifteen of their subjects. That might still be publishable in relation to schizophrenia. Or maybe it had other significance. Either way, the Brits and he were looking at the same data; he might still reach answers first. Checking around the room, he found no one who might barter samples with him. He ducked out into the hall.

In the poster area, where pine needles had been scattered across and authentic dirt floor, he found a Swiss scientist who wouldn’t negotiate but pointed him toward Dr. Heiss, a younger Swiss researcher currently studying schizophrenics. Heiss’ mind was open, not that unusual among the Swiss. Parts of their government, scientific establishment, and hotel administration clearly knew about telepathy. But the strongest Swiss research program seemed to be market research for conferences. The genetics were so new and so biased toward the U.S. and China, it was possible they didn’t have enough Swiss telepaths to silence minds of scientist, even those who might get scooped at the events their country hosted. Or maybe the Swiss thought illicit idea mining would attract generous attendees.

James remembered his lunch with Nigel, remembered it surprisingly well, but wasn’t eager to arrange such a collaboration with another open minded young scientist. However, he needed samples he could follow up on, in case he was on to something. Was the possible precursor sequence real and could it be found outside of Britain? His collaborator needn’t know his real objectives, and if the rest of the research leaked out, that was a fair price to pay.

“Dr. Heiss?” James asked as he approached the squat blond man. He was standing beside a protein holograph unfortunately placed just in front of a moving sheet of pseudo-waterfall. The protein appeared to ripple while the water appeared all but still.

“Yes?” The face that turned toward him bristled with almost transparent blond eyebrows and mustache. While James was flashing on toothbrush bristles, he heard Heiss’ thoughts compare him to a computer salesman, stiff, un-tailored shirt. . . He glanced at Heiss’ shirt, which had carved stone buttons and shades of pink and gray woven into the pale blue fabric, but if it was somehow more tailored than usual, James couldn’t tell the difference.

“James Morton,” he extended a hand without missing a beat, trying not to react to the ongoing critique of his apparel, “I don’t think we’ve met.”

They shook, and James heard the recognition of his name in the other man’s thoughts. That’s Morton? The Thai independent who sorted the first bipolar variants and developed that partially reproduced splice technique? I thought he’d be older.

Not high praise, but James felt confident they could reach an agreement, even if all Heiss said was, “I’ve seen your work.”

“Perhaps you saw my paper, or others, on the relationship between mood and immune system fluctuation in certain subsets of patients, especially those with psychotic symptoms?”

“Yes.” Get to the point.

James respected the directness of Heiss’ mind, “Well, I have a new idea for treating schizophrenic symptoms through an immune intervention partially refined in research on pseudomonas. However, I need a broader sample than my usual clinical population. I thought we might arrange a study with shared subjects.”

Logistically annoying, but this might help my replication of the neuroleptic cocktail results. “Interested?” James pushed.

“Perhaps.”

“Shall we get coffee and discuss logistics?”

James suppressed a smile as the other man nodded thinking, More like double protein mocha with
citrus and caffeine boosts, but what can you expect of someone who dresses like a computer salesman?

An hour later, James returned to his hotel room a satisfied man. He would have new samples, probably within two weeks. His major goal for the conference was accomplished. He opened his suitcase and began to reach in before he saw the note. It must have pushed to the side across the moss-sculpted carpet as he opened the door. It said:

1T33K000 lost. May be unusual variant. May relate to your work.

James looked at the message in bafflement. Part of the meaning was painfully clear. Anyone could get “one teek lost” from the first sentence, otherwise the marker was gibberish. He tried to guess more precisely what was meant. If the messages referred to the U.S., and the U.S. had lost a teek, did that mean the person died, defected, or disappeared? An unusual variant probably referred to genetics, but could refer to politics. If his “work” meant studying teeks and teeps, then the third sentence was redundant. Could the genetics Minerva wanted relate to telekinesis? Could the earlier Brandenburg thread mean the current teek came out of his father’s project? But there were no teek genetics included, not when he’d worked with them. And whoever was sending notes couldn’t know about the possible precursor sequence he’d found. At least, he hoped foreign spies weren’t that good. The thought that it all tied back to his father made James bury his head in the facts.

He pulled out his pilot and checked the two known teeks in his database. One had the bipolar correlate, one didn’t. He checked the new sequence he’d found in fifteen of Radford’s patients. The teek without the bipolar correlate had that one. Could there be two variants of telekinesis? And how might that relate to schizophrenia? Probably finding one sequence in each of his teeks was just chance, but how could he know without more data? Known teek samples were not something he could acquire by barter. The glow from his successful negotiations with Heiss was gone; acquiring schizophrenic samples no longer seemed good enough. What if the person sending notes thought James knew something about teeks, something that would explain the Minerva offer? What if the current note referred to work James wasn’t doing and couldn’t do for lack of data? Was the field he wanted to study leaving him behind because he didn’t want to play in others’ conspiracy?

James pushed in at his mock tree stump, hotel room desk, snagging the rolling chair in a rise of carpet moss. He shoved the chair through with a small tearing noise and brought up the security protocol to report his latest message to Alak. After drumming his fingers thumb to pinkie and back, he began to type.

April 12, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand

“What do you make of the new note?” James asked Alak as he entered the lab.
Alak nodded and brought his hands to his face, “Sawadikrap.”
“Greetings.” James motioned impatiently toward his desk. He didn’t want to sit there. Too many piles of papers cluttered the top, but he forced himself to wait calmly in the chair.
“May I see the note?”
James retrieved it from his pocket and held it before him, pinching the top corner with each hand.
“You’ve known the words since yesterday. Is there anything you can tell me?”
“There was a teek who fled south from the U.S. last week.”
“And you already knew?
Alak gave a measured nod and reached forward for the paper. James gave it politely, and pinched each set of finger to his desk instead.
“But how does he relate to me? And why this note?”
“She. The rest is less clear.”
“Less?”
“We don’t know.”
“But you will tell me?”
Alak rose and bowed slightly in parting. James pushed up from the cluttered desk, not wanting to show his full agitation. “It might help my work if I knew. I might find more to tell you.”
Alak showed no reaction as he left.
James wanted to throw something, but settled for aggressively reorganizing his workspace.

Chapter 10
April 12, 2025 – Tikal, Guatemala

Reggie bought sodas from a ten-year-old boy who lounged against his plastic cooler in the heart of the rain forest. The kid took his American dollars with a wicked capitalist grin. Tikal was a tourist trap. There were postcards of every Mayan pyramid from every angle, every carving from every angle, every open vista from every angle. Still, it was several hours drive from any luxury hotel, and not a cheap fare from any reasonable lodgings either. So there were more of the young and glorious people and fewer of the bored and tired set. There were still hundreds of Japanese with the latest computer-stabilized, special-effects-enhanced video recorders and plenty of other sightseers, using their phones to take pictures, being shepherded around by local tour guides. The Guatemalan government may not know how to administer a country, but they knew enough about economics to require native guides for visitors to Tikal.

Reggie brought the sodas over to Sarah, and slid in beside her where she sat against a tree, watching for howler monkeys. The guide they’d been forced to pay had been happy enough to leave for his own siesta when he realized they were in no hurry to finish. Reggie was glad they had the time to themselves. Sarah was wearing the batik shirt he’d bought her, and he liked how it hung loose at her neck. He drank his too sweet soda and rubbed the cool can across his face. A slight breeze dried the moisture, but also caused him to breath in dust.

“We should call soon,” Sarah said.
“But there’s so much to see between here and California.”
“You said you wanted to see Xunantunich and Tikal.”
“I did, and weren’t they worth seeing? You’re just jaded because you’ve seen these parts before. But if we took the back roads through Mexico –”
“Sorry, did that last week. Besides, if the U.S. is really looking for me, they might follow my trail down.”

Reggie could smell her sweat and sunscreen. He imagined himself as a tracking dog, retracing her every move. “The worst that happens is they catch you before you turn yourself in.”
“But then they’ll be more careful. I can’t say I’ve chosen to help on the conditions I stay with you and see the Chens.”
“One more night. We’ll go out to the coast, rent ourselves a little grass hut at one of those fancy resorts, walk on the beach, maybe take a moonlit swim –”

“Reggie,” she shook her head and a streak of sunlight jumped side to side across her nose. “I don’t know what you paid the driver to bring us out here. I don’t know what he paid the border guards to let us through without checking papers. I don’t know what it would cost to get back out to the coast. But if you try to check into a resort like that you’re either going to have to show ID or spread a lot of cash. Either way, the CDC could show up before we had time to enjoy it. Let’s wait until we can vacation without worries.”

“Are you sure you want to go back?”
“I couldn’t stand myself if I didn’t.”
Reggie pulled Sarah close to him and held her against his chest despite the heat. Her hair smelled different. She hadn’t been able to pack her usual shampoo before leaving home. Her arms were bare and tan, the way they would have been two months later in the spring, but not now. She could move
objects with her mind, and he was surprisingly comfortable with that. They were making plans that involved spies and telepaths. Somehow, this was his Sarah, behaving just as he would have expected under the circumstances. It was also a Sarah he had never expected, pulling him into a world he had never imagined. Reggie tried to shake his self-directed advisor persona and stabilize in the supportive boyfriend role.

“Reggie, I hate to ask, but how much money do you have?”
“A couple thousand in cash, much more that I moved to international accounts.”
“I’ve never asked you for money.”
“I know, but I’d happily spend it on you.”
“No. But, maybe you’d consider several plane tickets to Thailand a good cause?”
“Of course. You want the account codes?”
Reggie couldn’t help but stroke Sarah’s hair and neck as they went over the account locations and passwords. He wanted to do more, but decided to wait.

“Should I borrow a cell phone?” he asked.
“You think you can?”
“No problem.”
“From someone they won’t bother? I’ll go through the toll free operator and tell CDC I borrowed the phone, but I bet they’ll check anyway.”
“I can handle it.”
Reggie helped Sarah up from the ground, and led her toward the central acropolis. He felt magnificent walking toward it, even if it was a tourist trap. They glanced around at the plentiful tourists braving the afternoon sun. First Reggie looked for easy going people, those who would lend him a cell phone. Then he studied their clothes to guess who was respectable but innocuous, least likely to be suspect when the government traced the phone. A picture perfect American family strolled into view.

“Excuse me, can we borrow your phone? We need to check on who’s picking us up, and ours don’t work here.”
“Yeah, sure. No problem.” With barely a glance to check Reggie’s respectability, the man pulled out his phone. “You got any idea where the stella of the rain god is?”
Reggie took the offered phone, a Worldtel 2025, not a bad choice for an American hoping to work with other cell standards abroad. His respect for the family rose a notch. As he handed the phone to Sarah he said, “The one with the missing nose? Let me show you. Your tour guide go on siesta, too?”
“Oh yeah, Sammy wore him out hours ago.”
Sammy, the man’s pre-teen son, was lecturing about the Mayan rain god, despite the fact no one was listening. The imagery was clear and concise as a comic book and occasionally made his mother wince. Reggie helped them find the stella while Sarah stood out of earshot using the phone.

“And the Mayans used blood sacrifice too.” Sammy pointed enthusiastically, “They found pictures of them cutting people’s throats on top of that pyramid, right there.”
Sammy’s mother turned away, and Reggie was glad to see Sarah returning.

“No one knows just how or why. But I think they knew blood was powerful. I mean, people lose too much of it, they die. So if you want to make your gods more powerful, of course you’d give them blood –“
“You could be a professor someday. You give a good lecture.” Reggie smiled at the boy, wondering if all children were like that.
Then to Sarah, “Is everything arranged?”
“Yeah,” she nodded to Sammy’s father, “Thanks for the phone.”
Returning it, Sarah showed the arm extension of a ballet dancer, and Reggie was eager to be off with her. They both thanked the man again. He would probably never know how close he’d come to international intrigue.
Then Reggie steered them toward the paths where they’d watched monkeys earlier. “How long do we have?”
“Two hours, back where our driver dropped us off.”
“Excellent.” Reggie glanced around to assure no one was watching, then swung Sarah over his shoulder and abducted her into the jungle. They had two hours free without worries that the CDC would hunt them down. Time for an unworried vacation.

There was no way to know if their escort was a telepath. Reggie hoped Tom had been right and his mind was now telepathy-proof. He tried to watch an in-flight movie, but none of the two hundred choices appealed to him. The news station was a fifteen-minute loop covering a London rally about toxoplasmosis inoculations and giving obsolete stock market figures. They’d been ushered through some back rooms in a Mexican airport where they and their belongings had been thoroughly searched, but now they were passengers on a normal, commercial flight to San Francisco. The man traveling with them, who looked like he should be wearing a suit, even if he wasn’t, had made it clear he didn’t wish to chat. Reggie usually talked to people on airplanes. When he flew alone, he’d talk to strangers, amused and amazed at what people would tell while traveling. But on this flight, he felt constrained from talking to anyone.

He studied the airline’s shopping magazine. It offered a vacation pet feeder that could adjust serving size based on the pet’s weight when it stepped up to the dish. There were UV-blocking umbrellas and mosquito repelling picnic blankets. Reggie wondered what happened to such items if no one bought them and how many of them might make useful donations to people in poorer parts of the world. He pictured an Ethiopian family using the picnic blanket and umbrella as they ate their plain rice. Then the pet feeder brought forth ghoulish pictures of automated human food aid. He was not amused.

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Being back in the U.S. was not reassuring as their escort delivered them to a tall government office building on a corner near downtown. The front desk called to the top floor, and someone from CDC was sent down. This nondescript man in a cheap suit nodded politely and took them all the way up and to the end of the hall, where he introduced Mr. Fred Delgado.

Delgado’s cramped, corner office stank of corn chips and old coffee. The desk and chairs could have been salvaged from any public building any time in the last century. Delgado himself was a heavyset bureaucrat, probably in his late fifties, who had one of the baggiest faces Reggie had ever seen. It was mesmerizing, the way bags of skin on the bureaucrat’s jowls swung back and forth as he spoke. Was this a statement against plastic surgery or deliberate sag enhancement? Perhaps the man raised bulldogs and idolized their appearance.

Thinking of dogs, Reggie imagined himself as Toto to Sarah’s Dorothy. From the way the bureaucrat focused on Sarah and ignored him, it was clear that in this place Reggie was considered less than human, or less than whatever. Another man might have been insulted, but Reggie fixated on Toto pulling back the wizard’s curtain.

“Do you know anything about your maternal grandfather?” Delgado was asking Sarah.
“I know my relatives have suspicions, but my Mother never said anything.”
“And she was cremated?”
“Yes.” Sarah slouched back in her seat. Mr. Delgado glanced at a paper on his desk.
“What about your father?”
“I suspect he’s not the person named on my birth certificate, but that’s all.”
“Was he a sperm donor?”
“What?” Sarah sat up like a student surprised by an interesting lesson.
“Did your mother ever use the name Molly Bernard?”
Sarah began to laugh. Reggie had the unpleasant feeling he’d missed a joke. The bureaucrat looked unamused as well.
“Sarah Bernard. That’s Sarah Bernhardt’s real name. My mom always said I was named after her. But what if I’d been a boy?”
Delgado stood and unlocked a battered file cabinet in the corner. He pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to Sarah with one thick, meaty hand.

“That’s her handwriting,” Sarah said, “Even her real birthdate, June 8, 1964. So do you know who my father was?”

“Either Chris Morton or his son, James. They ran Family Fertility Services until Chris died in ’08, and we took it over. They personally provided the sperm for over two thousand of their clients, a sort of private effort to bias the gene pool. Not a bad idea, although we’re much more efficient.”

“They were telepaths?”

Delgado nodded. “So you’ve got that on one side and at least half from your mother, but no telepathy?”

“Nope.”

“Well, we’re still trying to figure out telekinesis. We’ll get some blood samples and go from there. One other thing,” the bulldog looked at Reggie, “How did you close your mind?”

“Excuse me?” Reggie played Toto to a bulldog wizard.

“Don’t give me that innocent look. Before you left the states, your mind was as open as any. Now it’s not.”

“A little knowledge and a strong will?”

The big man scowled at Reggie as if he was an uppity lab rat. But he led them down the hall to a laboratory room without challenging the explanation.

The lab was bright and smelled strongly of ammonia. The money not spent on Delgado’s office had clearly been spent here. The walls were sectioned off with workstations and large, pristine machines, all currently unused. A computer near the center connected to a 3D-rendering device Reggie had seen demoed just last month. The floor shone.

“Watkins, I need full blood work-up and GPS on both of these.”

“Wait,” Sarah interrupted in the doorway. “Why Reggie? And when do I get to meet with the Chens?”

“Look, dear. You and your boyfriend both know highly classified information, which means you need security clearances. DNA check and GPS implant are standard. If we choose to count you as munitions, regs get even stricter. So don’t push your luck. You can meet with your friends as soon as you’re done here.”

Sarah looked panicked, but Reggie knew she planned to cooperate. The GPS part she’d been expecting. Then she looked at the med tech and cringed so hard her eyes shut.

“Oh, hi. Sorry ‘bout the car,” she stammered.

Watkins laughed. “It’s okay. I got some trouble for that. But then you eluded the whole government for two weeks. So I feel vindicated. Livens things up a bit.”

Turning to Reggie, he extended a hand. “Hi, I’m Matt Watkins.”

“Reggie Malone.”

“You hear how she trapped me in a car?”

“No.”

“Good. Then my reputation is safe. Hold out your arm.”

Watkins applied local anesthetic to Reggie’s and then Sarah’s left forearms. Next he took sample vials of blood from each.

“Okay. Anesthetic should be ready now. Who wants to be first in the machine?”

“What’s it do?” Sarah asked.

“You put your arm here.” He gestured at a smooth, white apparatus about the size of a bread maker with a cylindrical hole through the center. “I fasten it down. The top part lowers, a little laser cuts, GPS goes in, and I slap on a bandage. In a couple weeks, it looks like this.” Watkins showed them a scar on his arm less than a quarter centimeter long.

Sarah nodded. “I’ll go first.”

Reggie felt a brief stab of masculine pride, especially as Watkins waved Sarah to the machine with some exaggerated pomp, but he figured this was her game to play. She received her implant and let the teep take a blood sample without incident.
On his turn, Reggie tried to think stoic thoughts as the machine clamped on to immobilize his arm. There was a view screen so he could watch the laser incision, see the chip inserted. He felt a sharp pinch, then wondered if it was psychosomatic. When his arm was finally freed, it only hurt where the clamps had held him still. The incision site was numb, and merited just a standard size band-aid. Then Watkins took them back to Delgado who in turn took them past the lab to a conference room at the other end of the hall. He waved them in and shut the door.

Sarah’s face split with a nervous smile as she scanned the room. “Hi everyone, I hope I haven’t caused you too much trouble. This is Reggie. Reggie, this is Mei Mei Chen, her children, Lisa and Robert, and her nephew, Howard.”

Reggie said, “Hello,” as Mei Mei stood and glided over to clasp Sarah’s hands. She was like a mother bird, scooting across the nest, checking the plumage of a returning, wayward chick. Lisa and Robert tracked her with their eyes, the dutiful chicks left behind, but Howard leaned away. He was seated across the table from the others and his eyes were on Reggie as Mei Mei spoke to Sarah. “No, let me apologize. It was my idea to visit your relatives, my responsibility. I can’t believe you turned yourself in.”

Reggie wanted to dislike the Chen’s. Sarah’s ties to this family had been built behind his back and had dragged him into danger just when safety in Thailand beckoned. But Mei Mei with Sarah seemed maternal, maybe Sarah needed that, and Reggie couldn’t begrudge it. He focused himself as her vigilant sentinel as they sat around a long, rectangular table. Sarah chose a seat to the right of Howard, facing toward the only obvious video camera in the room. Reggie sat next to her, facing the Chens, but keeping a special eye on Howard, who leaned in toward the group now that Sarah was near.

“There’s no way I could live in this country, other than to turn myself in. There are probably few places in the world I could go. That’s a lot to give up.”

Sarah leaned forward with her right arm on the table, and Reggie could barely see the words picked out in red, on the underside, away from the camera. Want to escape?

Howard’s mouth fell open when he saw, not subtle, but at least he didn’t say anything. “Why did you want to meet with us?” Lisa asked.

Howard’s gaze was now fixed on Mei Mei. By the time Sarah said, “I wanted to know if you were safe,” none of the Chen’s seemed to be listening. Finally Mei Mei said, “Yes. Yes, it’s good of you to check on us.”

Sarah’s arm now sported different words. Leave country? Now?

“I’m glad to have a chance to meet you all,” Reggie said to cover the silence. “I’ve heard a lot about you, and I’m glad Sarah wasn’t pulled into this alone.”

“Yes, it’s better to work together,” Mei Mei said with a nod, and a glance at Sarah’s arm, which was now blank and which Mei Mei could never have read from her side of the table. Sarah took a deep breath and seemed to visibly shiver.

Howard, who had been rubbing his hands together on the table, said, “We’re with you now. Whatever happens. Is there more you wanted to ask us?”

Suddenly there were loud sirens in the hall. Sarah burst from her seat, and everyone followed her lead. “Stay together. That’s a fire alarm. We’ll need to take the stairs, quickly.”

Sarah pushed open the door of the conference room. Delgado was standing outside yelling orders down the hall. Sarah yelled above the sirens, “Is it a fire?”

At the same time she covered the few steps to the exit at the end of the hall and pulled open the door marked “stairs.”

“Yes, but don’t worry —“

“Are you crazy? We’re sixteen floors up! We’ve got to get out of here.” Sarah all but pushed her friends through the door as she spoke. Reggie hesitated, not willing to go without her. She moved to follow him out.

“Okay. I’ll come with you,” Delgado said. Then down the hall he shouted, “Evacuate! Everyone out!”

They all ran down the stairs. Sarah kept urging her group to hurry. Reggie kept beside her on the
steps, preventing Delgado from passing them, in case he wanted to. But he was huffing along behind, in worse shape than even Mrs. Chen and fumbling with his phone besides. Reggie chuckled at the idea of telepaths still being dependent on their phones. But Sarah had implied telepathy wasn’t much stronger than the human voice, just better directed sometimes. Reggie wondered what Sarah had done to set off the fire alarms, and how well she could target objects beyond her sight. He wanted to know more, soon, about what all these people could do. But for now, he might as well enjoy the ride.

Back in the moment, Reggie felt his legs pounding on the stairs. He realized he was smiling. Many other people had joined them from lower floors, fleeing downward. The new people entered looking worried, then caught momentum when they saw other people hurrying down. The ones coming in were all talking about the alarm and whether there was really a fire. It occurred to Reggie how silent the stairs had been for the first few floors. Were the telepaths talking amongst themselves? Presumably they knew enough to bluff Delgado.

By the time they reached ground, several people had come between Delgado and the rest of their group, but there was no telling who might be watching for them below. The bureaucrat had managed to call someone on his phone. People evacuating lower floors had reached ground level before them. So there was quite a bit of confusion, but not enough panic and chaos to hide them.

A security guard began to approach, and Sarah said, “Outside!” They made their way through the front doors as the security guard tripped over nothing. “Keep walking fast, but don’t run. Cross wherever the light is green.”

Outside it was refreshingly cold. Fog hung over the buildings, keeping the day gray, like a rainy day without the rain. As soon as they were across the street Sarah led them around the block, out of sight of the office building. Before they turned the corner, Reggie looked back and saw what must be smoke coming from the top floor. Down below, Delgado landed in front of the main glass doors. His head searched back and forth, jowls swinging. He looked every bit the faithful guard dog agitated by his failure. Reggie fled with the pride of the fox.

Sarah was opening the door to a minivan parked at a meter. “Any of you know San Francisco well?” Robert nodded.

“Aren’t you calm enough to drive?”

“Yeah.” Reggie thought Robert looked resigned more than calm, still the faithful chick, through a squat, muscular chick, bulky and strong beside his mother.

“Great. Everyone in.”

As the others took seats and Robert adjusted the driver’s side mirrors, Sarah pulled a map from the glove compartment. It was a San Francisco map, but she dropped it to the floor and pulled out one of California.

“Can you get to fifth and Market?” she asked Robert.

“Yes.”

“Okay. First, don’t panic, but I need to remove the GPS from your arm. It might hurt, but I can do it cleanly. All right? Hold out your arm.”

Robert held his arm, still as a raccoon before headlights. Sarah held his elbow in her left hand, his wrist in her right. What had been a mostly healed cut reopened and a tiny square, smaller than a sequin, floated out along with a tiny speck of blood.

Reggie wondered if she found it by sight or memory of the implant process. Akum’s razor kept him from speculating too long on x-ray visions, though the thought almost provoked a pun. He’d begun analogizing about the sense of touch in ghost limb syndrome as the GPS chip landed on the California map in Sarah’s lap. The cut pressed itself closed. Sarah used her right hand to pull off her bandage. In the air it ripped in half. The half with a bit of her own blood on it continued to float. The other half Sarah placed, by hand, over Robert’s cut.

“Okay, drive to Market.”

As the van began to move, Sarah glanced at her own uncovered cut and had the transmitter out and onto the map in a moment. She reapplied the remaining half of her bandage.
“Reggie, can you check in back for a first aid kit? Clean band-aids would be nice.”
As Reggie swung over the back seat to look, Sarah crouched down between Mei Mei and Lisa who were in captain’s chairs in the middle of the van. She set down the map and its contents then turned to Mei Mei.
“Your turn. You do want to go through with this, right?”
“Yes. We all wanted to leave. We just, we doubted you could arrange it.”
“Well, we’re not out of the country yet. By the way, if we make it onto a plane, I’ll need you to listen in on the pilot and others and warn me if they’ll betray us. I don’t know how far the government will go.”
Mei Mei let out a gasp of pain as the transmitter floated from her arm.
“It’s okay. I’m done. Any band-aids, Reggie?”
“Doesn’t look like it.”
“I’ll hold a tissue on it. It will be fine,” Mei Mei said, taking a tissue from her purse.
“If you want part of Reggie’s bandage, let me know. But I don’t think I can make it useful for more than two.”
“Ready, Lisa?”
“Are you going to tell us your plan? Where we’re going? Or don’t you trust us?”
“It’s not about trust. There just isn’t time. I’ll tell you when I’ve got these out, okay?”
Lisa extended her arm and looked away. Sarah continued until the remaining three transmitters were out.
“Pull into the next covered garage you see, Robert. It’s time to switch cars.”
As Robert found a garage and took a parking ticket, Sarah opened a covered metal commuter mug that was sitting in the front cup holder. Reggie could smell the old coffee at the bottom, and watched curiously from the back of the van as Sarah poured the bit of liquid into the cup holder then tore off the top of the California map and pushed it and its bloody contents into the cup.
“Howard,” She called out. “Can you do what I did to this car?”
“I can unlock anything with a switch for the locks, but I don’t know what you did to the ignition.”
“Okay. Get everyone loaded into the nearest car big enough, and I’ll show you how to jam the ignition.”
Reggie watched Howard nod acceptingly at the order as Robert parked next to another van. It rankled Reggie a little not to be Sarah’s lieutenant, even as he admired her ability to command. He paused beside her while the others switched vans. She was damp with sweat, despite the chill weather.
“Are you okay? Is what you’ve done physically hard or are you just nervous?”
“Nervous mostly. You?”
“It’s been surreal, but we can talk about that later.”
“Okay.” With that, the paper in the mug burst briefly into flame, charring the inside of the cup and its contents.
“That might not stop them from transmitting.”
“I’m just ruining the blood.”
“But they took samples from us already.”
Sarah gave him a pained look, and Reggie guessed where the fire at CDC had started. With the briefest of hugs, they moved to the other van.
In under ten seconds, Sarah showed Howard how to teek out the shaft where the key went in and jam the ignition on. He assured her he could do it himself next time. Then they drove out of the parking garage, paying for the time their new van had been there. It was just over an hour, so it probably wouldn’t be missed too soon. Reggie watched out of the back window, trying to see if they were being followed. He couldn’t tell in San Francisco traffic. When they reached Market with its dirty concrete buildings, sleazy stores, and sidewalk peddlers, Reggie could hear Sarah giving directions.
Soon they were in another underground garage. Sarah had run off somewhere, and Howard was selecting another van.
Once Howard opened the doors and rigged the ignition, there was nothing to do but wait until Sarah returned. At first Reggie appreciated the need for silence. Then he remembered the Chens could communicate with each other silently, and it was all he could do not to strain to hear or at least watch for clues.

Sarah took about ten minutes, and they were a long ten minutes. As soon as she was back, she told Robert to head for the San Francisco airport, which was actually a few miles south of San Francisco. She gave him a baseball hat out of the bag she now carried and told everyone else to sit on the floor. There wasn’t much room on the floor, but at least the suspension was smooth. The sounds of their own acceleration and noisier cars outside combined to paint a virtual window view in Reggie’s mind.

“Okay, we’re trying to get to Thailand. Once there we declare ourselves political refugees escaping persecution based on mental differences. They evidently have a law set up to cover people like us, and they know we might be coming. I’ve been assured we don’t have to work for the government; they’ll settle for us just not helping the Americans or anyone else.”

“Are you sure?” Lisa asked.

“I’m not sure of anything except that the U.S. wasn’t offering even a pretense of freedom.”

“How are we supposed to get to Thailand?” Howard asked.

Sarah pulled a business-sized envelope out of the bag. “I mailed these to myself from Mexico. That’s why we had to stop by the homeless shelter. They accept all sorts of mail for people who don’t have addresses. These are passports and papers for all the girls on the gymnastics team I coach. Coached. I don’t think the government knows I have them. So hopefully they won’t notice when I buy them six tickets to Bangkok. Mei Mei, you’re going to travel as Mrs. Melissa de Carr. She was our parent chaperone. Lisa can be your daughter Carrie. The guys can travel as Torie, Erika, and Erin. They’re the closest I’ve got to male names. I’ll be Laura. Try not to do anything that would make airport staff check your tickets. These are all girls between twelve and sixteen years of age, so we can’t afford any scrutiny.”

“But you’ll need a retina or palm scan to buy the tickets and pass airport security,” Howard whispered, seeming to anticipate the solution.

“We’ll choose palm scan. There’s a scan print on each of these papers. The technology isn’t very good, and I’ve fooled locks before. I’ll do it myself when I buy all the tickets. But at the machine by security you’ll each need to hold your hand just above the glass. I’ll stand right beside you and make the right palm print touch. I think I need to be looking at the print to do it; so the rest of you will have to try to block other people from seeing and make sure no one interrupts me.”

“No way.” Howard was staring at her with jealous wet eyes.

“No way, what?” Sarah asked.

“The way you removed the GPS things and now this. I can’t do anything like that.”

“Yeah, well, you can move a car and speak telepathically. Everyone’s got their strengths.”

Reggie realized Howard either hadn’t caught the fire tricks or wasn’t questioning them. Then he noticed how Howard was looking at Sarah, a little too sincerely impressed. Was this guy after his girlfriend? Reggie’s mind was flooded with images of Howard and Sarah as lovers using their telekinesis in place of another hand, or whatever. He imagined how they could flirt with each other from across a room. Had they tried it? Or was Sarah really put off by the idea? Reggie didn’t think Sarah would have cheated on him, even when she’d kept the whole teek thing secret. But he could understand the temptation, and the idea nagged at him. He realized Sarah was talking again.

“. . . I don’t know how useful they are. They collect these clothes for homeless people to wear to job interviews. I don’t really imagine they’ll have people looking for us by clothing, and we don’t want to stand out as strangely dressed. But look through.” Sarah pushed the bag of clothes to Howard.

“I have some clips and pins here. I can arrange my hair and Lisa’s up off our necks. That’s a little different,” Mei Mei said, “No time to cut it like yours.” Her tone was not entirely flattering to Sarah’s hair, but Reggie imagined Sarah’s long hair sticking straight out then being cut, invisibly and simultaneously all around, with the extra pieces depositing themselves in the trash. Reggie thought the results were impressive.

“Most of this stuff looks weird. But we can walk in separate groups at least. Me and Robert, Mom
and Lisa, you and Reggie.” Howard seemed to have himself under control again. “They may still be watching for Reggie and me from last week. Anyone have make up or hair gel?”

As the rest shook their heads, Reggie shimmied under the rear seat. Sure enough, this van had a first aid kit. Reggie looked through until he found antibiotic ointment. “This might work as hair gel.” Sarah smiled, put a little squirt on her fingers, and tried to make the top of her hair prick up a bit. Reggie reached over to improve the styling, rather liking the look of her short hair gelled up. Then he used the remainder of the tube to give his hair a slicked back and wet look. He didn’t much care for it, but he’d been told on numerous occasions how different he looked with the curls back off his forehead. Sarah smiled when he was done, so he figured it couldn’t look too awful.

At the airport Reggie concentrated on looking busy and distracted, like most other passengers. He spent as much time as he could facing the walls to read posters or advertisements. He read about a model train display on concourse C that he might have gone to visit on a normal boring trip. Reggie had gone way overboard on his model building stage as a kid, and his parents had been more than happy to indulge him. It was only once, when he crashed a radio-controlled panzer through his bedroom window, that his mother seemed at all concerned. What if he’d been a teek?

Soon Sarah had the tickets, evidently fooling the palm scan well enough, or were they walking into a trap? Reggie remembered the palm lock on her mother’s house and wondered how Sarah had used it. As they approached the security checkpoint, the other four managed to fall into line ahead of them. It was a typical crowded day at the airport. Each person passed their ticket through a machine and verified their palm or retina scan before walking forward to the metal detectors. The guard standing by the scanning machine did not seem to be paying close attention as people filed past her. Sarah had handed each of their party a ticket and told them to go through in that order. She held the other papers in her left hand. Howard and Robert went through without incident. But on Mei Mei, there was a beep as the machine asked for a rescan. Just as the guard started to look toward them, a framed poster fell off the wall.

The guard stepped toward the poster, keeping it from falling forward. Mei Mei used her left hand to steady her right, which was now shaking above the palm scan pad, and it passed her through. Next went Lisa and then Reggie. The guard was leaning the poster against the base of the wall, while watching them over her shoulder. Only Sarah was left as the guard returned full attention to her station. Reggie saw Sarah glance at her papers and fold them before the guard could see. Then she held her palm to be scanned, it passed her through, and Reggie felt himself breath again.

Chapter 11
Sarah didn’t know she’d dozed off until Mei Mei nudged her awake. Her face felt pasty. Her scalp pulled where the antibiotic ointment had stiffened her hair. For a moment she imagined a jello pancake eating her brain, then remembered reality was just as weird.

“We’ve got trouble. The pilot’s been ordered to turn the plane around. They told him he had escaped criminals on board.” Mei Mei whispered very quietly in her ear. From the lack of activity around her, Sarah guessed the other passengers didn’t know.

An image of Torie teasing her from the gym door flashed through Sarah’s mind. It had been raining, the day Sarah went to get spooky and ended up rescuing O’Reeley instead. Torie had seemed worried when Sarah rushed off. How were the girls taking her disappearance now? Would using their passports bring teeps in suits to their doors?

“What time is it?” she asked Mei Mei, as Reggie moved his head and slowly opened his eyes.

“Nine A.M. in Bangkok.”

“Two more hours.”

“I’ve been studying the captain. I think I know enough to persuade him,” Mei Mei whispered. “Can you get us into the cockpit without setting off alarms or making the pilot or co-pilot attack us?”

“Let’s try.”

Sarah pulled papery pillowcases off of their airplane pillows. She’d thought through enough scenarios to know she’d want them as blindfolds. Still, her hands felt numb as she tugged.

Reggie leaned forward on her left, eyebrows raising wrinkles like McDonald’s golden arches as he silently waited for an explanation. Sarah squeezed his hand and whispered, “They’ve been ordered to take the plane back.”

“What can I do?” he asked.

“Just wait.”

Reggie smiled, but it looked so forced Sarah’s mouth flushed bitter. She wanted to take back the words, but couldn’t change the situation. Instead, she forced her own smile and squeezed Reggie’s hand again before she followed Mei Mei through first class to the crew seating by the front bathrooms. She pulled the privacy curtain shut behind them and turned to speak to the two flight attendants who had been resting there.

One was already starting to stand up and protest as Sarah said, in her sweetest little female voice, “I’m sorry, but we’ve got a bit of a problem, a slightly embarrassing little problem.”

Mei Mei was pulling the other curtain shut as Sarah pulled a pillowcase over one flight attendant’s head using her hands. She covered the other from behind with her telekinesis and pressed an illusory gag into each mouth. She tightened and fixed imaginary ropes until the attendants couldn’t thump against walls or try to untie themselves. Her real hands pressed cold and tense against her thighs as she fixed each imaginary binding in her mind. Tearful sniffling noises came from beneath one pillowcase.

She looked at Mei Mei, whose eyes were wide, but who was waiting patiently to one side. Sarah pointed at the flight attendants’ heads and then pointed to Mei Mei’s. The older woman nodded and Sarah bent down to whisper to her captives.

“Please, don’t panic. We don’t want to hurt or upset anyone. But I need to know how you knock on the cockpit door when you want the pilot to open it.”

It wasn’t that Sarah expected them to tell her. But she knew the door was only supposed to open from inside. Tampering with it might set off alarms, and the flight attendants had to have signals, if they’d just think clearly about them –

“No good,” Mei Mei whispered. “They call on the intercom and our voices would give us away.”

Sarah shrugged and moved toward the door. On this side, it had a regular door handle. With luck, the other side was an identical handle that automatically unlocked the door when it turned. Keeping all the imaginary ropes and gags in place, Sarah reached her mind to the far side of the door and turned the inside handle. Easing the door open, she immediately looked for the pilot’s and co-pilot’s hands

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to block any threatening movement. Mei Mei slid quickly inside.

“Please, give me a moment to tell you why they want this plane turned around.” Mei Mei sounded so sincere. Was she acting or not? “I know they’ve told you there are wanted criminals on board. But there aren’t. We are political refugees, victims of government policies you have not even been told about.” Mei Mei’s clipped accent and motherly calm pulled Sarah the way Peace Corps ads once had. The pilot showed no reaction, but he hadn’t reached for a panic button either. “Our only crime was to be born with certain genetic differences. For that they would keep us as lab animals for the rest of our lives. But we cannot help how we’re born. If they are allowed to imprison us, who knows what they will want to control next.”

“What differences? What are you talking about?” the pilot asked.

“If I told you, they would want to silence you, too. But if you call ahead to Thailand and ask if they are expecting us, a group of political refugees fleeing persecution of mental differences, they will confirm it.”

“And what do we say when the U.S. orders us back again?” the co-pilot asked.

“I don’t know. You could tell them we’ll blow up the plane if you want.”

“Are you threatening us?” Anger began to pull at the co-pilot’s face. Sarah’s shoulder tensed forward, and she had to focus to keep the flight attendants bound.

“Not at all. I’m doing what I can to see myself, my children, and my friends to safety and to allow you the freedom of choice we have been denied back home.”

“We have zero tolerance for terrorists—” the co-pilot began.

“They don’t sound like terrorists, Bill,” the pilot said. “Let’s call Thailand and check it out.”

The pilot called. Of course, the person in air traffic control knew nothing. But he put a call in to his superiors and a few minutes later the word came back, “Roger, we have government officials saying they will accept your refugees and that international agreements require you to bring them through from international airspace.”

“Understood,” the pilot replied. He tapped a control then turned to Mei Mei. “Your lucky day. Now, how did you get in here?”

“Thank you, sir. We’ll stay out of your way.” Mei Mei bowed her head briefly, and Sarah took the cue to back out of the cockpit doorway. Mei Mei followed, closing the door with a solid click.

For one brief moment Sarah was awash with relief. It felt like sudden melting through her shoulders and chest, but in her arms it couldn’t melt past the elbows. Her forearms felt icy, ready to shatter. Delayed fear pressed in at her forehead.

“How did you do that?” she whispered to Mei Mei.

“Our pilot is gay, Jewish, and politically skeptical. A natural ally.”

Sarah tried to smile. Then she looked at the two flight attendants she’d so far kept immobile. Despite the shrouding pillowcases, their terror showed in every tense muscle, adding to the weight of her fear. What had she done to these people? In trying to save herself, had she become a monster? Sarah knelt on the floor before them. Tears sprang to her eyes. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered from between them, not wanting anyone beyond the curtains to hear. “We would never have hurt you. I didn’t mean to frighten you. We just needed to talk to the captain. We’re political refugees, not terrorists.”

Tears were streaming down Sarah’s face now. The woman on her right was crying too. Sarah reached out to pat her hand and the arm jerked. Sarah’s tears exploded in guilt and exhaustion. She had to free these people, but she needed to know they’d stay quiet.

“Please, I want to untie you. I just need to know you’ll stay calm. We talked to the pilot. Do you understand? It’s all worked out.”

Mei Mei came close behind her, adding her own whispers. “There’d be no point in attacking us or alerting the passengers. I’m an old woman; she’s just a girl. If you cooperate and finish the flight, the plane will land, peaceful and normal.”

Sarah looked to the telepath, seeking a sign. Mei Mei nodded.

In her mind, Sarah untied invisible ropes and pulled them away. When neither prisoner acted to remove either pillowcase, Sarah reached forward and used her hands to carefully lift one and then the
other. The woman to her right continued to cry, refusing to make eye contact. The other one flashed Sarah an angry look then turned to her friend and said, “It’s all right Nora. I know how you feel, but there are people depending on us.”

“Best leave them alone,” Mei Mei whispered. “Wipe your face, and let’s go back to our seats.”

Sarah’s mind was a whirlpool, but she knew Mei Mei must be right. She would have wiped her eyes on her sleeve, but she was still wearing the batik top Reggie had given her, and it was too nice for that. So quickly, she plucked kleenex from the bathroom and cleaned up, shoving some in her pockets in case the tears came back. Then she followed Mei Mei through the curtain. Other than a few curious stares as they passed through first class, activity on the airplane was reassuringly normal.

Then she felt a squeeze on her shoulder from a place in the aisle where no one stood or could even fit. It took her brain just a moment to realize the touch must be teek, must be from Howard, and must be meant as reassurance. In that moment she almost tripped. For the first time she’d felt someone else’s teek, and she hated it. It wasn’t real, there was no warmth, and no one present to back it up. Instead of trying to acknowledge Howard, she looked for Reggie and for her seat.

Chapter 12

April 14, 2025 – Arriving in Bangkok, Thailand

Reggie’s mouth fell open, just a little, when he saw Sarah shuffle down the aisle, face red from crying. Lisa’s silent nods said all was well, and Mei Mei slipped into view, calm and poised as a lizard. Reggie’s flash of terror turned to concern for his girlfriend as she tensed and almost stumbled. She slid into the seat next to him, and he put his arm around her, letting her sink limp against his side.

After a moment, he felt the damp of tears soaking into his shirt. He cursed the fact they couldn’t talk, and then the fact that the others could. Lisa had nodded over silent communications throughout whatever had happened, and now she was undoubtedly hearing the whole story. But the cabin was nearly silent to him, most passengers either asleep or watching movies with headphones.

After a while he whispered to Sarah, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she whispered back. “It all worked out. I just feel like some kind of monster.”

Reggie tried not to recoil at the echoes in his own mind. He’d watched her lie, set a building on fire, steal cars, forge hand scans, and possibly hijack a plane. How well did he really know the person he’d been sleeping with for three years? Why was he even here? Why did he reject any role that took him away?

“You’re not,” he whispered.

“You went back for your friends. You did what you had to —“

“I scared two flight attendants so badly.”

Reggie almost laughed as his struggling doubts snapped away. “You’d never make it as a monster.”

When they exited the plane, two men in black suits stood waiting by an unmarked door beneath the gate number. Reggie knew they were telepaths even before Mei Mei tilted her head toward them and gestured for Sarah and Reggie to follow. When all six of their group were gathered, the two men led them through a door out onto the tarmac. They ushered them into a black car and drove to a building far across the airport. No one spoke during the drive, which Reggie resented a bit. Sarah sat calmly beside him, looking tired, with puffy red eyes, but no other sign of her earlier doubts.

They parked in front of a three-story, white building with a roof of solar panels. Without a word they were ushered inside.

A familiar voice said, “Welcome to beautiful Bangkok.” The sarcastic smirk and raised eyebrows presented Tom as they’d known him in Belize. The conservative dark trousers and white button down shirt seemed at odds with his personality.

“Tom, thank you,” Sarah began. “Let me introduce you to my friends. This is Mei Mei, Lisa, Robert, and Howard.”

As Tom swept forward to shake hands he said, “While you are all welcome to call me Tom, and several people do, my actual name is Tanit Asawaroengchullaka.”
“I’d be pleased to call you Tom,” Lisa said with a half smile. 
Tom spread his hands and winked dramatically. The men in suits stared coolly at him. 
“Now, if no one minds,” Tom continued, “These gentlemen would like to help the four of you with some paperwork, and I’ve been asked to sort things out with Sarah and Reggie.” 
With that, Reggie and Sarah let Tom whisk them down the hall to a small meeting room with a polished, round table. Tom reeked of spices, and Sarah was smiling beneath her red eyes. As soon as they closed the door, Tom sprawled languorously into a chair, pinned them with his melodramatic gaze, and said, “What a dramatic entrance. Tell me all about what happened on the plane and back at the CDC in San Francisco. There are rumors you can start fires, too. Is that true?”
“I just used telekinesis.”
Reggie looked but saw no hint of a lie on Sarah’s face. 
“How do you know so much, and why are we being separated from my friends?” Sarah answered defensively and sat in the chair farthest from Tom. Reggie contentedly sat between them. 
“Oh, rough day? It’s nothing malevolent, my dear.” Tom waved a hand toward Sarah. “The people who usually handle our ‘mental differences’ refugees have never dealt with non-telepaths. Not as teeks, not even as lovers.” He winked. “The moment I arrived on the scene they told me to handle your paperwork. Oh, and they don’t want you in their dormitory, so the government is renting you a room for a couple weeks. Might give you time to choose where you want to live and who you want to work for. Now, will one of you fill me in?”
While Sarah sat stunned, Reggie began telling the story of their escape from the CDC. He told it as he’d tell an amusing anecdote at a cocktail party. Sarah didn’t say anything at all, but Tom compensated with a few appreciative remarks. When the part on the plane had to be explained, Sarah finally shook her sulk for a few terse sentences. 
“Is that all?” Tom asked, leaning forward across the table toward Sarah. 
“Mei Mei probably knows better. She’s the telepath. I’m just exhausted.” There were tears waiting just behind Sarah’s voice. 
“Right,” Tom smiled sympathetically, an unconvincing look most befitting a predator. “Let me get your help with a few items here on the paperwork. I don’t suppose you have your passports handy?”
Reggie produced his from his money belt. Sarah offered hers from her mass of gym paperwork. 
“Excellent. Tell you what, I’ll have somebody drive you out to the Hotel Siam. You’re all set up in room 1411.” He flicked a key card from his crisp shirt pocket. “Someone will come by tomorrow with more papers for you to sign. I’ve also arranged invitations for you and your friends to an ex-pat Easter party next weekend. Give you a chance to make some connections. The family hosting the party is teep, and they’ll know all about you, but most of the rest are regular émigrés; just so you know. I’ll drop by there if I don’t see you before.”
With that, Tom stepped around the table to Sarah, catching both her hands, and asked with what might have been honest concern, “Are you all right, Sarah?”
“Just tired,” her voice was calmer and she straightened her back and shoulders. 
“When you’re ready to have a good time, don’t forget me.” With that, Tom saw them out and handed them off to an assistant who drove them to the hotel.

Their hotel room was clean, air conditioned, and could have been anyplace in the world. The drapes were butter yellow with opaque lining. A king-size bed dominated the room, which also contained two armchairs, two small dressers, and a television set. The phone was plain and primitive, and Reggie realized they had nothing to access the web. There was a private bathroom with the usual sample-size toiletries and also two overnight kits with combs, toothbrushes, and so on. 
“Can I shower first?” Sarah asked, and Reggie couldn’t refuse her. 
By the time he came out from his own shower, she was fast asleep, curled like a wild thing completely under the covers. Reggie didn’t think that he was tired, but he climbed in beside her and waited for exhaustion to catch up.

April 15, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand
After noon the next day, the two telepaths who had met them at the airport came by with papers. Reggie offered them the only two chairs in the room, which they accepted without speaking, leaving him and Sarah to sit on the edge of the bed. One telepath slouched in his chair and stared out the window, ignoring them. The other silently handed Reggie and Sarah stacks of documents. “These you need to sign.” When he finally spoke, his voice was flat. He did not make eye contact. “They say you’re here as refugees, you renounce your American citizenship, and you seek Thai citizenship. There are some additional papers in case the U.S. tries to claim you’re terrorists or hijackers, but we think they’re going to ignore the whole incident now. They’ve lost you. They don’t want publicity.”

There was silence while they signed papers. Then the man who had spoken collected them and handed out other papers. “These give you the right to live and work here. If you wish to work for the government, arrangements can be made.” The speaker swallowed, shifting his jaw to the side in a look of distaste. “We are not sure how useful you would be in the usual capacities, but if you’d like to work with the military, they could certainly come up with something. Ms. Duncan might also sign on for medical studies.”

The speaker paused, glancing at his companion who was still staring out the window. Then he began to recite, the way American T.V. cops would state Miranda rights, “We have certain security rules for telepaths, some of which would apply to you. We do not refer to telepathy, telekinesis, teeps, teeks, or any other clear indicator in writing, by computer, or on the phone. We do not disclose or demonstrate our abilities to normals. We do not use our abilities for personal gain, to circumvent the law, or in any way that might be noticed by normals. Do you understand and agree?”

“Yes,” said Reggie and then Sarah. “Good. Here’s my card. Only contact me if it’s important. Otherwise, you’re on your own.”

The two men abruptly stood and headed toward the door. The whole discussion had lasted less than five minutes, and Reggie felt vaguely insulted and awkward. Still he saw the guests out, falling back on the role of host. Sarah stood, staring distractedly at the business card she’d been handed. When Reggie went to look, all it said was:

Wang Chanthanasai
Immigration Specialist
726 Soi Suanplu, Bangkok
02/437-7112

Reggie shrugged and said, “Well, that was friendly.”

“They’re used to dealing with teeps.”

“You look worried.”

“Just imagine how ‘normals’ would deal with us if they knew.”

Reggie nodded in understanding before he jarred on the fact that he was one of the ‘normals.’ He reached an arm across Sarah’s back, physically defining whose side he was on.

Dinner in the restaurant hotel was loud, and neither of them spoke much. Afterward, Sarah insisted they go sightseeing. They picked up a tourist map at the front desk, and headed out into the night. Beside the hotel there was a newsstand, a tobacconist, and a beauty salon, all closed and gated after dark. Beyond the shops were a huge intersection, two marked lanes, and a third, in each direction. At two corners loomed skyscrapers, filmy with nearly new translucent solar siding, reflecting Thailand’s status as one of the world’s fastest growing economies. Graphic signs on lampposts alluded to its older reputation as an international sex capital.

“Do you want to see buildings, clubs, or something else?” Reggie asked.

“I just wanted to get out. I’ve gotten so paranoid, I’m afraid to speak in our room.”

“I don’t think that’s too paranoid. What did you want to talk about?”

“Oh Reggie,” Sarah looked like she might burst into tears again. Then she was silent. Reggie gave
her hand a squeeze and tried to be patient. As they walked, he looked into windows of closed up shops. They were in a very touristy area; so most of the stores held sentimental Thai “antiques” and tacky souvenirs. But a few sold traditional cloth and clothing. The rich blues and greens, reds and golds appealed to Reggie. They reminded him of Sarah’s Indian fabric collection.

“You know, I’m really sorry about dragging you into all this,” Sarah whispered. “I can’t imagine how it seems to you.”

“Don’t worry. It’s harder on you than on me,” Reggie said, not thinking about whether that was true. Instead, he was imagining all of the people on the street taking classes to close their minds to telepathy. Would there be easy funding, or would wealthy people prefer to limit that sort of privacy? If teeps and teeks were going to be accepted, they’d have to find a way to offer everyone that training.

“Do you ever wish I hadn’t called you?”

Reggie’s hand moved reflexively to where his cell phone used to be, “No chance.”

“And you still like me?”

Reggie stopped walking and turned Sarah to face him. He held her shoulders and looked straight into her eyes. “I like you. I love you. I seriously doubt anything is going change that. Okay?”

He hugged her tight, right in the middle of the sidewalk, but she didn’t relax in his arms. Passersby paid no attention, pretty tame for Bangkok.

“If I tell you stuff I don’t want anyone else to know, will you promise never to tell, even if you break up with me?” Sarah mumbled with her face against his shoulder.

“You’re asking that now? After all –“

Sarah yanked him forward by the hand, starting them down the sidewalk at a serious clip. “Reggie, there’s still a lot I’ve never told anyone. Now that people know what I can do, it’s like having a pain I’d taken for granted suddenly go away. But there’s so much more falling together in my mind, and I’m scared I’ll burst if I keep it all in.”

Reggie tried to brace himself to listen patiently, like a priest. But the unaccustomed heat and sudden exertion made him sweat, more like a sportsman facing a challenge. He swayed as if navigating a rope bridge, the ties abrading, wind gusting, only one person at the other end.

Sarah was silent as they passed through a crowded section of street. A scantily clad hologram undulated on the sidewalk while the words “nude girls” flashed on an old neon sign.

When they were somewhat alone again, Sarah said, “I don’t think the other teeks can start fires, and maybe they couldn’t pinch off an artery without doing visible damage. But there are ways to crash a car or plane, even collapse a building, which would work for any teek. Pushing someone down stairs or impaling them with shattered window glass would be easy to do and hard to trace. When I first imagined there were others like me, I wondered why none of it happened, or how no one found out, and I still don’t know.”

Reggie shook his head trying to match Sarah’s pace, “Maybe it can’t be used that way, or maybe there’s some sort of policing.”

At that point they reached the Grand Palace. It was closed for the night, but a load of Malaysian tourists stood listening to a tour guide who pointed up at shining tile roofs. The crowd huddled to the left in front of their bus, so Sarah and Reggie slipped far to the right, up next to the gate. The gate looked large enough for elephants to pass through, and Reggie realized they probably had. Beside it Sarah looked tiny, fragile beneath looming stone walls, despite what he knew she could do. Missing his camera, Reggie tried to memorize the lines of her body as her arm reached out to stroke the old gate.

“Kind of impressive, isn’t it?” Sarah said.

“Especially given the neighborhood. Funny how time does that.”

“Four weeks ago, I thought I was alone, that I’d never tell anyone.”

She began to walk, more slowly now. Reggie wanted to tell her she wasn’t alone before, but he knew what she meant. He tried to take her hand, but she pulled it away and crossed both arms against her chest. Her voice, when she spoke, was full of tears, though her face showed fury like an animal just caged.
“Reggie, the night I discovered I could move things, I was ten-years-old. I moved a pencil by accident. Then I tried it again. Then I tried other stuff. By the time I went to bed, I’d rearranged most of my room, one little bit, or a few, at a time. I think I might have told my mom that first night, except there was a guest in the house. His name was Peter. He used to visit us two or three times a year. Other than relatives, he was the only person who ever stayed in our guest room.”

Sarah’s face wrinkled in disgust. For a moment Reggie wasn’t sure if she reacted to the memory or to a particularly odiferous alley on their right. He wished she would stop and look at him while she talked.

“You know, my mom as good as told me the man she divorced wasn’t my real father. Until the meeting at CDC, I thought it might have been Peter. When I was a child, he-- he did things to me. At first, I thought they might be okay, if he was my father, because I knew there were different rules about touching and stuff between parents and kids.”

Reggie felt himself leaping to the end of a collapsing bridge, ready to protect the woman standing there from anything, but she kept standing all alone. “Are you saying –”

“Yes, but that’s only part of it. He came to get me the night I first learned I was, ah, telekinetic. He took me to the guestroom. And all of a sudden I knew -- Before that, I thought he was trying to be nice to me, that he didn’t know how I felt. But that night I knew he didn’t care how I felt. He knew he was taking advantage of me. I was so hurt but also so angry. The anger and pain just consumed me, and then the bed in that room was on fire, and he let go of me. I ran outside crying.”

Reggie froze, wanting to hit someone but trying to offer priestly understanding instead. He heard his own voice come out flat as paper. “That was the guest room fire you said started from a cigarette?”

“That’s what my mom and the police believed. I don’t know if Peter believed that or made it up. He never came back. I never spoke about any of it.”

“But he lived.”

Sarah shook her head and stopped, brought back from wherever she’d been.

“Yes, but what if he hadn’t?” Now there were tears on her face and her voice broke and squeaked. Reggie imagined child Sarah setting the man instead of the bed on fire, and thought it would have served Peter right. But grown-up Sarah stood trembling even now, and he wondered if any child could deal with that. To Sarah he said, “I’m sorry. It must have been terrible.”

They’d stopped, without noticing, in front of a bookstore. Sarah stood with her neck and shoulders curving down, into shadow. But her hair, curly with humidity and disarranged from walking, reflected the streetlights on two sides and the store’s display light from behind. Against the backdrop of books, one actually a travel guide, and others with titles in Thai script, it was impossible not to think how far they’d come, and only the lines on a map would show it as simple. For a moment Reggie could play neither priest nor protector, and as himself he realized he wanted to marry Sarah. The thought startled him into raising his arms. He tried to reach out to Sarah with the motion, but she pulled away, and he realized she wasn’t finished. And she was walking again.

“Don’t you see? I never put it together until the last couple weeks. All other teeks are teeps. That night I knew what Peter thought. Maybe I had telepathy, and I either turned it into fire or pushed it so far out of mind that I lost it.”

Those words struck Reggie like a pounding bell, and he called forward his priestly countenance again. He’d almost come to terms with the idea of telepaths living around him, but he really didn’t want his girlfriend to be one. Even if no one could read his thoughts now, he’d seen enough exclusive conversations. Still, he owed Sarah a sympathetic reply. Hadn’t he wanted to marry her a minute ago? Now there was a lump in his throat, a caving in sensation at his center.

“Does that mean you want to be a telepath?”

“I don’t know. In a way I feel robbed of something, but if my relatives were working for the government even then-- I don’t know what would have happened if they’d gotten me when I was ten. And I don’t know if my mother only had the genes on one side and wasn’t telepathic, or if she was hiding it, or if she’d repressed it in herself. I can’t know what my life would have been like any other way. And now, I’m not sure I’d want to change. The idea of hearing random people’s private thoughts-- well, it bothers me, but being able to talk to other telepaths might be useful, especially
now.”
“I always knew you had secrets, though I never guessed they’d require a security clearance. I even suspected abuse sometimes but decided that wasn’t it.”
“Why?”
“I don’t know. It didn’t quite fit.”
“Didn’t fit —”
“Later. What I need to ask, even if this isn’t the time is, is this all of it?”
“Yes . . . No.” Sarah stopped walking, her face suspended in thought. Reggie braced himself, trying to prepare for absolutely anything. They stood in an empty plaza, a small square of mortared gray stones just off the road, as the early nightlife hurried by. Bangkok was starting to buzz, but the two of them stood separate, quiet. Sarah lightly ran a hand across his shoulder and the loose fabric of his sleeve, raising goose bumps in the humid Thai heat.
“I’ve always suspected I felt touch differently from other people,” Sarah spoke softly, looking away toward the street. “It affects everything I do more than any of the other, well, unusual stuff. But I never talked about it. It didn’t seem right to put it into words. And somehow I’d thought it went with being a teek, but it doesn’t seem to after all.”
Reggie’s skin remembered the touch of Sarah’s hands, and other parts, especially during sex. She was an unusually attentive lover, always seeming to orchestrate her movements with complex care. Sometimes he would be caught up in a moment, and then realize he’d stopped one hand in mid stroke. But Sarah’s movements only increased in diversity and symphony. It wasn’t something he’d thought about in words, although he’d certainly noticed before.
“That’s all?”
She nodded, and he reached a hand to touch her face. She slid her cheek into the motion, completing it.
He said, “Maybe I knew that, at least in bed.”
“Is that why you’re with me?”
“No.” He felt a wave of indignation that cooled his erotic memories. But gazing up at him was Sarah, who in her honesty shivered with doubt. “No, I don’t think any relationship works without good sex, but that’s never been why I was with you.”
“Well, do you still want me, knowing everything?”
His palm tingled from touching her. There was nothing about her he didn’t want, but he couldn’t find the words to say it.
“Yes.”
She reached out to take his hand, the one still tingling from the last touch, and they walked back toward the hotel. Reggie saw tears pool in the corners of her eyes. He resisted the urge to wipe them away or to speak.

Chapter 13
April 19 - 20, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand

The hot water held Sarah. She felt safe and relaxed. In such warm air, the bath didn’t chill quickly; the air above was just cool enough for contrast. She missed the feel of her long hair drifting around her, but when she slid down and moved her head back and forth, she could feel the little hairs swishing, able to switch back and forth quickly. She moved her arm from side to side, just under the surface of the water. The tiny hairs brushed the current when pushed against their grain, but settled easily when pulled the other way.
Tears slid down her face into the water. She submerged, losing the itchy salt into the mostly fresh water. Tears had been trickling out for days, but it took no energy to shed them. She told herself the tears were taking away the images that hurt her. The rigid terror of the flight attendants on the plane.
The uncertainty of hurting people when she burned the CDC. The pain in her childhood self that last time Peter took her to the guestroom. All her life, she had imagined telling someone everything, being completely known and real. She’d even imagined that person being Reggie. But getting it all out hadn’t cured the pain the way she’d hoped. She’d seen how Reggie struggled to accept it all their first day in Bangkok, and on the airplane there had been moments when he looked away, as if she were a monster. He’d given up so much for her without knowing who she really was, but what if despite his best intentions he couldn’t fully accept the truth?

Sarah hid underwater, dissipating the thoughts and the tears. It was probably time to get out of the bath. Reggie would be in the main room, studying the newspaper for places to live or for work they could do. They’d trudged through pouring rain yesterday to pick up their residency papers. They’d stood in line, given their names, been handed work permits. The secretary didn’t even look at them. To her it was just routine.

Five days ago, they’d entered Thailand on what might be considered a hijacked plane. Yesterday, they’d picked up papers as if there were nothing unusual about it. Other than the startling efficiency, it was like any other move.

Sarah climbed out of the tub. She toweled off and drained the water. Wrapped in the wide, shaggy towel, she sauntered out to where Reggie sat, fully dressed, with the Bangkok Post spread across the bed.

“Any luck?”

“Do we need a place with a bathtub?”

Sarah pulled out her only clean clothes. “We should go shopping.”

“I’ve been saying that for days.”

“Yes, but it was raining then.”

“And you were busy sulking.”

“I’m still sulking, but I’m ready to do it outside in the sunlight.”

There was a knock at the door. Sarah finished pulling on her shirt as Reggie went to answer it. “Package, special delivery, international express. I thought I should bring it up?” The busboy sounded eager to please, or eager for a tip.

Reggie stepped out into the hall, closing the door behind him, but Sarah could still hear his conversation.

“Don’t you have someplace you could keep it until tomorrow?”

“It’s refrigerated.”

“Well surely you have – oh, never mind. Thank you. It was good of you to bring it up.”

Reggie came inside and put the box in the mini-fridge under the bar. He went back to his paper as if nothing had happened.

“What’s that?”

“Just pretend it’s not there.”

“You’re up to something. Tell or I’ll shake my wet hair at you.”

“Less dangerous than it used to be.”

“Actually, it works quite well. Shall I demonstrate?”

“It’s a surprise, for tomorrow. You’ll have to wait.” Reggie was pretending to read. He was the image of the nonchalant patriarch with his morning paper. If Sarah dropped it now, what would he do? He’d be disappointed, wouldn’t he? Surely he’d come up with another scheme for tomorrow, but it wouldn’t have the same spontaneity then. Sarah knew her duty. She even felt herself warming to the part.

OPEN IT NOW, AND I’LL GO CLOTHES SHOPPING WITH YOU.”

“We were going to do that anyway!”

“This way I’ll be less sulky.”

“I get to buy you an Easter dress.”

“Does it have to be a dress?”

“We’ll see. But I get to buy you something pretty and you can’t complain about me paying for it.”

“I get to help choose?”
“Okay, but you have to try on the stuff I like.”
“Deal.”

Reggie handed her the box. It was stamped “Keep Refrigerated” and felt enticingly cool. Instead of listing a name, it had been sent to Hotel Siam, Room 1411 from See’s Candies in Long Beach, CA, USA. The name made Sarah taste chocolate and smile like a kid.

“You shouldn’t have,” she said as she worked through the packing tape.

“Wrong,” Reggie laughed as he cleared away the newspaper.

Inside the box was an Easter basket complete with chocolate bunny and a couple dozen filled chocolates. There were also four Bordeaux filled Easter eggs.

“How do you remember everything I like? And when did you order it? And four eggs?”

“Hardly worth it for just one.”

“Oh Reggie, you’re crazy. Do you want some?”

By the time they reached the Easter party Sunday, Sarah was out of her funk and swinging toward a more manic frame of mind. This was probably a good thing, since the party turned out to be a bit more than she’d expected.

The ex-pat party Tom had mentioned was at the home of the Johnson family on the outskirts of Bangkok. Sarah and Reggie entered through a traditional Thai archway covered with gold and gems. She was fairly sure they couldn’t be real, could they?

Beyond the gate was a courtyard garden large enough to host an intimate gathering for elephants. Encircling the courtyard was a series of buildings, each representing a different architectural innovation, and some more like sets designed for Star Trek. There were three that Sarah mostly understood. One was a raised wooden platform with a bamboo roof and open sides, which could be covered by rolling down woven mats. Another was made of meter thick sod blocks, clearly cut by a machine and transported from who knows where, but Sarah had read about such houses in California, where they were considered oh-so-environmentally-correct. The final configuration that she had seen before was a cluster of white domes. They looked like bubbles blown in milk, but Sarah knew they were made of foam blown on site and allowed to harden. These domes balanced solar panels on top, like chocolate shavings sprinkled on milk bubbles.

Several other designs around the courtyard also sported solar panels. Some of the buildings were metal or ceramic. One was covered in a mosaic of tiny mirrors, which may or may not have reflected additional sunlight toward the panels on its neighbors. Another looked like it was made of tinker toys. Sarah wondered if the owners were eccentrics or some form of extremists. She also wondered what she was doing at their party.

The enormous courtyard boasted five tables of food with caterers dressed in white standing ready to serve. There were great roasts of lamb and ham and turkey. An enormous bowl held citrus segments, which had been individually peeled, not just to remove the inedible outer skin, but also to remove the film that usually surrounded each section. Sure, mandarin oranges could be bought that way in cans, but Sarah was pretty sure these segments were fresh and freshly skinned. There were dozens of bowls with salads, both Western and Asian. Nuts, dried fruits, fresh tropical fruits, deviled eggs, seafood, and miniature pastries covered artistically arranged trays. Then one whole table held traditional Easter candies from the states. Jelly beans, malted milk eggs, and marshmallow chicks filled bowls around the outside of the table. In the middle was a carved ice vase full of daffodils, daffodils that on closer inspection appeared to be sculpted from something like chocolate. If there had been Easter parties like this in the States, Sarah had never been invited.

Running all around, mostly oblivious to the finery, were a dozen or so children filling Easter baskets with what appeared to be boiled eggs died the traditional way and not too expertly, probably by some subset of the scurrying children.

Sarah tried to guess which child most likely lived here. If she could spot a Johnson, the youngster might lead them to their hosts. Or possibly there would be a strong family resemblance. She began to explain her reasoning to Reggie, hoping that he’d be able to help her identify their hosts and derive the correct etiquette for the situation.
“Actually, I think I already spotted them and they just stepped inside,” he said.
“Oh, how do you know?”
“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.” Reggie glanced around, then continued in a more private tone, “Tom said the hosts were telepaths. I think there are only three telepaths here, an older couple and the fellow sitting alone over there.”
“How can you tell?”
“I started noticing something back at CDC. I realized the people who worked there, your Chen friends, and Tom all had something in common. I think it’s in the way they move or their posture. Funny, but it’s how I always pictured elves. When we left the plane in Bangkok, I knew those two men waiting for us were teeps before anyone signaled. When we walked in here, I spotted three people who seemed likely. Of course, I haven’t tested myself yet, but we can see what we learn today.”
Sarah opened her mouth before she knew what to say. “Is it really that easy? Could I learn it?”
“We should find out if I’m right first.”
They walked over to the man Reggie had noted who was sitting alone. He was pale, as if he didn’t go outside much, and his hair was light brown, cut conservatively, but with a cowlick toward the back. His white polo shirt looked pressed, and was tucked in neatly but not stylishly. He sat with his arms crossed, staring at a flower as if he’d rather read a book. Sarah would never have gone up to talk to him on her own, but Reggie slid in casually, motioning to an empty bench and asking, “May we join you?”
“Of course.”
“My name’s Reggie Malone and this is Sarah Duncan.”
“James Morton. Pleased to meet you.”
There was a pause. Sarah ran her fingertips over the smooth sanded grain of the bench. Her mind insisted she knew that name from somewhere, and the man looked vaguely familiar. But she couldn’t place him.
Reggie asked, “Have you been in Thailand long?”
“Over ten years.”
“Oh, what brought you here?”
“Work.”
It seemed James was not an easy conversationalist. Sarah felt obliged to help Reggie out. And then, she knew.
“Was your dad Chris Morton?”
“Ah, yes.” James curled the fingers of both hands around the arms of his chair and met Sarah’s eyes with sudden interest.
“He ran a—a fertility service?”
“Yes.” James’ voice wavered with discomfort, like he wasn’t sure where she was going with this and didn’t like any of the possibilities. Was it fair to confront him? But what else could she do now?
“My mom went there, under the name Molly Bernard.”
He was still looking at her. His hands still clutched the chair arms, but one finger on his right hand began to tap rapidly, when it stopped, a left finger took up the beat.
Sarah’s fingertips stroked the bench again. “I’ve been told, well, that things weren’t quite what they appeared to be.”
“What exactly are you saying?” James asked.
What could she say? She wasn’t supposed to mention teeps or teeks unless she knew the other person was one. But Reggie thought this guy was, and if he was who he said he was—Oh! He was probably trying to talk to her telepathically, figuring what she must be saying, but he didn’t know why she wasn’t answering. Sarah felt really stupid for a moment, then decided she was sure enough.
“Oh, I should explain better. I’m not a teep, just a teek.”
There was an awkward pause while James appeared to process the information, his whole face motionless for a moment. Reggie raised an eyebrow and glanced at Sarah. Was he saying “I was right” or “You look just like that when you’re thinking”? Either one might be appropriate.
James pulled in his arms, wiped his hands on his pants, looked at Sarah, and leaned forward a bit.
"Where did you hear about me?"
"From someone at the CDC."
"You’re the teek who fled the U.S. a couple weeks ago? I hadn’t heard you weren’t a teep. But the CDC says you’re related to me? When were you born?"
"October 25th, 1999."
"Just young enough to be either my half-sister or my daughter. Is your mother a teep or a teek?"
"Not that anyone knows. She’s dead, but her relatives are teeps."
"Interesting. Would you be willing to let me analyze your DNA? We haven’t figured out teeks yet. I haven’t heard of any others that weren’t teeps, and if you could have teeps on both sides—No teeks that you know of?"
"No, and I’m not sure I want my DNA figured out. Are you saying you know what makes someone a teep? You could test for it?"
"You know, I really shouldn’t be talking to you about any of this. Perhaps you should have asked someone to introduce us. I mean, usually, a teep just by what they are can, but still, before I talk about my research I’m supposed to know you’re cleared. Not that we always bother,” he muttered, turning to Reggie. “I’m sorry, I forgot your name. Are you a teek also?"
Reggie shook his head, looking unusually embarrassed. Sarah put a hand on his knee and said, “He’s my boyfriend, Reggie Malone. He was at the CDC with me and knows everything I do, but he’s not a teep or a teek.”
James’ forehead wrinkled, and his glance looked even less friendly.
Sarah felt she wasn’t handling the conversation well. She felt smaller, childlike. But she took a breath and inflated herself with innocent defiance. “Look, I’m sorry that we’re not teeps and we don’t really fit into this system well. It’s been kind of a problem for us too. We were invited to this party, but there’s no one here we know. So who would introduce us? We only guessed who you were and who the Johnsons might be, because Reggie thinks he can tell by how people move.”
“What?” James looked momentarily horrified then turned wide-eyed to Reggie. “You looked around and guessed I was a teep?”
Reggie sat up straighter and squared his shoulder in one of those “take me serious” guy poses. “Yeah. I picked out you and an older couple, a graying Caucasian man and a smallish Asian woman.”
“And Sarah?”
“No. She moves . . . differently.”
“None of the servers or kids look like teeps?”
Reggie looked around again. “No, but the girl standing over there does. She wasn’t here before.”
James turned to look. “That’s Emma Johnson. Sure to be a telepath, since both parents are, and she’s about that age, let me call her and see.”
Emma looked up. She met James’ gaze with a mixture of juvenile annoyance and embarrassment, then stalked away into the house. James, on the other hand, looked pleased. He quickly pulled out a battered PDA, selected a screen, tapped in one dot, and hid it away again.
When the silence stretched, James said, “Emma’s gone to find her parents. I told her it was important. If you can really spot teeps, that could be very useful. Just knowing that none of the servers are would please the government.” At a quizzical look from Reggie, James continued. “Teeps often try to find employees with closed minds. Some pass it off as respect for privacy, but it’s also embarrassing to have your butler thinking bad things about you as he greets your friends. Anyway, they can try speaking telepathically to applicants with closed minds, but they can’t know if the person’s just refusing to answer.”
Sarah said. “You want Reggie to check for spies!”
“Well, we’d have to test his accuracy first, but it would be much easier than sneaking genetic samples. Here come Samuel and Ida.”
There followed an awkward minute of silence, some polite spoken introductions, and a “tour” of the media room. From the outside, the media room resembled a white shoebox with solar panels for a lid.
At the doorway, it became obvious that the walls were two feet thick. Once inside, it was demonstrated that inside those walls was a hollow metal framework covered with snap in panels, about two feet square. After removing one panel, Samuel extracted a photo album, which he handed to James, who flipped through and pointed at pictures. It was quickly established that Reggie couldn’t identify teeps in still photographs.

Another wall panel was removed to reveal a computer console. A few pull down menus later, a home video began to project on one wall of the room. It was a documentary, apparently filmed and edited by Emma, about a dance troop she belonged to.

“This is Aliana Carpenter,” intoned a high pitched voice from off camera, “She teaches tap and Irish step dancing. She’s about to lead the senior troop in a review from ‘Riverdance.’”

“Nope,” said Reggie.

Then the dancing began. Sarah had never seen anything like it. Her mind began to blend it into a floor exercise routine.

“Got it. That one, that one, and that one.”

“Yes!” said James.

“Oh my,” said Ida.

Samuel turned off the video before the end. Sarah was disappointed. She realized everyone else was more interested in Reggie’s new ability, which was good. But the step dancing . . . She had to learn it. For now though, she forced her mind back to the conversation.

Ida was saying, “. . . Well and good, James. But this isn’t the place to discuss it. Invite him round to your office. This is a mixed party, not a place for teep business.”

“Can you come tomorrow afternoon?” James asked Reggie. “I could set up more video tests and get clearance by then, and if you’re not opposed to a blood test? You don’t have any teep relatives do you?”

“I don’t think so, but I only started noticing teeps this week. Perhaps we shouldn’t rush into anything.”

“I’ll tell you what, both of you come out tomorrow and we’ll discuss how we can help each other. I can pay you for your time, and it’s all in the interest of science.”

Before they left the media room, Reggie had James’ card and they’d tentatively agreed to meet at two the next day.

In the courtyard, the sun was brighter. The aroma of meat and tropical fruit hung heavy in the air. Reggie and Sarah managed to select some lunch and find a place to eat before they saw the Chens arrive. Sarah took over introducing them to their hosts. Then she pulled an extra table to where she and Reggie had settled, so they could eat lunch together. It was good to see old friends, even if she had only known them for a month. They shared mundane news about settling in and looking for work and housing.

Mei Mei complimented Sarah on her new outfit. “This is lovely. Is it hand died silk?”

“Yeah, Reggie picked it out for me. It’s from Malaysia, very nice for the weather here.”

“The skirt is separate or attached?”

“You see, they’re actually three separate panels,” Sarah displayed each part as appreciatively as she could, after noticing a glance from Reggie. “Each connects to the leggings at one seam.”

“They hang so nicely, a very feminine look.”

Sarah wasn’t sure if Mei Mei was just making conversation or was surprised to see her in fancy clothes. It seemed the less often she dressed up, the more uncomfortable she felt when people complimented her clothing, which discouraged her from dressing up and caused the cycle to repeat. Her misgivings evaporated as she spotted the woman from the video leaning against a delicate shade tree at the other end of the garden. Aliana, that was her name, the one who taught tap and Irish step dancing. Sarah tried to ignore her, thinking she would never have the guts to approach a total stranger.

Howard said from across the table, “I guess you’ve made the best of arriving without possessions. Is the rest of your new wardrobe as interesting?”
Beside him, Lisa gave a knowing smile, and Sarah answered quickly, “Only the parts Reggie chose.”

Reggie had been facing away from her, talking to Robert who sat at the end of the table. Now Reggie and Robert turned toward her, Reggie smirking at her comment and Robert raising his eyebrows at Lisa who looked far too amused by the whole interaction.

As the group returned to safely swapping stories about Bangkok, Sarah couldn’t help glancing at the far tree, and noticing the woman still standing there, the grace of a dancer in her silhouette even without any movement. She tried to keep her mind on the group conversation, but kept being distracted by thoughts of the dance.

Then James happened by and Reggie began introducing him to the Chens. In the flurry of exchanged names, Sarah decided she was brave enough to introduce herself to the dancer, and she wanted to do it now before she lost her chance or her nerve.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she mumbled, as she stood and walked away. What was she going to say? Reggie had identified this woman as not a telepath. How could Sarah explain why she was at this party or even in Thailand? Best to stay away from small talk and just ask about dance.

“Hi, I’m Sarah Duncan. I believe I saw you in a video Emma made showing Irish step dancing?”

“Oh, yes, I’m Aliana Carpenter. You do step dancing?” Her voice lilted, a British accent maybe, but her words, like her posture, seemed composed. A sheet of long hair hung over one shoulder, blond where sun filtered through but dark and thick underneath. The shoulder was tightly covered in burgundy crushed velvet, and Sarah realized it was not a tight top she wore, but a leotard with an earthy, crinkled skirt covering the bottom. There was nothing particularly stunning about Aliana’s figure or her face, and yet Sarah couldn’t take her eyes off the woman. The way she stood and moved seemed to ask people to look at her in just the way Sarah didn’t like to be noticed, like with the Chens a few minutes before.

“Well, actually, I’d never seen step dancing before today. I mostly teach gymnastics, but I really liked the dancing on the video.”

“Ta, Emma made that a few months ago, just before she joined the senior troop. Do you know about Dance Diaspora? What we do?”

“Ah, no, not really.”

“We teach as many different dance traditions as possible, to let kids get a feel, literally, for human diversity. We’re always looking for adults to work with us too, either directly with the dance or in other capacities. If you’re interested, maybe we could add a workshop on gymnastics?” Aliana’s focus while she spoke was so intense that when she paused Sarah didn’t know what to say.

Aliana smiled casually, teeth not too straight, green-blue eyes still fixed on Sarah. “Come along, Emma’s studio’s over here, we’ll trade a bit.”

Emma’s studio turned out to be a basement room under what appeared to be an overgrown, cottage-size terrarium. There were skylights that angled from the ground to a rocky deck that formed the base of the terrarium. Aliana led Sarah down a spiraling metal staircase into the cool basement room. She used controls on the wall to slide back covers from some of the skylights and slide colored filters over others. It was a little like standing inside a kaleidoscope, if a kaleidoscope had a springy wood floor and ballet bars on the mirrored walls.

Aliana pulled her long hair back into a scrunchy, which had previously seemed to be a bracelet. She pulled her shoulders back, dropped her arms to her sides and gave her knee a sudden jerk up and back down.

“Start with that.”

Sarah was shocked by the suddenness of it all. When had she last fallen into the role of student? Could she move that way in her new Easter clothes? But her body responded by matching the woman’s posture and step. Her tapered silk flew with the quick motions, and immediately she was into the dance.

They continued like that, Aliana demonstrating, Sarah copying, with Aliana giving a few bits of instruction “toes down . . . chin up” now and then. It was like the most intense moments of gymnastics practice, when Sarah was completely centered in her own mind and her body took on an
energy she could barely shape. She’d never before felt that passion while working directly with another athlete.

Just as Sarah felt she’d grasped the fundamental stance and rhythm of the dance, Aliana said, “Now show me what you do.”

Sarah’s eyes cast about for a mat, knowing there was nothing but wood floor. Then the routine that had begun to form in her mind as she watched Emma’s video came back full force. Sarah was in the rhythm. She started along one wall with some of the steps she’d just learned leading into a handstand with a kick down, then she set out diagonally across the room taking the rhythm into a round-off, flip-flop, back flip. Her hands and feet slapped against the floor, sending tingles through her nerves. It was fool-hardy, unorthodox, and it worked. At the landing Sarah felt success, or maybe creation, wash over her.

“Exquisite,” Aliana gasped. “Show me how to do the handstand part.”

Sarah began to comply, but from upside down she heard fast steps clanking down the metal stairs. “What are you doing?”

Righting herself, Sarah saw it was Emma, petite but clearly entering adolescence, charging in as only a teenager on her home turf could.

“Emma, come see this. She’s combined basic step dancing with gymnastics. We must have her in the troop.”

“You don’t even know her!”

“But watch –”

“I saw. I don’t care what she can do. Anyway, my parents want to speak with her.”

“Oh good. Maybe they’d support an addition to our program.”

“Don’t count on it.” Emma’s glare turned to Sarah, “Come on.”

Sarah was shocked as she abruptly pulled out of the dance-gymnastics mindspace she and Aliana had shared. How long had she been down here? She’d forgotten all about Reggie and the party. And why were the elder Johnson’s looking for her? She forgave Emma her rudeness as she kicked herself for getting so caught up. She said a quick goodbye to Aliana and followed the Johnson girl upstairs. Outside, Emma led her away from the courtyard to a place behind buildings.

“What are you up to?”

“We were just dancing and –”

“I don’t know who you are or how I’m supposed to act toward you, but you stay away from Aliana or I’ll warn her.”

“What? I don’t think –”

“Don’t talk to me. Just go away.”

“I thought your parents wanted to see me?”

“I lied. I just want you to go away.”

“I think there’s been some misunderstanding.”

“Go away now, or I’m going to scream.”

Sarah was completely baffled. Her muscles tingled with the memory of new movement; her stomach curdled at the fury in front of her. She’d rarely seen the girls she worked with so upset with anyone but themselves. To tolerate this from a stranger seemed degrading. And yet, what could she do? Emma lived here, there was a party going on. Sarah was all sweaty beneath her fine clothes anyway. She might as well leave and hope things sorted out later.

She said to Emma, with more patience than she felt, “I’m sorry for whatever upset you. Perhaps we can work it out some other time.”

Then before anything else could happen, she left.

Chapter 14
April 21, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand
James had spent the morning setting up experiments he’d like to run. He’d even asked, well told, Alak to clear Sarah and Reggie to hear about his work. Yesterday had been the best day of his life since he moved to Thailand. Even if Sarah was just one teek, that would give him three genotypes to study, rather than two. The additional revelation of their relationship, however embarrassing, even explained the latest note without disparaging his research. Adding Reggie’s strange ability to all of that was like finding moas in New Zealand, so unexpected he wouldn’t mind even if it failed to pan out.

James caught himself with one foot extended, about to pace, now that all his preparations were complete. He forced himself to fiddle with the British schizophrenic DNA rather than getting worked up while he waited.

When he finally heard a knock, James sprang to the door and was surprised that Sarah and Reggie just stood there, peering in, looking tired and a little overheated.

“Come in,” he motioned inward, then forced himself not to repeat the motion as they moved unbearably slowly.

“Sorry we’re late,” Sarah said, as James shut the door. “We didn’t have a map of the university, and we got a little lost.”

“Oh, sorry.” He tried to lead them across the room and ended up having to wait at the far end. “I’ve set up two quick tests for Reggie. And if you’re ready to run some DNA, I could process that while we’re talking.”

“Ah,” Sarah buried her hands in her pockets, “You said we could discuss things first. I’ve spent most of my life avoiding DNA tests.”

James vaguely remembered this issue from the day before, but he wouldn’t let himself imagine she’d refuse. “Right. What do you want to know? Reggie, should I start your DNA sequencing?”

Reggie smiled, “Let’s talk first. Are you in a hurry?”

“No, not especially. Sequencing is just so slow, but what do you want to discuss?” James shifted from foot to foot and tried not to tap his toes.

“Well, you said you knew the genetics for telepathy. Is that all you want to test for? Could you explain a little more?” Sarah asked.

“Telepathy appears to be a simple recessive. The sequence is so new that there’s nearly no variation among telepaths even though the normal allele is completely different and mostly junk. The telepathy variant probably first appeared in China two or three hundred years ago. Some group of teeps brought it to the U.S., to California, almost immediately. For reasons we can’t know, they spread their genes surprisingly widely with non-Chinese. I recently isolated what may be the precursor sequence for telepathy, in a British population. I don’t know what it does yet. That part’s top secret, by the way.

“I have two complete teek genotypes on file also. Having a third would give me a much better chance of understanding those genetics.”

“You could ask Howard. He’s pretty casual about his teek.”

“Howard?” James couldn’t place the name at first. “One of the Chens? He’s a teek?”

“Yeah, so if you just want a third sample—“

“That’s wonderful,” and it was, but he couldn’t let Sarah’s data slip away like that, “You have to understand, trying to solve a multifactoral problem like this with even four samples, may be an impossible challenge. You’re data could be invaluable, especially if you turn out not to have the telepathy sequence. We haven’t previously looked for telekinesis in non-telepaths. I’m authorized to pay you quite well, by the way.”

“And you share what you find with the Thai government?” Sarah asked.

“I have a scientific liaison who oversees my funding and my classified research, but I’m the only person with access who really understands it. What are you worried about?”

Sarah’s eyes looked damp and her words came a little faster. “I don’t want to be used as a weapon prototype. I don’t want to be cloned or have my DNA spliced into other people who might be used as tools. I don’t want anyone else with my abilities tracked down based on my DNA.”

Reggie put a protective arm around Sarah’s shoulders, and James realized they were all still standing.
He moved two chairs in front of his desk and by the time he reached his own the others were seated. Sarah no longer looked close to tears, but James couldn’t help feeling guilty. What seemed a windfall to him created a painful decision for her, and he’d never dealt with such a reaction. He had to have the data, but he didn’t know how to explain the rightness of it to Sarah. “What about science?” James asked in a voice suddenly soft and slow. “Should we stop trying to understand because we might face tough choices? This is what we are, how we work. Anyway, there’s a good chance the Chinese have already figured out teeks. Someone will figure it out whether you help or not, and they’re much more likely to do the sorts of things you fear. Or what if they make a targeted virus? What if they wipe out all other teeps and teeks on the planet just because we didn’t figure out the genetics fast enough?”

“Are you sure the Chinese know?”

James sensed a “yes” would get them both what they wanted, but he couldn’t lie that way. “Nothing’s sure with the Chinese. But they started their program first. They have more subjects to study and more researchers working on it. They’re likely to find out faster.” “Would you be willing to run the tests, look at the results, then delete my information?” “Why?” James bridled at the unreasonableness of humans even as his scientific self assured him the offer was enough. “I needn’t label anything with your name or even teep or teek.” “It would be like having a kid around that I couldn’t watch out for.”

“We can’t build people from the code yet.”

“But they will. And they build viruses that insert bits into people.” “There are a number of reasons that’s unlikely in this case.” “In thirty years?”

“No one can predict that far ahead.”

Sarah sat silently. Reggie took her hand and said, “Look James, I think she just offered to let you test the DNA if you’ll erase it afterward. It’s a better offer than I would have expected her to make to anyone, even you.”

Was Reggie alluding to that genetic daughter or sister link? Was that the only reason Sarah was cooperating at all? Strange that it should matter when they’d only met yesterday, but James wasn’t going to miss any chance at this data. “Okay, I’ll take your deal. What about you Reggie, can I keep your genotype on file, unidentified?”

“I’m still not sure why you want it.”

“I’m not either. But if it matches someplace interesting, then I’ll know. I’m a geneticist. You have a strange ability. I ought to at least check if it’s genetic. It would really help if I could keep yours on file though, at least until I can compare to someone else who spots telepaths.”

“I still think it’s just body language or something. And it fits so well with how I imagined elves when I was little. There must have been others who could do this and made the people they identified into legends.”

“That would be interesting, since the current teep genetics don’t seem to go back that far. But Thailand doesn’t have any social scientists with clearance for this. Maybe if I learn more about the precursor sequence. It may connect to schizophrenia, and that might connect to people historically seen as witches or elves or whatever. So I’ll just do my best from the genetics angle. I also have some videos to test you on. Don’t ask how I got them. They gave me money to pay you, too. Now can we test?”

Finally, they let him take blood samples. He could only run one at a time. So he ran Sarah’s first, in case she wanted to stay while he analyzed it and then see it deleted.

While it was running, he set Reggie up watching video clips. He asked Sarah to try to guess too. Might as well gather as much information as possible with these imprecise means.

The clips were mostly of conferences and diplomatic events. The first showed three men in suits walking up stone steps at the embassy. “That’s one,” Reggie pointed to the man in the middle. James stood carefully out of view and recorded who Reggie identified and by which frame. They continued.

Reggie’s body language hypothesis seemed plausible, in that he identified teeps who were walking
around almost instantly. The less active the person was, the longer it seemed to take. Reggie identified all of the known teeps correctly, including the two known teeks. Sarah identified two teeps on her own, but she noted they were making unusual eye contact, and even James could sort of see that on re-inspection. Whatever Reggie was seeing, seemed to be invisible to Sarah and James. When the video finished, James said, “Well, you identified twenty-three out of twenty-three with only one false positive. Could be the false positive is an unidentified teep. Did you notice anything about how you did it, anything you can explain?”

“Just something in how they move, some sort of tension? They still remind me of elves.”

James shook his head. “Where’d you develop your image of elves?”

“Stories my father told me. Things I read as a boy. I don’t remember anyone describing their movements. But they left certain pictures in my head.”

“Are you a very visual thinker?”

“Maybe.”

“I can check the genetics on that, too. Let me pull up data on learning styles and synesthaesia while I’m at it. Sarah’s genotype should be done any minute. Then I’ll start yours.”

He went to his server, set up what he needed for Reggie’s analysis, then started on the data for Sarah, which was 98% complete.

“Well, Sarah, your DNA says you’re a teep.”

“But I’m not. Is there anyone else who has the gene but can’t use it?” Reggie still sat across the room, by the desk, looking at nothing. Sarah now stood peering over James’ shoulder at the screen. He tapped some more keys, not bothering to explain the numerical display.

“Not that we’ve found. But our general samples are rather limited. Still, many people are blind despite genetics for perfect vision. There could be physical or psychological factors, or some other loci could inhibit telepathy. That would be interesting to know. Could I just keep this for a few days of study?”

“No. Check what you want to now, but I want it deleted when you’re done.”

Sarah’s genotype was now fully sequenced. James started Reggie’s sample then glanced at Sarah who still hovered just inches behind him. Her hands were crammed into the pockets of her jeans and her weight seemed to shift between her heels and her toes.

“Okay, let’s see what you don’t have in common with any of the other teeps on file. Then we’ll check where you match just the other teeks.” The computer analyses were relatively fast. James helped the Thai government more for the facilities allotted him than for his salary. He set up tests for everything he could think of, including all the sequences he’d used in research and all the well understood sequences that were public knowledge. As the results started to come in, he wondered how much to tell Sarah.

“There’s no one place you match the two teeks without matching some of the teeps on file. That’s a bit surprising. But since both other teeks have teep relatives here, that weeds out some of the noise. I’d guessed from analyzing the two of them that we would need multiple sites on the genome to explain telekinesis. How about if I mark on one of them which sites all three of you share. Surely I can save that much before I delete your data?”

“You can’t just remember it?”

“Have I mentioned that human DNA is three times ten to the ninth base pairs long?”

“But if you mark all the places the three of us are the same, won’t that be the same as saving most of my genome?”

James sighed; his honesty made him say, “Yes.”

He modified his previous analysis. “Okay. How about this? Here we have segments you three teeks have in common that no more than ten percent of the general population shares.”

“How much is it?”

“Two-hundred and twenty sections of 500 to 5000 bases each.”

“How would you mark them on someone else’s data.”

“Mark them as matching data set 102599?”

“You remember my birthdate?”
“I’m good with numbers.”
“Wish I’d inherited that. Could you use something less obvious?”
“Make up a six digit number.”
“850381”
James typed it in, his insides jumpy with tentative success, and he tried not to smile or fidget. “Okay, let’s see what else we’ve got. You want to know your medical risks?”
“Okay.”
“First, you have two segments I discovered, only one could be from my side.” James tugged one index finger and then the other as the impact of his statement hit him. Was it chance that Sarah had both of the segments he’d been researching? Could the person sending him notes have known? But how could anyone know? Did “work” in the note only refer to his father’s business? How could the sender know Sarah had these sequences if she’d avoided all DNA tests? She could have been tested covertly, or the sender might know the genetics required for her ability.
“What?” Sarah asked.
James released a finger in mid-tug. “Well, this one’s correlated with mood disorders, especially bipolar, and I carry it also. This one I just discovered, but it seems to show up in paranoid schizophrenics.”
“Great.”
“Oh, sorry. You’re still not very likely to have or develop either condition. Both disorders have complex determinants. This bipolar correlate shows up in 12% of the general population. The two other teeks I have on file each have one of these sequences.” He mentioned aloud as he flipped through correlates. “And they also show up in combination with the telepathy predecessor sequence I found.”
James meant to be careful what he shared after that, but Sarah showed so much interest that he ended up telling her all about her cancer risks and anything else that showed up in his scans. They easily passed the hour it took for Reggie’s DNA to sequence.
James ran a quick analysis of Reggie’s genotype to see if he might have the telepathy sequence or it’s precursor, but there was nothing so obvious. He left it for later, since Reggie had agreed to let him keep that genotype on file.
He went back to studying Sarah’s until he’d checked everything he could rationally think to test. Despite her lack of formal training, she seemed to follow what he was saying reasonably well, and stayed interested for most of the time his analyses took. In the end, she did insist he delete the data, and Reggie, who clearly knew a bit about computers, had him clear away all sorts of possible back-up records.
“Well, it’s dinnertime,” Sarah said. “Want to join us?”
“No, I think I’ll stay and do some analyses on Reggie’s DNA.”
“Could I come back in a few days to hear the highlights?” Reggie asked.
“If you want,” James shrugged, already pulling up new correlates, feeling the pull of new data.
“Sure, thanks.”

Minutes after they left there was another knock at his door.
“Yes?” James grunted without looking up from the analysis.
As the door opened and shut, someone answered telepathically. “Hi. I’m Lisa. We met at the Johnson’s party? My brother Robert’s going to be doing some work with you?”
James remembered Robert’s earnest sociability at the party, and reminded himself to see a potential research assistant as a gift and not an invasion. He turned around trying to connect the girl before him to his vague memories of Robert’s family. She was wearing a red silk top with a very wide neck, and James remembered the delicate collarbones and neck stretching up from a similar neckline at the Easter party. He also remembered what Sarah had said about a teek in that family. “I remember. Did you need something?”
“I was walking by and thought maybe you’d like to get a bite to eat? I’m sort of on my own for dinner.”
“Sorry. I’ve got some work to do. You know, it’s just been pointed out to me that talking this way casually might look suspicious to non-telepaths. We usually speak aloud about everyday things around here.”

“Oh. Until recently the only teeps I knew were my family. We always spoke this way together. Who spotted you?”

“No, it wasn’t like that. You arrived with Reggie and Sarah, right? It turns out Reggie can spot telepaths with amazing accuracy. He thinks he’s just watching body language. But neither Sarah nor I can do it. We did notice some unusual looking eye contact between people speaking telepathically in a public place.”

“This is hardly a public place.”

“True.”

There was a pause and James scanned a few more screens of data. Then Lisa said, “So you were having Reggie spot telepaths?”

“Just on video.”

“I thought you were a biologist?”

“Geneticist, really. I ran their genotypes in addition to the video test.”

“You think spotting us is genetic?”

“It’s possible, but I can’t learn much from just one sample.”

“And Sarah’s?”

“Found the sequence for telepathy. Still haven’t figured out telekinesis. That’s classified, by the way.”

“Just from non-telepaths, I assume?”

“Or anyone not working for Thailand.”

“Sure, but the whole teep community here seems to work for the government.”

“Just about.”

“So, you think Sarah’s lying about not being a telepath?”

James truly looked at Lisa for the first time and shook his head; that possibility hadn’t even occurred to him. He stood and moved toward his cabinet of collection kits. “Probably something else is wrong, some brain injury or trauma.”

“That’s what you’re working on?”

“No, I checked Sarah’s with her here, then erased it.”

“And Reggie’s?”

“I can keep and follow the science through. Speaking of which, if I send home these sample kits with you, could you ask Robert to bring samples from your whole family when he comes in Wednesday.”

“I could.” She answered with a shrug that crimped her fine neck but lowered the neckline of her blouse in a tantalizing way. James quickly looked away. “I should get back to work.”

“Sure you don’t want dinner first?”

“People keep asking. Do I look like I’m starving?”

“No, you look fine,” she said, briefly touching his hand. “Maybe we just like your company.”

He handed her the sample kits and stepped around to open the door. She smiled and looked back over her shoulder as she left.

When she was gone, James reabsorbed himself in examining Reggie’s DNA. Later, he set to cleaning up the lab. He gathered the classified footage of teeps and his rate of identification notes. As he removed the slide that held Sarah’s blood sample, he realized there was still enough there to rerun the analysis.

He hadn’t meant to lie to her. He was usually a very honest person, within reason. But that sample could be so useful scientifically, and he knew he could bury the data where no one would ever find it. After a few moments hesitation, James put the slide back in the machine and restarted the sequencer.

Then he realized he hadn’t paid Sarah or Reggie. Neither of them had even asked directly about the money, and that was careless of them. He’d been authorized to offer a lot, especially to Sarah, since teeks were so rare, but they should have had to negotiate to get top pay.
James glanced at Reggie’s data on his computer screen and at the sequencer he’d just restarted. He ordered checks sent to both Sarah and Reggie for the highest approved amount.

Chapter 15
April 25, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand

Reggie stood beside Sarah on a dock in front of the Oriental Hotel. Since he’d been raised thinking the term “Oriental” was almost as insulting as “Nigger,” he couldn’t help but wonder how Tom, with his Berkeley education, regarded the place. The hotel itself bore the simple lines and mottled blue-gray tones of modern waterfront resorts, with no allowance for traditional Asian architecture. Then a gaudy boat decorated in red and gold pulled near the pier. Its bow was carved like a serpentine dragon, and the oarsman was a muscular young man in loose silk trousers and little else. Reggie handed him the card Tom had sent, which included their reservation time, table number, some writing in Thai, and directions to give the card to their escort at the dock. The boatman took the card, brought his hands to his face in the prayer-like gesture shown on Thai travel posters, and gazed up at them with bold, brown eyes. Then he said, “Sa-wa-di-krap, welcome,” and helped them onto the boat.

Reggie wondered if they were underdressed, in light cotton evening clothes, Sarah having chosen not to wear a dress or any jewelry. She sat beside him on a polished wood bench, totally caught up in the experience. As they began to move she dragged one finger in the water, thoughtless of any sanitary concerns. Reggie slid his arm behind her, wanting to share her perception of the moment. As they neared the main restaurant, which floated mid-river, Reggie noticed the sweet, clean scent of Sarah’s hair combining with the spicy odor of the bare-chested boatman. The combination reminded him of Tom on the day they arrived, perhaps a locally popular cologne combined with soap or lotion? The juxtaposition was more enticing than either part.

The island restaurant they circled looked like a Thai palace, covered with carved wood and golden spires. In the setting sun it seemed to glow, and appeared much more authentic than the boat. Still, seeing the sun glint off the oiled shoulders of their paddling boatman, Reggie had to wonder what sort of place Tom had chosen. As they came around behind the faux palace, they saw a dozen glinting boats, scattered fifty to a hundred meters apart. Their escort steered them toward one tethered craft. It was about fifteen feet long, more gaudy than elegant. The cabin on top had gold lame curtains, which were currently pulled back to reveal Tom, seated at a low table. He nodded as they arrived. The boatman helped them from one boat to the other, then departed with a bow of head and shoulders. Tom poured tea. As Reggie sat down he noted the back section of the cabin was covered with cushions.

“How are you, Tom? We missed you at the party,” Reggie began.

“Something came up.”

Reggie acknowledged the innuendo with a glance. He recognized that Tom wished to play the role of lord, and he’d already assumed the part of skeptic. Tom tilted his head and smiled. “Speaking of which—”

Another bare-chested man dressed in red silk trousers paddled toward them. He tied his boat alongside and carried up a covered platter. Setting it on the table, he removed the lid and savory steam poured out. The tray held an assortment of appetizers surrounded by carved fruit and flowers. Whatever misgivings Reggie felt about the chosen location, the food was a work of art. Tom spoke to the waiter in Thai. He nodded and went back to his boat.

“Is he going to paddle back and forth all the time?” Sarah asked.

“Yes,” Tom answered, “Unless we ask him to stay and entertain us for a while.”

“Do you mean—“

“We can access his health history online, including recent tests for all the common diseases. Would you like to see?” Tom held out his phone with a web scan window on the display.
“No, that’s okay.” Sarah sat back in her chair. “Can we talk here?”
“Of course.”
Reggie imagined hidden listening devices or smart dust that self-organized a network where it settled. He visualized himself searching the cabin and owning top-of-the-line detectors to do it right. Then he pictured his disappointment at finding nothing and concluding the three of them just weren’t that important.
Meanwhile, Sarah asked, “Could you tell me about normal people with closed minds?”
Tom sighed like a hissing python as he leaned back, stretching his tight opalescent green shirt until it almost untucked from his black leather pants. “Hardly normal. If you really want to know, most of them had terrible things happen to them in their youth, various abuse, especially rape.”
“Too bad they weren’t teeps or teeks,” Sarah scowled.
“Why?”
“I figure, a teep would know if someone intended to harm them, and, well, no one should try to rape a teek.” Sarah looked down as she spoke, but Tom winced forward as if kicked below the waist. “Lovely, I’ll remember that. Why don’t you tell me what you think of Bangkok?”
Tom and Sarah chatted pleasantly through the appetizers and soup. It wasn’t until after the obsequious server brought their main course that Reggie mentioned his main concern. “Do you know how the U.S. regards us now? Can I safely call my work contacts? Could I have my belongings shipped over?”
“Intelligence on the U.S. is highly variable. If they’ve sent messages about you to their foreign embassies, someone here would probably know, but I haven’t heard anything. What do you want to set up?”
“Nothing specific yet. I worked with a non-profit in the states, but most of our projects were international. I’m wondering if I could still be useful to them or if I need to start fresh.”
Tom half-smirked. “If they had any secrets, your government probably already snooped them. If you work with them openly, they’ll probably stay under surveillance. You should get a PAD if you’re going to call the U.S. a lot.”
“Oh shit.”
“What?”
“Just some business with PAD that I left dangling. Anything happen with them recently?”
“No idea. I don’t really follow the news.”
Reggie had a knee jerk reaction to people ignorant of current events, but he suppressed it. It seemed a bit hypocritical at the moment.
Tom turned to Sarah and said, “Do you still want to see Angkor Wat? I could arrange something for you.”
As Tom and Sarah talked, both leaning toward each other now, Reggie felt strange misgivings. Not that he’d ever particularly trusted Tom, but this evening he distinctly doubted the man. Was he jealous, or paranoid?
Reggie remembered his father counseling him before he left for the Peace Corps. Dad sat in his leather chair by the fire, eyes squinting into the flames. “Reggie, there are many kinds of people out there. I’ve always managed to find the honest ones. You trust your instincts, and I think you can too.”
Reggie wondered if he should call his folks. Had the government investigated them as well? While he turned over the possibilities, their server arrived with dessert.
“Should I ask him to stay?” Tom whispered, a mockery of his usual flirtatiousness. “You could sample another local dish?”
Sarah shook her head and Reggie offered a gentle, “No thanks.”
Tom smiled, clearly baiting them for fun now. When they’d finished the fruit and icy deserts he asked, “Have you worked through those Puritan ideas about teek sex?”
Sarah blushed.
Reggie figured Tom was harassing her for fun. He must know by now that she wasn’t interested.
“The problem is,” Reggie said with a melodramatic shrug, “If she pins me to the ceiling while teasing
me, there’s always the risk she’ll get distracted and I’ll fall back down. It’s rather hard on the bed.”
Tom glanced at the low ceiling of the boat, “If you’re into aerial demonstrations, just close the
curtains and make me a pin-up.”
Sarah mimed considering it for a moment. She leaned her head sideways, then gave it a shake and
laughed.

They returned to light conversation until Tom signaled for a boat to shuttle them back to the dock.

After Sarah closed the door to their hotel room that night, she leaned against it for several moments.
Reggie removed his shoes, then sat on the bed and waited.
“We’ve never talked about the whole teek sex thing, except with Tom.”

“True,” Reggie replied, instantly warming to the topic, though unsure where Sarah was headed.

“Have you been thinking about it? That whole bit with the ceiling—”

“He was trying to embarrass you. I just tried to distract him.”

“But had you thought of it ahead of time?”

“Yes, more as an amusement than an actual desire.”

“Were there actual desires?” Sarah was not asking flirtatiously. She was still sticking to the door,
looking distinctly uncomfortable. Reggie was torn between a suspicion that he could have some
fantasies played out tonight and realizing that Sarah needed someone sympathetic to discuss the
possibilities.

“Come over here. Let’s talk.” When she perched two feet away from him, he reached out to hold her
hand. It was cold.

“I’ve used teek so much these last few days,” she said, “But I still don’t know where it comes from
or how it works.”

“And it worries you?”

“It would be better to know. But I don’t think I’m going to find out, and I feel sort of, sort of robbed
not using it when no one else seems to worry.”

“Does it feel wrong to use it?”

“No. Sometimes it hurts to keep it a secret, but being able to do stuff feels pretty good. That’s really
conceited, isn’t it?”

“You’re one of the least conceited people I know. You can do something amazing. It’s a gift.”
She was silent as he stroked her hand and then moved closer. He wondered if it was time to move on
to something more intimate, and gently stroked down her side, just skimming her breast. She took a
deep breath. His attraction increased. He felt an invisible hand glide from his cheekbone, down his
neck, across his chest and stomach to his groin and thigh. His body responded without hesitation.

“So tell me what you’ve imagined,” Sarah said.
And he did.

Chapter 16
April 26 – May 10, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand

Saturday found them back at the Johnson’s for tea. Sarah stood in a sitting room filled with
adjustable furniture, beanbags, and swings. The different shapes, textures, and colors fit no unifying
theme except that they might all be considered chairs. Sarah gazed around like a museum visitor
who’d just happened into the “Sitting” Room.
Several pieces seemed the image of comfort, but Sarah did not feel comfortable. Reggie had
suggested conservative clothing, not knowing what their hosts would expect. Now Sarah wriggled
her shoulders against the seams of her fitted blouse and her toes inside stiff new shoes.
Mr. Johnson, Samuel as he wanted to be called, wore dark suit pants and a white button shirt, but
somehow eased casually into a chair shaped like Charlie Brown’s broken kite. Reggie settled, despite
his tie and jacket, into a similar canvas contraption supported asymmetrically by metal poles at the
corners. Sarah would have chosen a swing seat if she’d been with people she knew, but here she
wouldn’t know whether or not to swing. Fearing she’d attract attention if she didn’t choose fast, she plopped into a relatively normal but overstuffed chair. It would have been fine if she wanted to curl her feet up and take a nap, but in the current situation, she felt like she’d jumped into quicksand. Oh well, at least the trap was velvety soft. She leaned back to feel the fuzzy fabric stroke her neck.

Mrs. Johnson, or Ida, a thin Chinese woman with streaks of gray through hair wrapped back in a bun, wore a sarong and served good Thai tea as if no one’s culture was any obstacle for her. Sarah barely tasted the tea. While Samuel, Ida, and Reggie were chatting as if nothing had happened, Sarah kept glancing toward the door, expecting Emma to pounce upon her and make a scene.

“I hear you turned down a government job. Do you have something else lined up?” Samuel asked Reggie.

“I was co-founder of an NGO back in the states. Thought I’d wait and see if I could work with it from here or if I should start up something new.”

“Admirable. Of course, you could always take the government money as well. They won’t expect you to work too hard for it, and you might find civil service interesting.” Ida touched her husband’s arm and smiled. “Samuel was a diplomat for thirty years, first for the Americans and then setting up the ‘mental differences’ legislation here. He only thinks the work was easy because he enjoyed it too much to notice.”

“And who’s to say Reggie wouldn’t feel the same?” Samuel asked with a lift of his eyebrows.

“You set that up?” Sarah asked, drawn back to the conversation. “I did,” Samuel sighed. “The U.S. was just starting to use telepaths as agents then, mostly for their war on terrorism. Already on the diplomatic track, I was one of the first they found. There was a rumor Thailand was gathering its own force; so they sent me here to snoop. I didn’t find anyone in the government, but I met Ida. She had me hopelessly smitten before she introducing me to her friends, mostly escapees from China, an energetic group of intellectuals, artists, and telepaths.”

Samuel gazed at his wife with an intimacy at once touching and embarrassing to Sarah. She couldn’t tell if there was telepathy in play, but Ida took over the story.

“We were a community, but we had no ties to any government until the U.S. started worrying. Then Samuel defected and quietly arranged for laws to protect us and attract others.”

“How many are here now?”

“Many,” Ida slid her eyes evasively. “Only two other teeks before you and Howard came. And of course, you’re unique.”

“You’ve also attracted the interest of our daughter and her mentor, Aliana,” Samuel said, not so casually.

Sarah cringed and went cold, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset them.”

“Upset them?” Samuel chuckled. “They’ve both been after me all week to hire you or give you a grant or somehow bring you into their little troop.”

“Are you sure? At the party, Emma seemed rather annoyed with me.” Sarah struggled to sit forward in the overly comfy chair, even as she struggled to reconcile her memory of Emma with what her father was saying now.

“Oh, was she? Well, she’s young and emotional.” Ida nodded toward Sarah as if she were hardly any older than Emma and might not fully understand. “We’d been told ahead that you were a teek and not a teep, but Emma knew nothing other than that your mind was closed and she’d first seen you talking to James. She may have jumped to conclusions.”

Sarah wondered what etiquette she should have followed then or now, but she didn’t want to ask. So she waited, soothing herself with small shifts back into the velvet quicksand.

“Anyway, we don’t really have a job to offer you. But if you’re still looking for accommodations, we have a guest cottage you could take for the summer, and maybe that would allow you to volunteer with the dance troop and teach Emma gymnastics or whatever she and Aliana are so enthused about.”

“Well, thank you. That’s a very generous offer. We’d need a little time to think it over, and I’d like to speak with Emma—”

Samuel pulled a phone from his pocket, hit a key and spoke into it. “Emma, would you like to show
Sarah and Reggie the guesthouse?” There was a pause, “Yes, they’re here now, in the sitting room.”
A moment, and then he hung up. “She’s out on her scooter somewhere, but she said she’d be back in
two minutes.”

The guesthouse turned out to be the terrarium room over the dance studio. Sarah paused on the deck
with Emma, hoping for a private conversation. The deck looked like a mosaic of colorful rocks, a
larger version of what covered the bottom of every kid’s fish tank. But the rocks were molded from
thick insulating rubber, which felt surprisingly cool and springy through the cheap soles of Sarah’s
new shoes. Sarah wanted to squat down and touch the rubber rocks, but residual burns from her last
encounter with Emma kept her focused.

“Forgive me, Emma, but I’m a bit confused—“
“Sure. I was dumb last time. But no one tells me anything. And Aliana, I guess you can’t hear her,
but she has the most beautiful mind. She—“

Emma broke off and her eyes searched Sarah with an intensity that would have made Sarah suspect
telepathy back when she didn’t know it existed.

“I’m not sure how to talk to you,” Emma said, seeming much older than she had last weekend. “I’ve
only been telepathic for a little while. Even before that, I knew Aliana was special. She was the one
person who seemed to love dance the way I did. But now, I know how she affects telepaths, like
father and those in the troop. She doesn’t just love dance; she loves lots of things. She passes from
complete obsession with dance, to some slurpy, childish joy while eating an orange, and on to the
most pure concern for someone telling her a personal story. It’s overwhelming. Her mind is this
intense, swooping ride.”

Sarah was mesmerized by Emma’s words. No adult had ever explained telepathy this way to her.
Was it adolescent interpretation? Perhaps even a bit of puppy love for an older woman? Or was
Aliana really that unusual?

Emma looked down now, kicking at the deck with her foot. It gave a bit under each kick. “She was
obsessed with you at that moment when I came in. I-- I assumed you were a teep and were sort of
riding the thrill of it. It seemed unfair to her, like an invasion. Then you didn’t answer me, and I
wasn’t sure if you were a teep or on some errand for that scientist. I don’t know. I was confused and
Aliana’s thoughts were so loud! I lost my temper.”

Sarah tried to reconcile her image of Emma as an out-of-control, spoiled brat with the vulnerable,
sincere girl fidgeting in front of her. It would be stupid to move in here and get tangled in this, but it
would also be interesting. Sarah missed the girls she had coached back home. She needed a place to
work out and keep her body strong. And even without telepathy, her experience with Aliana . . . Of
course she’d have to think and talk to Reggie. But on an honest level, Sarah knew she was hooked.

The sun was bright as a face-on camera flash that Tuesday when Sarah and Reggie moved into the
fishtank. Reggie had discovered some handmade, fused glass turtles, which he’d brought along to
personalize their new home. He suspended one next to a primordial fern that hung from the ceiling,
adding to the underwater illusion. Then there were the window snails, a recent development in the
Roomba household helpers line. These opalescent thumbnail-size robots hid window-cleaning
equipment under their shells. Reggie affixed one to each window and let it begin its random walk,
keeping the glass clean, just like old, biological snails that tidied up fish-sized aquariums. Sarah
thought it would take a hundred years of window cleaning to justify the cost of the pseudo-snails, but
Reggie had been in techno-withdrawal and couldn’t resist this innovation that fit so well with their
décor.

Other than the turtles and snails, they had almost nothing to unpack, so Reggie was soon busy with
his other electronic indulgence. After dozens of trips to internet cafes and struggling to find a clock
because he didn’t have his cell phone, Reggie had bought a PAD. He insisted on showing Sarah
how to insert the SIM card from a regular GSM phone. While the SIM card was supposed to identify
a caller to the network at large, Reggie explained, in the PAD system a second microprocessor acted
as a false SIM, allowing PAD to constantly change the data given out, with a system only their
The company could track. The lower section of the phone allowed it to use satellites when wireless and cell services were unavailable or uncooperative.

One of Reggie’s first twenty phone calls that afternoon was to some storage place in the states. He seemed to think he could have their old belonging sent by boat in a few weeks, though he mumbled about the risk of loss in container shipping. Sarah, who’d been afraid to contact anyone, in case the American government was still upset, wondered if their stuff would be allowed out and if it would be searched or bugged on the way. Still, it was being sent to a dock, not an address. Since she’d expected to never retrieve anything from home, there was little to lose.

Her stomach growled like an empty garbage disposal. Reggie was still on the phone so she grabbed a canvas bag and headed out to buy groceries. At the archway, she almost collided with Howard, who was just entering the Johnson’s courtyard.

“Hey Howard, what brings you this way?”
“Came to help you move in.”
“We don’t have any stuff.”
“Easy work then.”

Sarah rolled the braided handle of her shopping bag between her fingers. Howard smiled at her like the meeting was chance and he just happened to be free all day. “I was about to go grocery shopping. Want to come?”
“Sure. Where’s Reggie?”
“On his new PAD. He’s decided it’s safe to call business contacts back home, and everywhere.”
“You don’t think so?”
“Dunno. I’d worry about spreading trouble to others, but Reggie’s friends—well, I think some of them like trouble.”
“I see. I haven’t called anyone. Other than my cousins, who came with me, I don’t think I had any close friends.”
“Really?”
“No one I’d bother to explain to. What would I say?”
“Yeah, I feel really bad for the kids I used to work with. They must think I ran out on them, but what could I say that would help? I haven’t even called the executor for my Mom’s estate. She’s the type who worries too, but she’d see through my excuses. I guess I’ve been hiding all my life, but now, I’ve gone beyond explanation, like some kind of monster.”

Howard looked at her sideways as they walked. “It’s a gift.” He touched his hand to her shoulder, and Sarah remembered how awkward she’d felt with him that first day. They hadn’t developed any new understanding, but the high drama of the last few weeks made him seem like an old friend. Also, there weren’t any doubt in his eyes the way there were with Reggie. Howard had always known what she was.

“So have you settled in? Found a job?” Sarah asked.
“My aunt’s brokered her way into the Chinese teep community. That woman makes connections the way other people make dinner plans. Someone found her a place in this apartment complex that’s almost all Chinese teeps. She gave me a room and made it clear that I need to stay near them. But at least she doesn’t arrange my social life the way she schedules her own kids.”
“Do they mind?”
“Naw, they’re used to it. Rob would probably forget to eat if no one planned meals for him. And I think Lisa’s studying to fill her Mom’s shoes. She set up government fellowships for herself, Rob, and me; so we’re studying at Bangkok University. No specific strings attached, but we’ll see. Can’t be worse than the U.S. arrangement.”
“Good to hear. So no one regrets coming along?”

Howard laughed through his nose. “That’s an understatement. My relations are very proud people. The U.S. said outright that they’d control us. The Thais may or may not have better intentions, but they understand about saving face.”
“I guess that’s good. It sounds like you all fit in much better than Reggie and I do.”
“There’s a lot of American teeps as well.”
“No teeks though.”
“Yeah, I try to play that down myself. Are people asking you for silly demonstrations?”
“No. They just don’t know what to do with me and Reggie ‘cause we’re not teeps. I shouldn’t complain though. We’ve been pretty lucky.”
“Well, I’ll leave you my address and phone number. If you’re ever lonely for another teek, just call.” Sarah kicked herself for being skeptical of his motives as he said that. Howard was a nice guy. He and his relatives had been extremely good to her.
“Did I mention it’s a two kilometer walk to the store?”
“No, but with you, I try to be ready for anything.” He raised one eyebrow and smiled.

That night in the aquarium Sarah tossed and turned as if she was at sea. The face of Captain Joe loomed large above her. His gun waved into her line of sight, and she felt it hit hard and heavy above one ear, an oily metal scent mixing with the salty cold air. Then she was Joe, a gun still boring into her (now his) head as American spies pinned him against the hull of the boat, shouting questions. A shot fired, ringing against her eardrums from the inside. Then her head was whole again, but she was still Captain Joe, standing at the bow of his ship as it sank, slowly, in the middle of the Atlantic. Somehow she knew the holes were made by teeks, and she was Sarah again, and felt guilty, as she lost control and shot holes through every surface around her.

By the time light seeped though the heavy blinds, Sarah was ready to give up on sleep. Her only consoling thought was that at least she didn’t sleepteeek and hadn’t shattered their home with her dreams. If she was going to consider herself as a monster, best to be in control of her dangerous tendencies. She pulled on clothes she could exercise in and crept out to the studio below.
First she stretched. The smooth wood floor was surprisingly cool and clean, like holding ice to a physical pain. Sarah’s mind cleared, and she pressed her limits at crunches and push-ups. Her body was evolving a warm-up routine based on Irish step dancing and gymnastics when Reggie sauntered in and began his own version of yoga. By the time he finished, they were both ready for breakfast, but as they crossed the ten vertical feet from studio to rubber rock, Emma came running over.

“No dedication,” Emma sighed sarcastically, then bounced off to collect a futon.

By Friday, they had two real gym mats and Emma managed to do a back walkover. When Sarah finally climbed home and settled down to sleep, Reggie was on the phone again, presumably to America at this hour.

“Do you still have the project key off-line on a secure machine? And you’re sure no one’s had access to it?”
“Possibly, but it can’t hurt.”
Another pause.
“We haven’t had due process since the early aughts.”
Sarah fell asleep realizing she’d barely spoken to Reggie all week.
The next morning she was up at dawn. Dance Diaspora was hosting a Maypole dance for all of its members, contributors, and volunteers, and Aliana had asked Sarah to help set up. The two of them drove out with a rented ladder, tables, and tablecloths. After Sarah helped carry everything across the park to a giant flagpole, Aliana handed her two coiled ribbons.

“Climb up and tie them to the ball at the top. I’ll hold the ladder.”

Sarah started climbing. The sun baked her uncovered hair and at the highest point, slight shifts of air passed through her woven top. She tied the satiny ribbons then started to creep carefully back down, unreeling as she went.

“Just throw them!” Aliana yelled.

Sarah felt herself smile and relax. She threw the first one, which was yellow, and watched it skitter as it unrolled its way to the ground. The second ribbon she threw as hard as she could, feeling it release from her hand, watching with sun-watering eyes as it arced up then fluttered down. It was deep purple.

When she reached the bottom of the ladder Aliana moved it away then caught Sarah by the hand.

“Now, you must learn the dance.”

“I thought I’d just watch, only the dancers –“

“You are a dancer, and I can teach you easily enough.”

She handed Sarah the yellow ribbon and showed her how she must weave with a circle of imaginary people to decorate the Maypole. Their ribbons didn’t form a fancy weave, with only two of them dancing, but by the time they reached the bottom, Sarah felt part of the ritual.

“See, you’re a dancer, just like me.” Aliana smiled and kissed her on the cheek.

Sarah felt tingly and warm as they danced the pattern in reverse and unwound their ribbons. When Aliana sent Sarah back up to attach the other colors, Sarah felt she could fly with each color she threw down.

A week later, Emma and Aliana could both do front and back walkovers, handstands, and dive-forward rolls. It was time to design a tumbling routine the troop could practice while incorporating new aspects of dance. The project was so absorbing that Sarah had stopped looking for a real job. What James had paid for viewing her DNA could cover a couple years if it had to.

Aliana spent her days managing Dance Diaspora and teaching tap to young children, but she came by every night to teach Sarah and learn gymnastics. Aliana also arranged a few other dance lessons, in the hope Sarah could join the senior troop someday.

At the end of an evening session Sarah was exhausted but felt radiant. Searing joy filled her inside and the urge to create burst through her mind like fire. She was stretching on a cool gym mat in the studio as Aliana left up the stairs and Emma sat down beside her to stretch.

When Emma stopped stretching and curled up with her arms around her knees, Sarah pointed her legs into a pike position and paused to look at the girl.

“I don’t think I should be saying this,” Emma said, brow wrinkled with teenage tension, “But you realize Aliana is a lesbian?”

“I figured that out.”

“Did you figure out anything else?”

“She knows I’m with Reggie. She’s just teasing me.”

“She’s serious.”

“How old are you?”

“Don’t do that.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Don’t hurt Aliana.”

Sarah was taken aback and wondered if she’d been sending messages she shouldn’t have. Then she looked at the tensed body in front of her.

“Emma, are you –“

“It doesn’t matter. She’s not interested in me. She’s interested in you.”

“You know, it’s all right to feel whatever you feel.”
“Thank you Miss-ever-so-knowledgeable-about-what’s-going-on-here. I’m fine with what I feel and whoever I feel it for. I’m even dealing with being in the same room as you two. Just thought I might save you from causing too much trouble.”

“Okay, I’ll try to make things clearer with Aliana.”

Emma tilted her chin down and looked up at Sarah, one eyebrow raised.

“Without hurting her,” Sarah added.

Emma rolled her eyes and shook her head, then flounced away.

Chapter 17
May 21-23, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand to Angkor Wat, Cambodia

Reggie was sweaty but triumphant, ready for a shower and siesta, as he returned from a day of shopping in Bangkok. Taking the last step off the springy pseudo-stones and opening the door of the glass house, he could see Sarah moving around inside, like a bird building a nest. She was piling clothes all over the bed.

“Leaving so soon?” he asked.

Sarah sprang forward, grabbing his hands, still bangled with bags. “We’re going to Angkor Wat! Tom’s doing some business in Cambodia and said he’d take us Friday if we can meet him at the Grand Hotel.”

Reggie disengaged his heavy hands and set all the bags on the glass dining table. He remembered his unease when Tom mentioned Angkor Wat over dinner.

“You’re not excited?” Sarah grew still, and Reggie realized he had too. The decision was made, and he shouldn’t spoil it for her, but somehow he just couldn’t play the cheerful sidekick yet.

“Let me take a shower. Then we’ll talk.”

The next day, Reggie jolted along on a bus to Siem Reap. Cambodian roads made him appreciate Thailand’s economic success. He imagined himself on a Mars rover. They swerved around a crater large enough to swallow their transport. Then bounce, bounce, bounced over smaller craters covering the planet’s dusty surface. Now a long section of road like shattered crystals vibrated his spine through strange harmonics. But it wasn’t such a bad road, for Mars.

The musky, gritty air on the bus became the recycled air in his spacesuit. The scrap metal shacks they sometimes passed could be space debris. But then what of the thatch and bamboo dwellings up on stilts? Only British astronauts would deploy such shambling specimen collectors. And the chickens squawking in pens on the roof? There was never a rational explanation for poultry.

Reggie tried to make the best of the bus ride. Sarah was chatting warmly with a German tourist seated in front of them. They talked about women travelling alone and about traveling by bus rather than air. They talked about landmines still scattered across Cambodia, amputees, and poverty. The shacks here were wispy, fly-away shelters compared to those they’d seen on the Thai side of the border. Never mind that they’d traveled two-hundred and fifty miles through Thailand in the time it took to cross forty miles of Cambodia. The roads in India had never been so varied in their bone shaking deformity as this supposedly major thoroughfare. Still, Sarah seemed to float along oblivious to the heat and ragged roads. Scenes outside her window or people on the bus absorbed her attention like a small child at carnival. In that moment she was like a Martian to him.

Reggie was bone sore the next morning as they waited for Tom in the lobby of the Grand Hotel d’Angkor. They’d spent the night more economically in Siem Reap, in an unpretentious hotel where every spring in the mattress displayed unique personality.

If Reggie hadn’t been struggling with intangible misgivings, he might have insisted they splurge and stay a night at the Grand. Built a century before, the luxurious mansion, surrounded by gardens and hung with silks, had once been occupied by the Khmer Rouge and then the Vietnamese “liberators.”
Now it was fully restored, the best hotel around, and of course the only place Tom would stay, which was why Reggie had merely read the brochures then stayed someplace else. Their escort for the day strode into the lobby like a Thai prince and ushered them out to the glossy, black jeep he’d rented. Tom’s hair had been shaved almost to his scalp, and his natty tan explorer ensemble looked more Hollywood than tough guy. Sarah sat in front as Tom drove. Reggie couldn’t hear their conversation over the roar of the motor. He just sat attentively in back with his arms crossed.

When the audacious temple with five towers loomed above its man-made lake, Reggie knew it must be Angkor Wat. By the time they closed in and parked, he’d lost some of his misgivings. No wonder Sarah had always wanted to come here. The building had presence.

At least a kilometer wide, with carvings and bas-relief on nearly every surface, the compound engulfed Reggie as soon as he wandered into the concentric enclosures. He recognized Hindu epics, Buddhist images, boats with eyes, and shrines full of flowers, fruit, and incense. He wandered through a series of stone doorways, all complete, in a line, but with no roof. The sun rose higher, bringing out details, adding to the dazzle. The sounds of gathering tourists speaking diverse languages created a sort of discordant, jangling music, which vibrated in his ears without reaching his thoughts.

Then Sarah was beside him, slipping an arm around his waist, light and seductive even in the still heat of noon. His mind swam back from the awe and intensity that had absorbed it.

“Guess you like it after all?” she asked.

“I should have done more research. I had no idea the temple was so—It’s like I was discovering it myself.”

“I want to stay longer, too; maybe we can come back tomorrow. But Tom is ready to move on. He wants to drive to Ta Prohm, says it’s cooler in the heat of the day.”

Reggie suddenly realized it was witheringly hot and his head was beginning to ache. He drank some water and rummaged in his pack for trail mix as he followed Sarah out.

At Ta Prohm, Reggie wandered again, examining plants as much as pillars. This temple, just a couple minutes drive from Angkor Wat, was half wild. Vines traced their way around corners; old trees blocked the sun. A repeated whoo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo sounded amid the more standard cackling of birds. Reggie climbed to a higher point, to see how the parts fit together.

Though less awesome than the monument they’d just left, Ta Prohm was soothingly beautiful and almost devoid of tourists at present. Reggie sat at the highest point he could reach and gazed down as Sarah and Tom bent over some carvings on an interior corner.

Approaching the temple from some distance was a group of squat Asian men in dark trousers and white shirts. Reggie stared at them, mistrusting them for some reason, not wanting them to invade the pleasure of his afternoon. Then he realized what his eyes were telling him.

“Elves!” he yelled down at Sarah, loud enough for her to hear but hopefully not to attract the men’s attention. As Sarah began to rise and look toward him, Reggie saw Tom reach quickly into his pocket. Tom manipulated something with both hands, then began to pull his right arm back.

“Tom!” Reggie yelled as he hurled himself down into the ruins, knowing he’d be too late to save Sarah.

For a moment he couldn’t see her, didn’t know what was happening. There was a muffled sound like a gunshot, passing near him, but not too near. It came from outside the temple, the men approaching, not near Sarah.

Reggie sped around a corner to find Sarah snarling like a military commander into the face of a statue-like Tom. In Tom’s rigid right hand a sharp needle glistened.

“You set me up. Why?” Sarah demanded with tight, controlled tones.

“I can’t hear them. What have you done to my mind?” Only Tom’s mouth moved, the rest of him, even his chin, held rigid like petrified wood.

Sarah’s tough façade faded into confusion, “What?”
Reggie felt himself slide into the role of soldier. “There’s a bunch of teeps coming, maybe Chinese.” He thought back to his instinctive cry of “elves,” was that some strange race memory or had he been speaking in code, like a sentry, even then?

“What’s in the needle?” Sarah asked Tom.

“Just a tranquilizer, a peaceful capture. What have you done to my telepathy?” Tom’s voice trembled with terror despite his unnaturally still face.

“I did nothing to your brain, only your body. I’ll free your hand enough for you to inject yourself. Do it now, and I’ll try to save you with us.”

Tom’s mouth opened, but Sarah cut him off. “Remember when I said that you should never rape a teek? Well, you shouldn’t betray one either.”

Tom’s arm became less rigid, and he injected himself.

Reggie stared in disbelief. What was going on here? Was Tom truly a double agent, trying to deliver Sarah to his handlers? Had he been communicating with the teeps closing in on them? Where were those people now?

Reggie whispered, “We need to reach the jeep fast. We don’t need him.”

“Without him, we’ll know nothing, and I said I’d try to save him. I can keep him immobilized and bear part of the weight if you carry him.” The whisper was Sarah’s voice, but he responded to it with military obedience.

They worked their way out toward the edge of the temple. Sarah padded ahead, listening and then peeking around each corner. Reggie followed, Tom slung over his shoulder like a corpse, no longer frozen, but bundled by Sarah’s teep so the arms and feet didn’t flop. The lightness of the load made Reggie think of hollow bones, like he was carry human-sized poultry, newly thawed but still shrink-wrapped.

A man in a white shirt sprang from a corner up ahead, firing a gun. But the gun spun to the side at the last moment. Its bullet, which turned out to be a dart, crashed across the wall beside them. Then their attacker froze, like unthawed human-size poultry, as they ran the other way.

Reggie carried the image of the frozen Chinese man in his clean white shirt as they raced back along the ancient corridors. The image weighed on him more than the bundle over his shoulder. Someone had just shot at them, and Sarah had “shot” back. Reggie’s mouth was open, and he didn’t know if it was just so he could breath.

He managed to stop when Sarah did, in an outer doorway, barely within sight of the jeep. Before he could run for it, the vehicle started roaring toward him.

“Throw Tom in the back, and we’ll head for Angkor Wat,” Sarah ordered.

As the jeep paused before them, Reggie did as he was told. He instinctively hunched over the wheel as his foot hit the accelerator, and sure enough a shot fired at them and hit the outer metal of the driver’s side door. There was only one shot, no knowing whether it was a dart or a bullet, but hopefully now they were out of range. Still, there was only one road leading away from Ta Prohm, and there could be an ambush or a roadblock ahead. Reggie told himself he was behind enemy lines and his cover was blown. Now he was authorized to use any means to escape.

Sarah must have imagined similar orders as they cleared the trees, because she told him, “Go for one of the helicopters by the main parking lot. We’ll never make it out on Cambodian roads.”

Driving maniacally along the dirt track, Reggie could see three helicopters. Two appeared to be private, one white and one gray. The third was orange and offered tourist flights. As Reggie brought the car in, the propeller on the orange one began to spin. A Cambodian man ran toward it yelling and shaking his arms. At the same time, Reggie noticed that a truck was following them, gaining on them, from the direction of Ta Prohm.

“Behind us, in a truck.”

Sarah turned. Reggie thought he heard two tires blow out on the truck as the propeller lost a little speed. When Sarah faced forward, the propeller sped up again.

“We could tell the pilot that Tom was shot by the people chasing us, ask him to fly us to Thailand,” Reggie said.

“Sure. Or offer him money. Or toss him out, and I’ll fly the thing myself.”
“Do you know how to fly a helicopter?”
“I’ve heard they’re a lot easier than they used to be. I always wanted to learn.”
Reggie skidded to a stop on the road beside the helipad. The tour man was now in his helicopter, staring at the controls and shaking his head. Two men were charging on foot from the broken down truck, but they weren’t going to make it in time.
Reggie lifted Tom from the back seat as if he were an injured friend, or more precisely, a friend injured by someone else. He scuttled behind Sarah to the helicopter operator. She was just beginning to tell the man their story when a shot was fired and hit the confused pilot in the head. This shot was definitely a bullet, not a dart.
Reggie pulled back behind solid metal. The shot had come through the far door, from one of the other helicopters. There was warm blood splattered all over Reggie’s face and shoulders, all over Tom who lay unconscious and slightly drooling in Reggie’s arms. For a moment, he thought his knees would buckle or his stomach heave. Then he saw Sarah, emanating wrath and staring straight through the doors of the tour helicopter in the direction of the assassin. He thought, I’m a spy trying to escape with the most dangerous woman on Earth. Regaining control of himself, Reggie realized there was no point in pretending.
With a screech of metal, Reggie saw the black helicopter’s propellers wrap down around its doors as the windows rolled themselves up. Whoever had fired shots from inside was not currently visible.
Sarah shoved the dead pilot from the tour helicopter and took his seat without hesitation. Reggie quickly heaved Tom into the backseat then buckled himself in front. The noise of the propeller forbid discussion as Sarah took hold of a long lever control to her left and positioned her feet by pedals on the floor. She glanced out at the two men approaching from the truck. They were just pulling guns that now flew from their hands. Sarah glanced back at the other two helicopters for just a moment. Then with a gulp like the cat eating the proverbial canary she gently pulled the long lever, made some slight move with her foot, and they rose above Angkor Wat.
The temple blazed in piercing sunlight against a scrubbed blue sky. The helicopter tilted and lurched unsteadily as they began to fly forward, about a hundred feet from the ground.
“They’re scrambling for the white helicopter,” Reggie shouted.
“I broke it. Don’t talk now.”
Sarah’s tone cut through the adrenaline rush of escape. Reggie could see how tense her shoulders were under a shirt abnormally soaked with sweat. He suddenly realized they could still die if she made a mistake in piloting.
Reaching back, he took the time to prop Tom up to a better position and buckle him in. Sitting there, limp and helpless, the body barely resembled the proud, theatrical man who had so affected them in Belize.
Reggie looked away, out the window, and saw they were flying above the same road that had brought them in from Thailand yesterday. There were no other aircraft in sight.
“Reggie,” Sarah shouted without looking sideways. They seemed to be moving forward smoothly, and her face looked intent, but calm. “Do you still have the card that government guy gave us? Wang Chantachai, or whatever his name was?”
Reggie realized he still had a fanny pack with his phone and a wallet in it. (His money and papers were under his clothes in a money belt, as usual.) Probably he hadn’t taken the card out of his wallet. On the first pass, he didn’t see it. He looked again without saying anything, and there it was.
“Got it.”
“See if your phone works. Someone should tell the Cambodians and Thais that we’re in this ‘copter. I’m heading back to Poipet where we crossed the border. I’d like to land in the open area there. If he’s got anyone who could advise me ahead of time on landing this thing, that might be good too.”
“Should I tell him Tom set us up and people might be chasing us?”
“Whatever, but we’re not supposed to say much on the phone.”
Reggie pulled out his PAD. It was claiming a marginal signal. Well, that would have to do. It was the best phone on the planet. He dialed the number from the card.
It rang. There was an unrecognizable greeting on the other end.
“I need to speak to Wang Chanthanasai,” Reggie shouted. The reply was unintelligible. “I need to speak to Wang Chanthanasai,” he tried again. More mangled words, they sounded like angry English. Then they were disconnected. Reggie dialed the number again. “Emergency! I need to speak to Wang Chanthanasai!” “This is Wang.” The connection was bad, but Wang spoke each word loud and clear. “This is Reggie Malone and Sarah Duncan. We are in a helicopter in Cambodia. Someone tried to capture Sarah. We need clearance to land in Poipet.” There was a pause long enough for Reggie to worry he’d lost the connection. Then the words, “I can’t . . . How long . . .” “We don’t know anything about helicopters. We just left Angkor Wat and are following the main road to Poipet. And we have someone with us you may want in custody.” Reggie heard something harsh muttered in Thai, then, “I will call the border at Poipet, but this is . . . No more . . .” “Is there anyone who can tell us how to land a helicopter?” “What!” Wang ranted for a moment, loud and clear. Then he personally gave instructions for landing, which Reggie relayed to Sarah, who seemed to at least know what “cyclic” and “collective” meant. By the time Reggie got off the phone, he was pretty happy with himself and the PAD. He looked over at Sarah, and she looked more than happy. Bliss might best describe the vacant smile and quivering hands. “Are you all right?” “I’m flying!” “Yes, I see that.” “Reggie, I’d kind of read how to do this but—I had to teek the whole surface of the ‘copter. I’m touching it everywhere. I’m actually part of something that can fly.” Reggie remembered dreams he’d had about flying. There was something very sensual about being able to steer oneself through the air. Watching Sarah, he felt like a voyeur. “What’s it like?” “Guiding a toy boat in a bathtub, with slight motion under water or the barest touch of a finger. God, I always wanted to learn to fly.” “So why didn’t you?” “Once I knew what I could do,” there was a catch in Sarah’s voice, “I thought I might be too dangerous.” There were tears in Sarah’s eyes now. Her euphoria seemed tinged with self-denial. Reggie imagined an angry Sarah flying over the countryside, setting fires to forests and buildings as she passed. How old had she been when she chose not to study flying? How much had she read to know the parts of a helicopter and how to get one off the ground in the first place? “Someone else I’d worry about. You, I trust.” Reggie hoped he sounded reassuring. He thought he even believed himself, mostly, but Sarah gave no sign that she’d heard. Over an hour passed in silence, Reggie watching out the window or watching Sarah enraptured with the feel of flight. But his first sighting of the border was like a bucket of cold water down his front. He thought he’d heard somewhere that landings were the hardest part of flying, or maybe Sarah’s early concerns had infected him. She still looked pretty happy, and Reggie kept silent so as not to break her concentration. They began to slow and descend. With each dip the nose of the helicopter tipped up or tilted and things were a little rough. Luckily, there was nothing in front of them but clear, flat land. The border was surrounded by hard baked dirt without a single tree. Reggie tried not to tense, but by the time they finally approached the surface his fists were clenched on the seat and he pulled in like a turtle seeking his shell.
The ground lurched up. They were going to crash. Then they were still, safe on the ground. Sarah released one hand, then the other. The propeller was still turning but the absence of motor noise was startlingly sudden. Sarah sank back in her chair and closed her eyes. Reggie unbuckled himself and looked at Tom, who was still oblivious. Then he waited.

Sarah still had her eyes closed when the propeller came to a complete stop and two Thai police officers began walking toward them. Reggie reached across to touch her hand. She opened her eyes and took a breath, but that was all.

The shorter of the two Thai officers reached the helicopter first and motioned for them to open a door. Reggie did so and stepped out to speak to him.

“Hello. You are Reginald Malone?”

“Yes, sir.”

“With Sarah Duncan and someone we may need to handcuff?”

“Yes, sir. Though the person you may need to handcuff is currently unconscious.”

The officer looked like he might not have understood that. After a moment of silence Reggie added, “He’s asleep, drugged.”

The officer nodded. “You have passport?”

Reggie carefully untucked his shirt and pulled his money belt up enough to retrieve the papers issued to him by the Thai government. The officer took them and looked toward Sarah. Reggie climbed back up and crouched beside Sarah who still looked rather dazed.

“You okay?”

“I probably shouldn’t do that again.”

“They need your papers.”

Sarah straightened up and pulled the papers out of her money belt. She handed them to Reggie and then glanced back at Tom. “Is he okay?”

“I think so. Still out cold.”

Sarah nodded and began to stretch. Reggie took her documents out to the officer.

“You come to our car now.”

Reggie went back in, unbuckled Tom, and maneuvered him out of the helicopter. Since no one offered to help carry him, Reggie hefted the full, limp weight over his shoulder. Sarah climbed down behind them, and they all made their way across the dry ground toward the immigration building.

Midway there, the officer who had spoken to Reggie motioned for them to follow his partner to a police car.

Reggie set Tom up in the back seat.

The officer gestured for Reggie and Sarah to ride in back, too.

“With him? He might be dangerous when he wakes up.”

The cop stared at him blankly.

“What about handcuffs?” Reggie asked, trying to sound friendly and miming the action of handcuffing Tom, just in case the man really didn’t understand English.

The cop looked at Reggie like he was a sissy for worrying about an unconscious assailant, but he did handcuff Tom to the door of the car. Then Sarah and Reggie climbed in from the other side.

It was dark by the time Wang Chanthanasai claimed them from the Bangkok police station where they’d been dumped after their cramped and silent drive with the Poipet police. Tom was fully conscious now, but hadn’t spoken.

The silence continued as Wang drove them into Chinatown and led them down concrete steps into a basement room off an alley. Stooping between cloth flaps in the doorway, Reggie wondered if they were safe. This didn’t look like an official government meeting room. There were scattered metal chairs, a faded red rug, and large cardboard boxes stacked against one wall. The overhead light was a bare electric bulb. If someone wanted to quietly do away with a problem, this seemed like just the room for it.

Wang, who had taken charge of Tom, steered him into a chair, then nodded for the others to sit.
Reggie sat and went over the day’s events in his mind. But Wang turned instead to Tom and asked, “What’s happened to your mind?”

Tom glared sullenly at Sarah and Reggie, then shook his head. “I don’t know. She did something.”

“I didn’t,” said Sarah. “Maybe those people—”

Wang silenced Sarah with a look, then spoke calmly to Tom, “The police said you were unconscious, drugged. Do you remember what happened?”

“She did something to my mind before that. She froze my whole body and suddenly I couldn’t hear the other teeps.”

“He was trying to drug me,” Sarah hissed. “He’d set me up to be captured by those people, and he was going to drug me unconscious.”

Reggie reached out to cover Sarah’s hand where it rested on her knee. While she seemed resigned and rational, he envisioned lifting Tom up by his shoulders and shaking him.

After a pause Wang asked Tom, “Is it so?”

Tom shrugged and looked at the floor.

Wang watched him with no expression. Then pulling back, like a cobra spreading his hood, he said, “I’ll need to call a few more people.”

Chapter 18
May 23, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand

James paid the driver and stooped out of the taxi at Dr. Yu’s home office. Before he fully unbent, Yu was out the front door and down the stone steps. The cab nosed its way into traffic. People pressed at James. The sidewalks of Chinatown reviled personal space. James flattened his hands against his legs, and tried for stillness if not calm.

“Dr. Morton.”
“Dr. Yu.”
“Shall we walk?”

James nodded and the conversation switched immediately to tight telepathy.

“You know Tom Asawaroengchuullaka?”

“Very slightly,” James replied, remembering to look ahead as he dodged diminutive pedestrians and ignored smells of soup and frying fat, despite his missed dinner.

“Tom’s a playboy, occasional diplomatic staff, the usual government connections. Today, he took a new teek émigré to visit Angkor Wat and supposedly tried to sell her to the Chinese, or someone claiming to represent them.”

“I’m not sure I want to know about this.”

“Oh, but I haven’t told you why we’re being called in. Tom lost his telepathy. He claims the teek did something to him. Wang wants me to examine him, and I thought your laboratory inclinations might be useful.”

“I doubt it’s genetic or even viral if a teek’s involved. But you could have just sent me samples—”

“Perhaps you don’t see. This could threaten us all. You and I may need to stretch ourselves a bit, but we are the community’s best chance for answers.”

“I hardly think—”

“We’re here,” Yu broadcast loudly, standing in front of an alley-side door.

Wang opened the door, “Come in. Thank you for hurrying. Be careful what you say aloud. The teek and her boyfriend are not cleared for anything, except scientific information.” Wang’s glance paused on James, “And Tom may well be compromised, but I believe his teep is blocked.” Then aloud, “Tom, the doctors have come to examine you. Can you tell them what happened?”

James was still descending the basement stairs as Tom began to talk. He told about Reggie shouting, Sarah freezing him, the loss of his telepathy, and being forced to tranquilize himself before James
pieced together that they’d been visiting temple ruins in Cambodia. How had Tom ended up there with Sarah and Reggie, and why were they all discussing this in a basement storage room? Then Sarah began talking, filling in for where Tom was unconscious. She told at length about being chased by Chinese agents, hijacking a helicopter, and being driven back to Bangkok by Thai police. James lost track of her words when he realized the mud spattered across her clothes was actually blood from a Cambodian helicopter pilot. Tom and Reggie were also spattered with blood.

Yu interrupted Sarah once to ask, “Are you sure the people chasing you were from China?” She tilted her chin and looked at him, “No, but Tom didn’t deny it. They looked Chinese, and that’s the other government involved, right?”

James wondered if Yu might have his own connections to China. There were certainly rumors about the Chinatown teeps. Did he want to know? Could he avoid it?

As Sarah finished speaking her eyes were on James. He tried to look elsewhere, but since Dr. Yu was conducting a preliminary examination of Tom and Wang was pacing, blocking most of the room, James felt obliged to nod and look concerned. She’d certainly had a trying day, but James wished he was safely away from the drama. He caught himself beginning to tap the sides of his knees and folded his hands instead.

The silence stretched, both mentally and audibly, and James tried to think of something reassuring to say to Sarah. Then Wang said aloud, “Do you realize how much trouble you’ve caused the Thai government? Teeps, and some teeks, have worked quietly here for over a decade. You’ve hijacked two aircraft and upset two foreign governments in less than a month.”

“Would you rather they caught me?”

“I’d rather you found quieter means!”

“Look, I tried to live peacefully. Then the U.S. came after me, you guys sent Tom to recruit me, which led to the first airplane incident, and when he offered to show me Angkor Wat, I thought it was okay with you, which led to today’s whole mess. It’s not like I steal aircraft for fun.” Sarah’s voice squeaked at the end, making her sound very young.

“Nonetheless, it can’t happen again. Stay inside Thailand. Stay out of trouble. You’re not that important. You’re hardly even useful.”

“Maybe not.” Sarah looked down and away. “As a teenager, I sometimes thought the most useful thing I could do would be to kill myself and destroy any trace of my DNA. Would you prefer that in the future?”

James met Sarah’s eyes without thinking when she looked up. He was torn between her pain, pain he might be partly responsible for if he was her father, and the thought that she’d wanted to destroy her valuable genome.

“Now that I know there are other teeks, I think it’s more useful that I’m alive. There must be others like me, and if so—you might need me after all.”

Was she talking to him? No, it must be to Wang. But she was looking at him, as if he and Wang were on the same side, but he hardly knew Wang.

There was silence for a moment, then Yu broke in abruptly with, “Dr. Morton, I can’t find anything wrong. Do you want to take some samples and run your own tests?” James rushed to do his part and leave.

Shortly after running Tom’s samples, but well before James had bothered to call Yu or Wang, Alak knocked gently at the lab door and showed himself in. He waited in respectful silence as James finished typing in results, but the unscheduled visit made James twitch.

“Good to see you, Alak.”

“We haven’t visited for a while. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” James lied. There was a long pause.

“May I sit down?” Alak gestured toward the one swivel chair. His overloaded briefcase made the gesturing arm droop strangely, and James could see Alak was already sweating, though it was well before noon.

“Of course,” James replied, going to join the man by his desk. This meant he was in for several
minutes of small talk. He braced himself to play along. Finally the real subject was broached.
“I hear,” said Alak, “That Dr. Yu called you to examine Tanit last night.”
James tapped his foot and crossed the opposite leg in the beat it took to connect “Tanit” to “Tom”.
“Yes, I did some DNA and protein expression blood work on him. Nothing unusual turned up. We
should probably arrange a brain scan.”
“Did Tanit seem to be very familiar with Dr. Yu or Wang?”
“Uh, no.” James answered. Then as his own questions about the Chinatown teeps took hold,
“Anything in particular?”
“No, nothing. You and Dr. Yu, being doctors, must consult occasionally. And perhaps Wang has
some connection to Tom?”
“I was surprised that Yu called me, and I was told Reggie called Wang. He still had his card from
immigration.”
“Oh, of course. I’m very interested in this whole occurrence. Perhaps you could confer with me from
time to time. Keep me informed as to Dr. Yu’s work, as well as your own.”
“Of course.” James wondered if he was being asked to spy on Wang or if he was under suspicion
himself. Probably both, but either way he might as well appear cooperative. “I have the new offer
from Minerva to give you.”
As James handed across the stiff manila envelope, he continued, “They’ve asked me to reply within
two weeks. I hope that will also be enough time to find separate lab space for Robert.”
James hadn’t really expected Alak to show any reaction. The bureaucrat merely raised his eyebrows
and waited for James to continue. “I’m willing to assist as his advisor, of course, but I can’t pursue
my own work adequately with him always interrupting.”
“He says you won’t give him passwords for any of your files, so his only access to data is by asking
you.”
For Alak the statement was almost confrontational, and it confirmed he was communicating with
Robert. Was that an accidental slip? More likely, Alak was acknowledging that James was watched,
which was of course why James wanted Robert out.
“Once Robert has his own secure system, I’ll give him copies of the files he needs.”
“He’s cleared for everything you know.”
James cringed inwardly. He’d usually enjoyed the lax security among telepaths in Thailand, but now
that another teep knew genetics, was almost at a level to help James with his classified investigations,
he longed to protect his records. They were like a diary he’d never expected anyone else to read. He
wanted to bring points forward for discussion at his own pace, not have someone snoop them out at
will.
“I offered to work with him, even teach him, but my agreement when I came here promised complete
control of my own lab and equipment. The computer system here is part of my equipment. I will
properly share data with Robert, as soon as he is separately equipped to study it safely.”
Alak did not answer, but with the Minerva envelope in hand and a tight smile fixed on his face, he
nodded and left.
James knew he hadn’t handled the negotiation as smoothly as possible. In the past he’d had a
surprisingly cordial relationship with the Thai government, and with Alak as well. Was it just him, or
was there increased tension throughout the teep community? Alak had been asking about Yu and
Wang, and it appeared Tom had been working with some outside force.
A shiver shook James’ head, neck, shoulder, and on down. The notes, the offers from Minerva,
whatever Davies was maneuvering, it was too much like the cocoon of plotting he’d left the United
States to escape. Maybe Thailand was too involved after all. Could he work someplace else? If he
took a research position well distanced from the intrigues of teeps and teeks would the forces
involved let him go? The thought turned his frustration into something colder and closer to fear. He
stepped away from all those thought and back to his computer and its analysis.

May 27, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand
In only a few days Robert was moved into a “newly available” space down the hall and James raced contentedly through his publishable work. He had a lot of catching up to do. Then came a knock on his lab door. He ignored it. Another knock, and Reggie and Sarah peeked in.

“You said I could come by sometime,” Reggie said, “To find out more about my genotype?” James wanted to say he was too busy, but that would just create another interruption some other day. So he said, “Fine, but I can’t talk long.”

He pulled up Reggie’s data on the display by his server. There were currently no chairs nearby, and James hoped standing would keep the visit short. “Let’s see, you have the same potential schizophrenia correlate as Sarah. None of the cancer related risks. This segment underlies certain visual thinking abilities. This one correlates with some measures of creativity; the popular press calls it the “entrepreneur gene.” I haven’t found anything to explain your ability to spot telepaths. Searching the literature for genetic links to processing body language turned up nothing. No unique mutations. No variations on the telepathy sequence. Basically, unless we find someone else with your ability, it’s going to be hard to even look for a genetic link. Knowing of the possibility though, we might experiment with training programs.”

“Any new insights about Tom?”

James flashed back to the uncomfortable scene in the Chinatown room. Was that why Reggie and Sarah had stopped by today? “Unfortunately, no. I didn’t expect to find anything genetic. But I made arrangements for an MRI and an fMRI to be done. Gave Robert a chance to train in another lab while surreptitiously adding telepathy to the supposedly silent part of a listening task.”

“Huh?” asked Sarah.

“MRI, magnetic resonance imaging? It’s a way to check for trauma in the brain.” Sarah stared at him blankly, frowning slightly and wrinkling her forehead. He almost felt sorry for her. “Didn’t find any. The fMRI checks brain activity during certain tasks. We’d run a test before with telepaths using regular speech for one part and telepathy for another, and Broca’s area, which processes speech, usually lights up for both. Tom’s brain is not responding to telepathy. Tells us almost nothing except that he’s not faking.”

James watched Sarah’s reaction, remembering how Lisa had suggested that Sarah faked her lack of telepathy. Sarah just continued to frown, no unusual reaction that James could detect. Maybe they should let Robert run another MRI anyway, just to keep him busy.

“Nothing else showed up?” Sarah asked.

“There was constant activity in the primary somatosensory cortex, which usually indicates touch. But Tom said he’d been itchy since, well, since what happened. Anyone else ever feel itchy after you teeked them?”

“No. I’ve done it to myself lots of times and never felt itchy. I did Howard’s hand once, we could ask him, but he probably would have mentioned it.”

“It’s probably psychosomatic. Psychosomatic pain, or in this case itchiness, could trigger detectable brain activity.”

“Is Tom getting any help?” Sarah asked. She was dragging a chair from across the room. “His whole life, his work and contacts, were built around being a telepath. And if he’s having psychosomatic symptoms, maybe he needs some kind of counseling.”

James sighed as Sarah plopped down in the chair and began rubbing her hands as if she was cold. “Let the punishment fit the crime. But anyway, he’s part of that whole Chinatown community. Not my place to get involved.”

“Is that why we were taken to Chinatown? What was going on there?” Reggie asked. James wished he hadn’t mentioned it. “I don’t know. I don’t know anything. Just as telepaths are their own community within Bangkok, the Chinatown teeps have their own core community. I don’t think they want farangs involved.”

“Farangs?”

“Foreigners, us. Really, I’m not sure they want Thai teeps of non-Chinese decent either, but only a couple exist. Both have American ancestry.”

“Do you think they supported Tom trying to sell Sarah to the Chinese?”
“He failed. Probably no one more competent was interested.”
“What about the Johnsons? Do you think we can trust them?”
“What do you mean ‘trust?’ They’re not part of the Chinatown group, since Ida married Samuel. He’s still pretty tight with the government, though I think he tries to stay out of things now that he’s retired. They’ve always been exceptionally kind to me.”
“Yeah,” Sarah nodded. “They gave me a place to live and now they’re paying for me to go to Chiang Mai with Emma. I don’t know what I can do to repay them.”
“They probably think they’ve adopted you. Samuel speaks of us all as family. Genetically, that’s not too far off.”
“Have you checked? Has someone tried to trace the genealogy?”
“Of course they’ve tried. But the U.S. government got to it first. There are some disadvantages to studying all this from Thailand.”
“If you did that test on me, that fMRI thing, could you tell why I don’t hear telepathically?”
James smiled despite himself. Sarah seemed so innocent as she pursued her own puzzle, seeming ignorant of the players around her. “Maybe. We could see if and where there’s brain activity in response to telepathy. Maybe when Robert’s had a little more training he could design a study.”
Sarah’s hand rubbing had turned into hand ringing, and James caught himself watching for symmetry in her movements. He said, “You realize, without a major breakthrough in neuroscience, identifying the problem won’t mean we can fix it.”
Sarah shivered visibly and wrinkled her nose, “I’m not sure I’d want it fixed. No offense?”
Not knowing what to say to that, James retreated back to explaining Reggie’s genome.

That evening, James locked the lab up early. His mind had refused to seal around any project since Sarah’s visit, so he was going to pick up a bowl of noodles on the way home and maybe even clean his apartment tonight. That should be enough to bore him into one line of inquiry or another. No sooner was he outside the building than a female voice called out, “James, is this a better time for us to grab a bite?”
The woman was young and wearing a black silk blouse that settled smoothly on the lace of her underclothing. Out of context, it took him a moment to identify her as Robert’s sister, Lisa. By then, she had hurried to his side and stood inches from his elbow, catching her breath in little gasps.
“Well, I was just going to grab some noodles—”
“That would be great!”
James had meant to say he was taking them home and needed to clean his apartment. But he’d been around just enough women to realize this one had cut him off on purpose, and he was now obliged to buy her dinner. At least noodles would be quick. He took her to the noodle shop near his home and instantly regretted it. Despite the fact that he bought noodles there at least once a week, alone, without any sign of impropriety, the matronly shop woman gave him a disapproving look today. As they sat down to wait, James was sure the other diners thought the same. Seeing a young Asian woman with a slightly older white man, people in Bangkok assumed he wanted her body and she wanted his money. What he really wanted was to be done with the meal already.
“So, how’s your work going?” Lisa asked.
“Fine.”
“Any exciting new projects?”
“Nothing out of the ordinary.”
“What happened to Tom was ordinary?”
“We can’t discuss that here.” James tapped his knee as he watched the seconds click by on a wall clock. After fifteen seconds, he switched to tapping the other knee.
“What about outside of work?” she asked.
“Nothing. I was going to clean my apartment.”
“But what do you do for fun?”
“I like my work.”
“But don’t you have any hobbies?”
“No.”
“Have you ever tried karate?”
James shook his head, then tried to show polite interest as Lisa talked at length about the benefits of karate. At least she’d stopped questioning him. While speaking, Lisa used her hands and arms, always with calm restraint, but it was enough to show she had muscle. The skin on her arms, neck, and face was smooth and perfect. James tried not to look down at the skin visible above, and somewhat through, her sheer blouse. If this girl was flirting at him, it was a very generous offer. However, she was much too young, her brother worked with James, and aside from her body and the fact she was a telepath, he had no reason to like her. A forward leaning gesture gave him a direct view of the lace camisole beneath her blouse. For a moment he thought a nice body and not having to hear unintended thoughts might be a better offer than he could pass up, but then she spoke.
“Have you seen Sarah much since, well, you know?”
James had no idea how the conversation had turned. “Not much. A couple times.”
“What do you think of her?”
Lisa was younger than Sarah, and Sarah was young enough to be his daughter, though just barely. It made James feel old in a way he hadn’t before.
“I don’t know.” James glanced around. “We can’t talk about this here either.”
“Next time you’ll have to take me someplace where we can talk.”
James shrugged that off with false good humor.

Chapter 19
June 2-3, 2025 – Chiang Mai, Thailand

Sarah tensed as she approached the marble counter at the hotel in Chiang Mai. A discreet white on black sign said “check-in” beneath more graceful looking Thai script. The whole room was smooth, like a non-stick pan. Maybe they didn’t want anyone sticking around.
“Excuse me,” Sarah said as she rested her fingers on the rounded, chill counter.
“Yes?”
“We have a room for two reserved under Johnson?”
“Yes, here it is, room 107.”
“Well, we had a friend join us, and we were wondering if we could get an extra bed brought in?”
“107 has two queen size beds. I could move you to 105, which has a king and a twin.”
“Oh, well, we’d actually like three separate beds, if that’s possible.”
Sarah glanced back to where Aliana and Emma stood, sure she saw Aliana raise an eyebrows at that. Heat flooded Sarah’s face and neck. She looked forward, glad her friends were behind her where they couldn’t see. She should have followed Emma’s advice and talked to Aliana weeks ago.
“I can send up a roll away to 107, but they’re mostly used for small children.”
“Oh, that would be fine. We’re not fussy.”
Sarah filled out paperwork, took the translucent plastic key card, and headed to the elevator without consulting Emma or Aliana.

It was ten o’clock that night when the three returned to their hotel. After the muggy heat and noise outside, the room seemed cool and peaceful.
Sarah laid back on the roll away bed and stretched her legs up into the air. She circled her feet, heavy like water balloons after stomping around all day. Earlier they’d climbed up to Wat Doi Suthep, a temple with a commanding, tranquil view. After a self-guided tour, the three of them found shade by a retaining wall, and counted the old city roofs like properties on a Monopoly board. Emma pointed excitedly at the almost intact stone walls surrounding the old city, and somehow they agreed to walk
the full circuit. By the longest gap in the wall they’d found a not-too-touristy restaurant with outdoor seating and very relaxed service. Then they’d finished the loop and explored a few unintended detours. It hadn’t been a truly strenuous day, just more walking than Sarah was used to. Her feet were still piked above her off the bed when the phone rang, but Aliana was washing her face and Emma was poking through luggage, so Sarah swung over to answer.

A barrage of rapid, frantic words slammed through the earpiece, reminding her why she hadn’t replaced her cell phone.

“Sarah, I’m so glad I reached you. I’ve been trying for an hour. You have to get out of there. They’ve sent someone, I think to kill you. They know your hotel room, but also think they can track you though someone you’re traveling with. She’s apparently easy to hear, if you know what I mean. I swear I had nothing to do with this. I would do anything to protect you. I don’t think they know that, or I wouldn’t have found out at all. But you must know why they’re after you, and they probably thought that I, being one too, might object, which of course I do, but I tried not to make too much of a fuss, so they wouldn’t suspect I’d warn you—”

“Wait, slow down.” Howard had said all that in the time it took Sarah to recognize the voice and get some handle on the choppy words. “You’re saying someone wants to kill me?”

Aliana and Emma both came over and started whispering questions at that, but Sarah managed to hush them with a hand motion and a stern look.

“Yes! For what you did to, for what they think you did to you-know-who. They’re really scared that you could—”

“Who’s trying to kill me?”

“People here, like us. They sent someone, one of us, well, not like you and me, but like the rest of my family. I think he’s had some training, from the government, so he could protect himself, but I don’t think he’s really trained as an assassin.”

“Is it someone I would know or recognize, maybe?” Sarah clutched the phone too hard and looked away from her friends. Her skin prickled, but she swallowed her panic like a large, dry pill.

“I don’t think so, but I’ve met him. He lives in our building. He has the rounder kind of Chinese face, sort of like R—like my cousin, but he’s taller, a bit older. You should just get out of there. I don’t think he’s landed in Chiang Mai yet. And I gather he plans to attack while you’re sleeping. But you should leave before he can watch the building. And remember, he might pick up if anyone saw you or spoke to you. He might be able to sweep around local hotels, asking about you, listening to what people don’t say, or listening for the—the other kind of person with you.”

“Are they, the people with me, in danger, too?”

“Maybe, at least as hostages.”

“Where can we go?”

“They waited until you left where you’re living. You might be safe back there.”

When Sarah hung up the phone, Aliana and Emma both spoke at once. It took Sarah a moment to sort out Emma’s, “What’s going on?” and Aliana’s, “Was that for real?” and to answer, “Stay calm. I need to talk to Emma.”

Despite the look of rage on Aliana’s face, Sarah dragged Emma to the far side of the room and whispered in her ear. While Sarah was pretty sure Emma’s parents knew what had happened with Tom, she’d avoided saying anything to Emma. Now it made the situation much harder to explain.

Sarah whispered, “I think a teep from Chinatown is being sent to kill me for a problem I may have caused another teep. He knows where we are, but he probably hasn’t arrived in Chiang Mai yet, and plans to wait until we’re asleep. He evidently knows how strong Aliana’s thoughts are, and may use her to find us. Could he hear her if we were passing him in a taxi? Could he zero in on her in a crowded train station?”

Emma stood stunned for a moment staring at Aliana. Aliana, standing across the room, hand on one hip, said, “I think I deserve to know what’s going on here.”

Emma whispered to Sarah, “Right now, I think any teep on this floor of the hotel could hear her. I’m not sure about a taxi, but she’d probably stand out in a train station.”
Sarah bit her lips trying to find another solution, then whispered, “I can try something that might make her unreadable, but you’d have to go along with it and tell me if it works.”

Emma’s face tightened, but she nodded fractionally. Sarah felt a stab of terror at what she was about to risk and what she might find out.

She took one of Emma’s hands in her own, trying to offer reassurance and calm, while answering Aliana. “I think you might deserve to know, but most of what’s involved isn’t mine or Emma’s to tell. It’s something that involves the Johnsons, and me, and some other people. I think you’re in danger now, too, and I’m really sorry for that.”

“How can you be so calm about this?” Aliana’s eyes were wide, but her voice was needle sharp.

“What sort of trouble are you into?”

Holding Emma’s hand, Sarah felt inhuman, statue-cold or at least reptilian. Aliana, chin and chest thrust forward, face damp from washing, seemed so much more real, so deserving of a real answer. Instead Sarah enunciated, “I’m calm because I need to be. I’m trying to figure out what they would least expect us to do, and I think I’ve got it. But to do this, you’ll have to trust me, without any real explanation.”

There was silence in the room. Sarah could feel her heart racing. It pounded fast blood through her neck and arms. She hated pretending to be more confident than she felt, but it was the only way to get things done fast.

“Do you trust me, Aliana?”

With an almost religious, focused calm and a much softer voice than before, Aliana said, “I trust your intentions.”

“Fair enough. Hope for the best.” Sarah pulled a spread off one of the beds. It was red with a pattern of white elephants and black dots. “I’m going to have Emma hold this over you for a minute, okay?”

Aliana merely nodded as Sarah cloaked her in the bedspread, a child’s ghost costume with pachyderms and polka-dots.

Sarah told Emma, “Hug it around her.” But even as Emma clumsily reached around the spread, offering a few moments of tactile distraction, Sarah covered Aliana in the telekinetic cocoon she had previously used on herself, Mr. O’Reeley, and Tom.

Emma almost immediately looked at Sarah, mouth open, eyes wide. Sarah discontinued the pressure even before Emma said, “It worked.”

She pulled the blanket off Aliana, and asked, “You feel okay?”

“Was that all?”

“That’s it.”

“Perhaps later, you’ll convince me you’re not crazy?”

Sarah smiled despite the knot in her throat. Aliana looked so young, like a sassy little sister, as static made even the hair on her arms stand on end. “I’ll try. For now, put what you need in your carry-on bag and let’s get out of here. Oh, and we should leave the cell phones. You both have active GPS, but I know how to take the data cards out if you want.”

Aliana wanted her data out; Emma didn’t care but took it. Sarah quickly checked their guidebook for train information and gathered her own essentials in a bag, while Aliana smoothed her red hair under a dark scarf. Within a few minutes they were sneaking down the back stairs and out onto a minor road.

Winding their way a few blocks from the hotel, they skirted the tourist frenzy near a night bazaar. Music and the smell of spiced meat buffeted them. There was no place out of sight to cross the river, but once across they found peaceful minor streets leading toward the train station.

Aliana, hurrying along in her dark scarf, seemed the timeless image of a woman with a mission. Long arms swung by her sides and her navy crepe skirt rustled with each step. When she looked down, her quick grace drew Sarah’s eye, reminded her of the day they left the Easter party to dance. But when Aliana caught her looking and raised her face, Sarah had to turn away, singed by just a glance. There was anger there, anger like Sarah felt at herself for bringing her friends into trouble.

But there was a searching behind the anger, like Aliana was justifying events to herself, trying to invent good enough reasons, and Sarah was ashamed and fell back to let Emma take her place.
Emma drifted forward without apparent thought, absorbed in her own confusion and hardly noticing Aliana. Sarah tried to watch around them, calming herself for their sake, holding her mind like a trigger she was no longer afraid to pull.

The station, when they reached it, was a relatively modest building with rough concrete floors and old-style fluorescent panels. The crowds were not enough to hide the three women, even with the night train boarding.

“Emma, I want you to stay with Aliana. Go into the bathroom, and I’ll meet you there with the tickets. That way we won’t be remembered as a threesome. I’ll buy all four spots in a sleeping compartment if I can.”

“What if the assassin is already here?” Emma asked.

“Hopefully he doesn’t know we’re running yet, and he’d probably expect us to fly out. But I’ll keep an eye on you until you’re in the bathroom. You, well, just be open to anything that might mean trouble for us.”

Aliana stood passively now, a glazed expression in her eyes. Sarah clenched her teeth and headed off to the ticket counter alone.

Once the train was underway, Sarah felt the turmoil she’d postponed coming back with force. The lump in her throat had never eased, but it only limited breathing now that she had time to notice. Her upper body was beginning to shiver; she wanted the lights off as soon as possible. No one had spoken since they’d boarded the train, and Sarah knew she should say something, but couldn’t get the words out.

They’d had no problem getting a sleeping compartment to themselves, and once the ticket stubs were notched outside the door and the window shades drawn, there was a tangible sense of privacy. Sarah pulled down the upper bunk on one side and turned off the lights as she climbed up to take it herself. Aliana was sitting on the lower bunk across from her, and Emma scampered into the bed below Sarah.

Within minutes, Sarah gave in to terror. It vibrated through her as the train pushed along. Still in her clothes she wrapped the scratchy train blanket around her shoulders, even though she was boiling deep inside. What had she done? Now basically forbidden to leave Thailand, she’d made enemies among the teep community, enemies who wanted her dead. And while she’d tried to believe at first that it had been some fluke, that her telekinesis of Tom hadn’t really destroyed his telepathy, what she’d done to Aliana tonight proved otherwise. Somehow, being wrapped in Sarah’s cocoon could close a person off from telepathy, perhaps a gift of privacy to normals, but a mental mutilation to teeps.

Sarah was a weapon. Not the weapon she’d always worried about being, someone who could set fires or control objects without detection. She could apparently destroy telepathy. For those who might have doubted, what she’d done to Aliana would prove it. She could ask Emma not to tell, but that would just tie her into the trouble, and other teeps would wonder who had ‘taught’ Aliana to close her mind.

Just as Sarah was drifting through concerns for Aliana, the woman herself spoke, still clearly sitting on her bed in the clattering darkness.

“Sarah, did you drug me?”

“No,” Sarah said and shook her head pointlessly in the dark.

“What did you do?”

“Please don’t ask.” Sarah’s voice cracked as she said it.

“Sarah—“

“Please don’t ask now?”

“All right.”

Beneath her, Sarah could hear Emma’s uneven breathing, the sound of someone trying to cry silently into a pillow. Tears began to run down Sarah’s face, too. The train shook her as if she was crying even harder. What was she going to tell Aliana? This friend had shown such trust and patience
toward her tonight; how could she refuse to answer her, refuse to take responsibility for involving her in this mess? How had she become the sort of monster who could risk what she’d done to Aliana on a hunch, and at the train station as well as in Cambodia, she’d been ready to kill people with her power.

As if sensing her concerns, Aliana said, “You have to tell me something.”

“What?”

“Anything. I feel—rather strange.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No. It might even feel good, if I knew it was the effect of some drug or something explicable. But, it’s not a way I’ve ever felt before. Could you explain, or—or could you sit with me?”

Sarah knew she should have talked to Aliana before this, made it clear that they could only be friends. Could going to her now count as leading her on? It was such a strange night, and Sarah’s body ached for physical reassurance as well. If she could give Aliana nothing else, surely she could give that. And Emma was still crying on her bunk. If all three of them held close tonight, wouldn’t that be okay?

“Maybe that’s a good idea for all of us.” Sarah took her pillow and climbed down to sit beside her friend. She put her arm around Aliana’s shoulder, felt the woman nestle into her. “Emma, would you like to sit with us?”

There were a few muffled sniffles. Then Emma silently cuddled in on the other side of Sarah.

An hour later, Emma was asleep with her head on Sarah’s thigh. Aliana curved against her on the other side, resting her cheek on Sarah’s shoulder and lightly stroking Sarah’s arm. From her own reactions, Sarah knew that stroking could well count as flirting, but she couldn’t find the will in herself to speak, and she didn’t really want Aliana to stop.

“You don’t want me to stop?” Aliana whispered. “It’s as if I hear you asking yourself even when you don’t speak.”

Sarah’s breath caught for a moment. Aliana’s insight seemed eerily similar to telepathy, similar enough to feel like a violation.

“Would it be a violation if I were telepathic?”

A scream rose and choked in Sarah’s throat. She took a deep breath and said, “If you were telepathic, would you know what poem I was thinking of?” Then very hard she thought, “I’ve never seen a purple cow. I never hope to see one. . .”

As Aliana spoke the words, “I’ve never seen,” Sarah wrapped herself instantly in her own cocoon, then asked, “And now?”

But as Sarah thought it Aliana recited, “The hydrogen dog and the cobalt cat, side by side in the armory sat . . .”

Sarah released the telekinetic pressure from herself and thought, “What will happen if I can create telepaths?”

“You’re thinking, what will happen if you can create telepaths. I’m right, aren’t I? I’d never even heard that dog and cat poem before. Did you do this to me? Can you explain what’s going on yet?”

Sitting on a rumbling train in the dark, Sarah was frozen with a skull shattering pressure inside her ears, not worse than she’d felt before, but it wasn’t waiting until she was ready to deal with it. “I should wake up, Emma,” she said. “She—this affects her too.”

“You were going to say she’s a telepath, too. But you’re not—you were trying to make me unreadable, and this—“

“Stop, please. I probably deserve it. But none of the rest of them could read my mind. I don’t know why you can, or if the rest can now, too. But, I need a minute.” Tears were pouring out of Sarah now. She turned her head so they wouldn’t fall on Emma, who somehow still slept with her head on Sarah’s leg.

“Don’t wake Emma yet. We need to talk first. I’m sorry if this seems like such a bad thing to you.” Aliana’s touch was no longer provocative. One arm held protectively around Sarah’s back, while the other held the hand draped over Aliana’s shoulder.
When Sarah’s tears had stopped, Aliana spoke. “I think we’re past whatever you wanted to discuss about my sexuality. A few minutes ago, I sensed you liked what I was doing, but thought you should say something to stop me. I avoided touching anything more than your arm, even though my whole body is crying out for touch in a way I’ve never felt before. My mind wants to say I feel this because I’m falling in love, but my feelings for you are not new, and the intense desire of my skin started somewhere in the confusion of this evening.”

Sarah wanted to pretend confusion, to slow down, but that wasn’t possible. “You’re asking if the change in how you feel touch is caused by what I did tonight? It’s possible. I’ve always been unusually sensitive to touch, and what I did to you, I’ve done to myself many times. But I shouldn’t have tested it on you. I think I’ve crossed some line.”

“The idea that you might feel things the way I’m feeling them now, is unbearably attractive. So if you’re going to say no, maybe you’d better say it.”

Sarah couldn’t believe where this was going. She couldn’t believe how much she wanted comfort and acceptance from someone who by rights should condemn her. “We couldn’t do anything with Emma here.”

“But you want to.” Aliana used the arm holding Sarah to stroke lightly down her side, along her ribs. Not touching her breast, but close enough to set off an intense erotic reaction. 

Sarah wanted to; she also wanted to cry. “But I wouldn’t. Much as I might be tempted, I’m already involved with Reggie. We may not be married, but I love him, and our lives are so entangled that he gave up everything to come to Thailand with me.” It sounded weak, even to Sarah. No matter how much Reggie tried to be the perfect boyfriend, Sarah could see him distancing himself, see him disapproving of her power and what she was willing to do. If Reggie truly loved her and wanted to stay with her, would he have been so distracted lately with his new PAD and all his business calls? Would she be responding to Aliana this strongly? But Aliana had affected her, since the first day they danced, and now she could hear Sarah’s thoughts. Still, Reggie had stayed with her through so much—

“I’m not trying to displace Reggie. But couldn’t you love me, too?” Aliana’s breath struck moist sparks against Sarah’s neck and ear. In the same instant she wanted more but also felt it was unfair of Aliana to manipulate her that way, especially if Aliana could hear her thoughts. And it hurt to think she was probably hearing these thoughts too.

“Do you know how I’ve felt for you since we first met?” Aliana answered her thoughts. “Is it so unfair to make you deal with similar feelings?” The fingers on Sarah’s side were no longer tempting, but clinging.

“I wouldn’t have hurt you on purpose, you know?” Though now I hurt you and maybe Emma and Reggie too, because my thoughts betray me. “I can’t defend what I’ve done up to this point, but please, let this stop now. Let it wait ’til I’m not tired and overwhelmed.” Sarah’s voice squeaked as she almost drowned in waves of emotion. Aliana’s hand stopped moving, settling platonicly on her shoulder. Relief washed through Sarah like cool water, easing a few stubborn traces of desire.

“I’ll stop because I don’t like to hurt you either, and even if you haven’t handled yourself well, I still have my standards. Nevertheless, pain and all, I hope neither of us forget this.”

They sat together, not speaking, not moving, a still spot in a humming, vibrating metal train. Sarah fiercely battled to keep her thoughts from forming words, knowing she couldn’t. And she tried to console herself with the thought that it was her friend Aliana listening, and she could at least give Aliana trust. So as she calmed down and the fear receded, she carefully thought through what she figured Aliana had a right to know. She thought about how she had fled the U.S. because she was a teek, and how she had used her telekinesis to stop Tom, a teep, from giving her to the Chinese. She thought about how Tom had lost his telepathy and how that had given her the clue to stop Aliana’s mind from being read, to keep them all hidden from the assassin. Then she thought about James’s research, about the genetic precursor to telepathy that he didn’t understand. And suddenly she hoped that Aliana’s telepathy might be different than Emma’s, and maybe her own thoughts were still protected from other teeps.

In the moment when Sarah decided she had to wake Emma because she had to know the answer no
matter how selfish that was, Aliana nodded.

Sarah gently shook Emma’s arm. “Emma, wake up.”

The exhausted teenager didn’t react, and Sarah convinced herself to wait, to let the girl sleep. But five minutes later, when Emma stirred slightly, Sarah couldn’t resist trying again.

“And you can’t hear mine?”

“Heard your thoughts but not your feelings,” Sarah said, and Aliana gave her shoulder a calm squeeze.

“Bizarre,” Sarah sighed, with a huge feeling of personal relief. “Get this, Aliana can now hear my thoughts.”

“How? Are you sure?” Emma’s face shifted in that moment from the soft inexpressiveness of sleepy youth to the dramatic raised eyebrows and tucked chin of adolescent skepticism.

Sarah stiffened a bit, and Aliana gave her shoulder a calm squeeze without saying a word. “We tested it lots,” Sarah ventured, “But so you’ll know, tell me something to think about.”

“Think about what I told you my favorite new food was two days ago at lunch,” Emma said without hesitation.

Fast as Sarah could think it Aliana said, “Vietnamese spring rolls.”

Okay, now tell me what I’m thinking,” Emma said quickly.

Emma and Aliana stared at each other for half a minute, but in the end Aliana just shook her head. Emma asked, “Can you hear the guy dreaming in the next room?”

“You wouldn’t like it anyway.”

Sarah pretended outrage, “Maybe your parents shouldn’t let you out.”

“Yeah right,” Emma smirked. “So you want to explain to me how you first blocked her thoughts and now this?”

“I guess I’d better,” Sarah sighed, and she explained to Emma what had happened to Tom and the relevant bits of what happened with Aliana. They were still trying to make sense of it when the train bumped to a stop in the Bangkok station.

It was full morning and the gleaming modern transit center pounded with the footsteps of busy people. Silent now, the three women carried their belongings toward a taxi stand, eager to get back to the Johnsons’ house. Then Sarah heard a shot, felt it hit her head, and was swallowed into nowhere.
Part Two

Chapter 20
June 3, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand

“But can you tell us why the Americans want that patent?”
If Alak were speaking aloud, James imagined he’d be talking through his teeth. James wove a pencil through his fingers, then through the fingers of his other hand, trying to stay calm. He wondered if Alak was specifically annoyed with him or just relaying tensions from above.
“I’ve told you it might relate to telekinesis, but with so few teeks to study, it’s hard to find any answers. Now if you’ll let me return to my work—“
“And you still haven’t explained what the teek did to Tanit.”
“I had only one case to study, and the problem was clearly not genetic.”
“What good is genetics if it can’t answer any of our questions?”
James set down his pencil, took a deep breath, and glanced at the Swiss results on his screen. After weeks of delay, Heiss had at least provided excellent data. He’d sent blood samples from thirty paranoid schizophrenics and forty-six members of their immediate families, along with a psychiatric history for each.
These samples included only one patient who was homozygous for the telepathy predecessor. She also had the bipolar sequence the Americans wanted. Her mother shared all of the genetic factors, but was classified as mentally healthy. So even if latent or partial telepathy might be in play, perhaps causing delusions, it was not a sure path to schizophrenia.
Realizing Alak was still waiting, James said, “Look, I’m frustrated too. Do you know what I’d give to know if this patient and her mother are teeps or teeks? But even if I could convince Heiss to let me visit and run some follow-up tests, the subjects must not be doing anything too obvious.”
Alak squared his shoulders and sat back, as if he was considering a serious proposal.
“You don’t think it could be arranged, do you?” A quick shake of Alak’s head dashed those foolish hopes.
“No, but there’s something you should know.”
James refused to play the impatient one. He just waited, not even moving his hands.
“You man Heiss has been silenced.”
James froze for about ten seconds, pressing his hands down hard, then blurted, “You do mean to telepathy, not killed?”
Alak nodded.
“No, but there’s something you should know.”
James refused to play the impatient one. He just waited, not even moving his hands.
“You man Heiss has been silenced.”
James froze for about ten seconds, pressing his hands down hard, then blurted, “You do mean to telepathy, not killed?”
Alak nodded.
“Was it because of me?” First Nigel, now this. James needed to untangle himself from this web, and yet, he was looking for a pattern in the threads.
Alak shifted sideways, as if the soft office chair was too hard for him. “We don’t know.”
“But you’ve been watching him?”
“Just peripherally. We never saw him with any Americans or even any high ranking Swiss. But our observer there reports his mind is now silent. We want you to go ahead and talk to him at the conference this weekend, but be careful what you say.”
“You think the Americans are involved? What’s going on?”
“Just remember anything Heiss says.”
“And tell you, when you won’t tell me anything?” James had reacted without thinking, and Alak ignored him until he amended, “I might guide the conversation better if I knew what you suspected.”
“If we knew anything, and you knew what we knew, then that information would be at risk.”
“I see.” James tried to see this as a fair challenge.
“But afterward, there’d be no reason not to tell me. After all, I gave this country my best discoveries
and was promised scientific freedom and support. If they want to understand the Americans or some double agent, they can ask their spies. I have my own work to do.”

“As do I,” Alak nodded and brought his hands together in something short of the traditional wai. He turned to leave and was just reaching the door as it sounded a brief knock and swung inward. Lisa stood in the doorway, an arm’s length from Alak, and for a moment it seemed as if the hand he’d been reaching for the door would connect instead to Lisa’s hip.

Lisa gave a quick smile and met Alak with wide-open eyes. The Thai man nodded his head and stepped back.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Lisa said.

“I was just leaving,” Alak answered softly, and Lisa stepped aside just enough to let him pass, though James thought their clothing brushed in the process.

James was silent for a moment, tapping his thumbs together, reining in annoyance, and Lisa timidly shut the door.

“I hope this wasn’t a bad time.”

“Well, actually—” James saw Lisa’s big childish eyes, “I can’t talk long. I have a lot of work to do.”

“I’ll be quick then. I just wanted to thank you for taking me out, and I hoped I could make dinner for you sometime?”

James clasped his hands together tightly and remained seated at his computer.

“It’s a very nice offer, Lisa. But Robert already invited me to dinner with your family once, and I just don’t think—”

“This is just me offering. I thought maybe I could cook for you at your place.”

“I don’t think that would work.”

“I could bring everything, even the cooking pans.”

“It’s not that, just, Lisa, you’re young, and I don’t want you to get the wrong idea.” James really didn’t want to deal with this. He had to force his eyes down to the keyboard to keep from drifting back into the data on the computer screen. “You’re a very nice person, but—”

“You just want to be friends.”

James decided that was close enough. “I’m glad you understand.”

Lisa gave a weak smile as she drifted out the door. James felt his fingers begin to type, even as he felt guilty for making her sad. Still, it was better that she knew.

He sorted the Swiss sample for those with auditory delusions and those without. His hypothesis was that if some patients were experiencing partial telepathy, it would be most likely to show up as auditory delusions. But none of the sequences correlated with such symptoms, no matter how he grouped them. And he only had the one patient and her mother with the predecessor telepathy sequences. He still needed more data.

June 7, 2025 – Zurich, Switzerland

Back at the Zurich hotel where he’d met Nigel, James stood staring at the mask-like sculptures near the mezzanine elevators. The swirly green oval was about as he remembered, but the dark lump next to it refused to look like a face no matter how he squinted. James shifted foot to foot, then reversed the pattern. He wondered how Nigel was, if their interaction had caused the postdoc trouble. Then he thought of Heiss and went to the rail overlooking the lobby. He’d spent most of the day watching for his supposed collaborator, unable to focus on science until the required conversation was done. Around three o’clock he spotted Heiss down below, wearing a midnight blue dress shirt that tucked surprisingly neatly into gray slacks. James’ first thought was that he now understood tailored shirts. Then he thought to wave. Heiss was nowhere to be found. James checked the nearby conference rooms and finally the poster area, but without luck. Was Heiss avoiding him? Or had he merely caught a convenient elevator? James wandered back down the hall wondering if he
shouldn’t just give up. What was he likely to learn in casual conversation? Wouldn’t he just be calling attention to himself, attention from those within the conspiracies he wanted to avoid? He sat though a lecture he should have enjoyed, ringing his hands and not learning a thing. The speaker’s words flew past him. His own attempts to plan for eventually meeting Heiss kept slipping beneath concerns about whether some plot was advancing around him and whether he truly wanted to find out.

Leaving the talk, he automatically scanned the halls for Heiss, then stopped short when he finally saw him. A few doors down, Heiss in his midnight blue was talking to a man in an even more adventurous amber, long sleeved shirt. Heiss had one hand on his hip, the other man dangled a jacket over his left shoulder. They looked like posed mannequins in a shop window, and James wondered how one overheard fashion critique could so greatly affect his observations. As far as James could tell, both men’s minds were silent.

Walking forward as casually as he could James said, “Heiss, good to see you. Do you have a minute?”

“Certainly.” Heiss raised one shoulder in a half shrug and the man in amber wandered off. Heiss took a step toward James and kept walking as they talked. James wondered where he was being led, or if movement was supposed to prevent eavesdropping. Or maybe it was just chance.

“Are you on your way somewhere?”

“A talk down there in five minutes, but how’s your investigation?”

Was it odd that he chose the word “investigation”? “No luck so far with the cultures, though I’ve plenty more to try. I found some potential correlates when clustering by symptom. Have you tried that?”

“No. Clustering by what?”

“Oh, different sensory modes of delusions, family correlations. Have you come across anything interesting in your analysis?”

“We’re still completing our double blind drug trials, but I’ll know more in a few weeks. What sort of correlates?”

“It’s all pretty tentative so far. Do you have any more detailed records on the subjects’ symptom presentations?”

“Afraid not, our privacy laws are pretty strict here.”

“Of course,” James detected condescension and realized he was making a fool of himself, and he wasn’t even learning anything. His hands lifted to tap against his legs but he redirected them into his pockets. He gave it one last try, “Anything new on the horizon?”

Heiss smiled in a way so sincerely patronizing that James wished he could erase the last few minutes and face Alak’s scorn instead. But he smiled as Heiss said, “Just the usual fun of working with nutcases, one side of the desk or the other. Now if you’ll excuse me?”

James answered, “Certainly,” in pale imitation of the man in amber. Turning away, James almost laughed, because he was so relieved the conversation was over and because he’d realized his ivory shirt could literally be a paler version of amber.

His relief and amusement lasted all the way back to his room where he found a note, lying as before, just inside the door. He picked it up and fell back on the bed laughing aloud before the words even registered on his brain. It was all too much, the note, his attempts to gather covert information. Whatever happened, he was going back to his lab and rededicating himself to research. No more pressing Alak for answers, no more pressing other people for Alak. He rolled onto his stomach, letting his laughter subside to chuckles. There, with his eyes firmly pressed to a pillow, he realized he’d already read the new note. His brain was already grinding through diverse explanations for:

Be ready on July 28th.
Reggie stepped from the dazzling afternoon sunlight into the dim shop on the edge of the courtyard. With Sarah off to visit Chiang Mai, Reggie knew exactly what he wanted to accomplish. He intended to inspect every jewelry store in Bangkok, and today he’d just about done it. Owlish old men had tried to hustle him and feline young women had asked about his girlfriend. Playing the smitten suitor was easy; escaping to look some more, a fitting challenge. At times, he’d been tempted to just buy a big diamond, knowing it would require the least explanation and wondering if deep down Sarah harbored such clichéd hopes. But his instincts kept drawing him back to this place.

The front window of the shop housed a riparian scene on mounds of deep green velvet. Cut glass baubles created a sparkling river; blown glass ornaments dangled above. Along the bank, gnarled metal sculptures of jungle animals, trees, and laborers drank the water or wandered about. To one side, resting atop the same velvet, lay little gold rings. Each ring was really several loops woven together to form a knot. But one ring had been left in pieces, to show that they were all truly puzzles. Inside the dim shop, Reggie studied a sculpted metal tree trunk that formed the base of a lamp. He found a belt of chained metal where every link was a different shape. A young man, European, maybe German by his features, came out from the back.

“Can I help you?” The accent wasn’t quite German, maybe Polish?

The man’s fingers were smudged and his shoulders slightly hunched. “Are these your creations?” Reggie asked.

“Most of them,” his shoulders rose, his head cocked back.

“Did you make the puzzle rings?”

“Yes, all my own designs. Did you want to try one?”

Reggie drifted toward the window display. The one he liked best, a set of wavy lines like cumulus clouds, looked much too large on closer inspection. He hesitated, and the other man spoke.

“You like that one? It’s subtle, harder to unravel than it looks.”

“But I need something smaller, about the size of my pinky.”

“For a woman? I have more.” He ducked into the back and returned with a shoebox holding a couple dozen more rings. The artist picked through carelessly and presented a smaller ring with more wavelike horizontal lines. Reggie knew it was the right ring without checking the size.

“Could I take it apart and try the puzzle?”

“Take your time,” the Polish fellow smirked, pulling a chair up beside a glass display case and motioning for Reggie to have a seat.

Reggie sat and instantly had the ring in six pieces. How hard could a puzzle be with only six pieces? Twenty minutes later, Reggie’s phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and saw it was Phil. He stepped outside to take the call, leaving the ring still in pieces on the display.

“Hello?”

“We’ve got financing! Another ten or twenty mil wouldn’t hurt, but with Scott on our side, we might carry a vote of the shareholders.”

“You’re amazing.”

“Just following a damn good idea, which was yours.”

“Because I made a mistake.”

“Que sera sera.”

“Send me the figures by email?”

“You bet.”

Reggie walked back into the shop wishing he could propose to Sarah on the spot. Then he sat down to solve the puzzle. After another fifteen minutes he tried lining the pieces up to see which band held the lowest point and which one rose the highest. Ten minutes after that, triumph. The metalsmith polished it up and promised he could resize it if needed.

Reggie walked through the steaming streets as if there were springs in his shoes. His next stop was an upscale grocery store that catered to American émigrés. He wanted fried chicken and corn on the cob for his idealized American picnic. But most of all he wanted a box of Cracker Jacks in which to
It was late afternoon when Reggie arrived back at the guesthouse, grocery bags swinging, ring still safely hidden in his front pocket. A note was tacked to the front glass door.

“We’re back early. Sarah got hurt. She’s in the main house. –Emma”

Reggie’s heart raced. They were supposed to be gone four more days. Would they all have come back for a sprained ankle or something small? Reggie took the time to put his groceries in the refrigerator and force several deep breaths. Then he made his way to the Johnson’s front door.

The look on Aliana’s face as he entered the basement room was nearly enough to stop his heart. Sarah lay unconscious, in a bare room, on what looked like a high tech hospital bed. There were readouts at the top and a couple of tubes snaking out from beneath the covers on the far side. Between white sheets, Sarah looked like she was sleeping, though the top of her head was covered with medical gauze. Aliana sat holding her hand, hair in disarray, face red and rutted. When she looked at Reggie her eyes screamed of greater pain than he’d ever experienced. It was a look he’d seen before, on Sarah.

“Samuel said it wasn’t that bad,” Reggie stammered, “that she was just sedated.”

“But they wanted to kill her,” Aliana sobbed.

“Who did?”

“I-- I’ll find Emma.” Aliana tromped out the door, almost bumping into it. Tears still shining on her face.

Reggie took her place in the seat beside Sarah. Part of him wanted to be sad, but a larger part shouted defiantly that she was okay.

Soon Emma came in and closed the door.

“You’re not freaking out?” the teenager asked.

“Should I be?”

Emma shrugged, “Some bunch of teeps decided to kill her because she was able to take Tom’s telepathy away. My parents are pissed, but might kick you out anyway. They had her sedated and brought back here just in case she did some weird teek thing when she woke up. They barely even act like she’s a person.”

“So she hasn’t been awake since being shot in the head?”

“Yeah, six hours now. The sedative should have worn off, but we hadn’t slept or eaten—”

“She’s over-sensitive to medications.”

“Seriously?” Emma squeaked and leaned over Sarah.

“It hasn’t been a problem before, but I don’t think she’s ever been sedated.”

“Should we bring in a doctor? The only teep ones are suspect—”

Aliana burst in the door and ran to the far side of the bed, staring down at Sarah’s face. Had she been listening? Reggie wasn’t sure how much Aliana knew.

“Sarah, can you hear me?” Aliana pleaded. She grabbed Sarah’s shoulders and for a moment Reggie feared she would shake her despite the head injury. But she didn’t, and Sarah opened her eyes. Aliana started sobbing out loud. Sarah’s eyes fixed on her, then Emma, then Reggie. Reggie squeezed Sarah’s hand. “Are you all right?” She started to nod, and he said, “Don’t move your head.”

“Where are we?” Sarah asked. Her voice was rough, but she seemed as alert as when waking from sleep, which with Sarah was fairly alert.

“An empty room in my basement,” Emma answered, with a glance over her shoulder at bare white walls. “They took everything out in case you threw a teek fit or something. Can you still—”

Aliana’s tangled hair was smoothed back behind her shoulders by invisible hands. She didn’t flinch; so Reggie concluded she’d been brought in on most of the secrets.

“Have you told anyone?” Sarah whispered, eyes on Aliana.

“Not about me, not yet.”

Reggie imagined himself the new kid in the clubhouse even before Sarah mumbled, “Could you tell
“Reggie for me? I’m so tired.”
“If you want. We’ll take care of you.” Aliana reached a hand to Sarah’s chin and cheek, leaning over her as her eyes closed.
Reggie felt Sarah squeeze his hand, then fall asleep like a light going out. There was silence in the room for minutes. Emma finally left without meeting anyone’s eyes.
Aliana gingerly pulled herself up on the foot of the bed. There was only one chair in the room. Quietly she said, “We were warned to leave Chiang Mai, but Sarah needed to do something to quiet my thoughts. I guess she tried doing what she did to the man called Tom, figuring I wasn’t telepathic, so it wouldn’t hurt anything. It did hide my thoughts, but now I can hear hers.”
“But no one else’s?” Reggie kept his voice even, like he was in the doorway of an all girls tree house being told it was more than just all girls.
“Not so far, and Emma can’t get through to me.”
“And Sarah still can’t . . .” Reggie shook his head not quite completing the question.
“Hear me? No. And she hates that I can hear her. I’m starting to hate it, too. It’s quiet now, but do you know what kind of fear came through in the few words her mind screamed while she was unconscious?”
“No, but I can imagine.” Reggie wondered if he could. Until yesterday, he was pretty sure he knew Sarah better than anyone else ever had. Now, Aliana had a direct line to her thoughts.
“I don’t want to believe, don’t even know what’s real,” Aliana said.
“I’m sorry.”
Aliana nodded, face calm, back straight, completely different from the demented figure he’d found watching Sarah when he entered. Reggie barely knew Aliana, and he didn’t know what to think of her now.
Four days later, Sarah had only a scar, which she stared at in the mirror several times a day and arranged her hair to cover the rest of the time. It formed a shiny red stripe from above her left ear to three inches behind. She wouldn’t sleep on that side, but otherwise, she kept insisting it was fine. Reggie suspected she’d done more than just remove the stitches telekinetically, but she didn’t seem inclined to talk about that, or anything else.
To fill the silence, they listened to audio he downloaded onto the PAD. Trying to be chivalrous, Reggie played music more than he would normally choose. But now it was just past noon and despite the heat, Reggie was making crepes. In the seconds it took to fry each one he scooped diced fruit into bowls. Mango into the first bowl, flip the crepe, durian into the second, start a new crepe, banana into a third, flip the new crepe.
While cooking he strongly preferred to hear news, so the PAD was blurting, “The British Campaign Against Toxoplasmosis sparked new interest today with their proposal to euthanize all infected felines. It has been illegal to import animals carrying the disease into Britain or Scotland for over a decade, and there is still no treatment for infected cats or humans once the parasite reaches the brain. However, animal advocates argue that cats are worth the minor risks involved and the scientific community is still divided as to whether psychological effects on infected humans are primarily pro-or anti-social.”
Reggie glanced around to see Sarah, who was folding cats from squares of golden paper. It was good to see her take interest in anything, after the last few days of quiet withdrawal. He reminded himself that she’d been shot in the head, though the injury didn’t look so major now. Surely, as a good boyfriend, he could wait until she wanted to talk about it, even if it was hard to keep quiet when he was with her constantly. He couldn’t even stir himself to go outside for air, afraid someone would sneak into the house, someone he wouldn’t be able to stop anyway.
Sarah sat on the bed, propped up with pillows. Her scar was only noticeable because he knew where to look. Otherwise, she was the picture of health, and seemed incongruous playing the invalid.
Around her were scattered paper birds and animals, folded from an origami kit that Emma had given her yesterday. Any concerns about wasting teek power seemed to have evaporated, since she now folded two at a time, one with hands, one without.
The news continued, “An Indian physician, Dr. Manoj Agarwal, working for Doctors Without Borders, has raised concerns about the U.S. backed AIDS vaccination program. Dr. Agarwal claims he became suspicious upon seeing the bulky needle disposal units designed solely for the new international program. He claims that after each needle is used to inject vaccine, it is placed point down into a plastic box, which aligns the needles in a grid, possibly to deposit samples of the recipients’ DNA. These used materials are taken to a processing van where Agarwal claims the grids may be used for secret genetic testing.”

Reggie was just leaning around to spy Sarah’s reaction when he saw Aliana and Emma, in their workout clothes, approaching the glass front door.

“Can we come in?” Emma asked, head already through the door. She took an exaggerated sniff and said, “Or would we be interrupting lunch?”

Sarah continued her silent folding, so Reggie smiled and said, “Come in. You can stay for crepes if you’d like.”

“Oh, no,” said Aliana. “We’ll just visit for a moment. If we eat your wonderful food we’ll be too full to dance.”

Reggie knew he should offer again, but he didn’t actually want the extra company. So he let them scurry over to Sarah’s bedside as he finished up in the kitchen.

“Wow,” he heard Emma say. “Is that easier or harder using teek.”

“Same if I’m doing both, easier if I’m only using teek and work like there’s an extra opposable thumb on each side.”

“Isn’t that confusing?” Emma asked.

Reggie heard no reply. He looked over to see Sarah staring at Aliana and Emma staring at Sarah. They looked like three figures in a sculpture, frozen in mid-action.

“Would you like to stay for lunch?” he called out loudly.

“No, we should really go.” Aliana leaned over the paper menagerie to give Sarah a hug. Emma did the same and then they rushed out.

“What was that all about?” Reggie asked and knew at once that he shouldn’t have said it. There wasn’t going to be an answer. “Shall we eat?”

The next day, Reggie and Sarah walked through the double doors of the Johnson family’s sitting room. It was Sarah’s first day out of bed. Ida greeted her with a pat on her hand and then steered her toward an oversized beanbag. Reggie perched on an ergonomic stool by the wall, feeling very mother hen-ish, but Sarah showed no sign of needing him. He watched Emma, with her knees pulled up in a chair swing, coasting back and forth in the light of a window, eyes fixed on an empty patch of air. Samuel sat quietly in a Danish-design armchair. Ida was the only Johnson who seemed fully present in the room. She brought out a tea tray, something dark with a hint of citrus, and offered everyone a cup. Then, when they were all seated with their tea, she began.

“I know it’s been a hard week for everyone,” Ida said, smoothing her dress.

“I appreciate all you’ve done to help me,” Sarah said.

“It was the least we could do given the circumstances. There’s always been an inner and outer circle of teeps in Bangkok, but there’s never been violence before.”

“It wasn’t her fault!” Emma shouted from the swing.

“No one’s saying it was,” her mother answered.

“But you’re sending her away!” Emma whined.

“Emma—” began her father.

“It’s all right,” said Ida. “Sarah, Reggie, we’ve been glad to have you here with us, and with Emma. It’s not that we blame you for what happened. But we walk a fine line living here in Thailand and trying to do what’s best for our community.”

Samuel took over. “Recent developments should make it safe for you to find your own place in Bangkok. But if you’re worried, the Thai government has offered to provide you lodgings and security if you participate in experiments involving what you did to Tom and other—“

“I’m sorry, but what recent developments?” Sarah asked.
“Well, we’ve sent out feelers since Tom began to regain his abilities, and there’s widespread regret in the community about the attempt on your life.”

“Tom’s telepathy works now?” Sarah was sitting up straight in her beanbag.

Samuel spread his hands in surprise and glanced at his daughter and his wife. “I thought you knew. When he heard you’d been shot, he came back into teep society and demonstrated that his mind is receptive and he can speak telepathically, weakly now, but he believes it’s getting stronger. He’s argued against blaming teeks.”

Sarah just sat with her mouth open.

There was a silence before Emma muttered, “If it’s all okay, then why are you making them leave?”

Ida answered, “I know you like being in the center of things, Emma. But you’re only thirteen, on the verge of entering the adult world. You don’t need—”

“Sarah and Reggie,” Samuel interrupted, “Why don’t you come with me to the office and we can discuss what the government is prepared to offer you.”

Like sheep, they followed Samuel out of the room, leaving Ida and Emma alone.

The next day, Sarah and Reggie packed. They’d declined the government offer and talked about where they might move and how to distance themselves from the Thai teep community without creating more problems. Reggie felt like a hawk watching Sarah for any signs of dizziness or fatigue. But what he saw was the beautiful woman he loved, acting and talking more or less the way she had before being shot. Other than being asked to move, it was as if the last week hadn’t happened.

By late afternoon they were mostly packed. Sarah sat sideways on the bed, slowly folding laundry and packing it in her bag. Reggie knew the timing wasn’t quite right for all he wanted to tell her, but there might not be a better chance. He wound up his optimism like he’d wind a music box, then he swooped beside Sarah on the bed and scooped her up in his arms.

“Hey, what’s that for?”

“I’m taking you on a picnic.”

“Now?”

“As soon as I pack the basket and you put on your flowered dress.”

“Why should I put on a dress?”

“Because I’ll be busy packing the basket, unless you feel too weak and need my assistance?”

She swatted him with the shirt she’d been folding and went to get the dress.

Reggie quickly shucked the shirt he’d been working in all day, pulling on the organdy peasant shirt he’d set aside for this occasion. Then he packed his carefully infiltrated box of cracker jacks in the bottom of the basket under several kitchen towels he didn’t expect to need. That way Sarah wouldn’t see them before the moment was right. He set the chicken to fry while he made Waldorf salad.

Sarah came out in her dress and shook her head, but she seemed to know better than to reprimand a cook. She went over to a mirrored panel and wove her short hair into tiny French braids. Reggie’s spirits rose most sincerely. Intricate braids had always fascinated him, and Sarah knew it. Now, as she wove, it was clear that hands weren’t holding all the parts. Reggie didn’t know how she did it, and he hoped it didn’t hurt around her injury, but by the time she finished her scar and the shaved patch around it were nearly invisible.

By the time her braids were tied, the kitchen tantalized with lemon and rosemary. Without much delay, Reggie packed up the food along with a blanket they could sit on. Then the two of them made an easy walk to a hill behind the Johnson’s property, and Reggie spread the blanket on the ground. A breeze would have made the scene perfect, but the thick damp air held an earthy smell with a slight tropical sweetness, and from their shady spot near the hilltop, household gardens and roads spread around them like a warm quilt.

“Is there an occasion I’ve forgotten?” Sarah teased. “It’s not the Fourth of July yet, and I don’t remember anything special in June.”

“If you’d like fireworks, I could arrange some, but since you’ve only been up and about for a couple days, I thought I’d be a gentleman.”

“You made me put on a dress so you could be a gentleman?”
“I like the way it drapes across your knees when you sit on the blanket.” He really did like it. Sarah had slid off her shoes and was sitting with her legs tucked to one side, calico rippling across her calves. She leaned on her opposite arm, tiny braids tilting toward her shoulder.

He served salad and bread, then waited until they’d licked their fingers from the chicken before mentioning the first of his plans.

“There’s something I’ve wanted to talk to you about.”

“What’s that?”

He put his arm around her, stroking along her side. She stiffened and Reggie stopped stroking and just held her close beside him. “Ever since we came here, I’ve been trying to find the most useful job I could do given our new situation. It turns out a phone call I missed, from one of the founders of PAD, may have set up the opportunity of a lifetime.”

Sarah pulled back and looked him in the eyes, but held his hands, still clearly listening.

“You see, PAD owns its own satellite network, several encryption and telecommunications patents, and a private island with some decent diplomatic claims to national sovereignty.”

“I know, I watched the business channel special with you after America banned their phones.”

Sarah straightened the neck of her dress as she spoke.

“Fair enough. But have you thought how a non-profit could use those resources? Cell phones brought huge chunks of India and Africa into the twenty-first century. But the PAD technology can reach places cell phones can’t and bring the bandwidth needed for them to do business on the web. Phil’s found a way to start us truly independent of any national government, and by balancing different interests’ need for unmonitored communications, we can probably keep it that way.”

“That’s great,” Sarah smiled, her eyes still fixed on the distance. “Why didn’t you tell me before?”

A serious answer about industrial espionage, how busy she’d been before her injury, and how silent afterward skimmed across the surface of Reggie’s mind, but he smiled like an artiste and said, “Then it wouldn’t have been a surprise.”

She tilted her head again and sighed, “Congratulations.”

“Well, it’s not quite done yet. We’ve set up a network of alliances to pull together the money and work out some legal details. This all started with the near-bankruptcy of PAD and several interests who wanted to end the network and sell off its assets. But the shareholders will vote in a week or so, and with any luck we’ll be their best offer.” As a showman Reggie knew when he was losing his audience. “There’s a further possibility I hoped you’d like.”

Sarah spread her hands for him to continue. He watched her carefully, wanting to see her reaction.

“Ideally, any plan should serve more than one purpose. In addition to improving world infrastructure and protecting free communication, we have the chance to start our own mini-country. I thought, maybe you and I could move to PAD Island. It would give us a safe, independent place to live. I could use it as an umbrella organization for new NGOs. If you wanted to, we could even make it a safe haven for other teeps and teeks.”

Reggie had seen Sarah’s face begin to light up when she saw the possibilities. Then he’d seen it darken. He couldn’t bear a refrain of her recent silence, not now. Her eyes were down and she was picking at the blanket.

“What is it?”

Sarah didn’t speak. She sat, picking blanket fuzz with her fingers. When she spoke, her voice was high and sad.

“Reggie, I’m really glad you’ve made something good out of all this. I always knew you were the sort to make big things happen, and I’m glad following me to Thailand didn’t wreck that. But right now, I don’t know what sort of person I am, and I don’t think you do either.”

Reggie flashed back to when he’d righteously let Sarah leave at the end of their stint in India. Had their roles changed so completely and caught him unaware? “You’re the person I love. I want to help you reach your goals and to kiss away your worries.” He caught and kissed her hand, trying to charm her back into the mood, but her face stayed empty. “I want to buy you fanciful clothes and surprise you with chocolates and poetry. I want to carry you away to a tropical island and know you without the rest of the world.”
Sarah smiled, but the corners of her lips still turned down. “All my life, I’ve avoided being noticed, and just tried to do what I could along the way.”

Reggie reached out his hand again, but Sarah nudged it away without meeting his eyes, refusing to be interrupted. “Maybe I didn’t live up to my potential, but I told myself I did some good and very little harm. Ever since I went back to rescue the Chens, I’ve been acting like a superhero or something. And it was kind of a thrill, each time I succeeded, each time I survived. But what have I achieved? I torched a government building. I terrified an airplane’s crew. I damaged a truck and two helicopters, and cost one pilot his life. I’m lucky I didn’t get you or Emma or Aliana killed. And two governments and at least one of the Chens would probably be happy to see me dead, or worse. I can’t live this way. I can’t take these risks. I think I might lose my mind and then—then who knows what could happen.”

Reggie sat frozen. He hadn’t seen this coming. Did Sarah really feel so bad? Should he convince her to keep trying? Or could she really not handle their new lives? If he couldn’t tell whether she was saying no or just needed more time, then maybe he really didn’t know her as well as he thought. He saw his proposals, both the part about PAD Island and what he’d intended to say next, derailed.

Reggie looked down at the Johnson’s estate. The buildings with solar panels shone like water in the setting sun. The surrounding air was quickly cooling to a comfortable temperature for cuddling. Sarah sat beside him, silently picking at the blanket. Her dress was endearingly crooked on her shoulders.

Reggie could smell the remains of their chicken. There was no scent of Cracker Jacks. He’d sealed the bag with an iron when he snuck the ring into the prize packet.

“We don’t have to move to the island. I can live wherever you want and communicate by phone and email.”

“No Reggie. I’d be holding you back. I want to disappear. You want to change the world. I don’t think the two go together.”

“Don’t we go together?” Reggie asked, touching the hair at the nape of her neck and sliding his hand slowly down her back. “Can’t we keep finding ways to go together?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, looking away, looking like stone. He found his hand at rest on the blanket and didn’t know what to do with it, or what to do with himself. His father had always told him to trust his gut, and his gut told him he was losing Sarah.

They sat in silence for a moment, then gathered their picnic things and headed down the hill.

The PAD was ringing when Reggie stepped in the door. He kept hold of the basket, not wanting Sarah to unpack it and find the mystery box of Cracker Jacks. He picked up the phone, only planning to answer if it was important. The ID code showed it was Phil. Reggie glanced at Sarah. She shrugged, and he took the call.

“Reggie, I’ve been trying to get a hold of you for an hour.”

“Sorry Phil. Sarah and I needed some time without the phone.”

“Wink, wink, nudge, nudge. But anyway, if this story is for real, it could be very good news for her. Some British attorney, a Mr. Radband, has been trying to contact Sarah about an inheritance—”

“British? I don’t think her mother ever went to Britain.”

“No, it’s about that guy she rescued when his car went off the road. Remember, we had a meeting here that night? Well, the solicitor didn’t say directly, but he hinted the inheritance was several million dollars.”

“What? Are you sure this is for real?”

“No, I’m not sure. That’s why I didn’t give him any information. But I said I’d ask Sarah to call him. Do you have something to write on?”

A week later, near the Bangkok airport, Reggie sat across from Sarah in the overdone lobby of an executive hotel. He wanted to be next to her, on a sofa, but she had deliberately chosen a chair. She was silent again. Since the picnic, he’d tried to show how much he cared for her, but each day she seemed to sit a little farther away.
Today he was wearing a suit and felt more like Sarah’s financial manager than anything else. First, she’d insisted he make arrangements with the attorney, who had offered to fly anywhere they specified to deliver his documents in person. So Reggie arranged this meeting. Then Sarah insisted that Emma and Aliana come along, in case the attorney was one kind of teep or the other. Howard had invited himself along, claiming that Sarah might need protection after what had happened in Chiang Mai.

So the rest of them sat shivering, underdressed for the over air-conditioned lobby, while Reggie sat stiffly in his suit, waiting to see if today would bring good fortune or intrigue.

The attorney had told them he’d wear a black bowler hat to make himself recognizable. But when Reggie saw the distinguished British gentleman enter the garish Thai lobby, he knew him at once, and the man had class. Reggie was glad to be wearing a good Italian suit. He felt his mother’s prim upper class manners cover him like armor, as he stepped forward to introduce himself.

But while he stood up gracefully, Sarah tugged herself out of an overstuffed hotel chair and said, “Mr. Radband?”

“Yes, Ms. Duncan, I presume?” Sarah nodded and they shook hands. She turned to introduce her friends. “This is Reggie Malone, who spoke with you on the phone. And these are my friends, Aliana, Emma, and Howard.”

“Indeed, I had not expected such a committee. Usually papers are presented in private.”

Sarah glanced around at her friends. Emma shook her head slightly; Reggie knew he would have noticed if the man was that kind of teep, but this meant he also couldn’t be read. Aliana gave a slight shrug, and Reggie wondered what the well-bred Brit was making of this display. But the solicitor stood placidly by, the model of patience without affront.

“I’d like Reggie present to look over the papers,” Sarah said, “The others won’t mind waiting.”

“As you wish. I’ve reserved a meeting room. Let me check in with the front desk.”

A moment later, the concierge showed them to a small room with a heavy oak table, not far from the lobby. Reggie and Sarah went in with the attorney. The other three stood guard outside.

“As I said on the phone, Ms. Sarah Duncan was named as the primary beneficiary for Mr. Daniel O’Reeley’s estate. Most of the assets were protected in a trust, but as you can see from this itemization, the after tax valuation as of yesterday was approximately eight million American dollars.” Mr. Radband passed a financial statement to Sarah. She glanced at the bottom number and handed it to Reggie. He tried to look professional and diligent as he studied it line by line.

“Mr. O’Reeley also instructed me to assist the executor for Mrs. Molly Duncan’s estate with papers necessary to conclude that probate. If you would sign these documents, those assets could be transferred in a few days. They total just under ninety thousand American dollars.”

Reggie glanced sideways at Sarah.

She smiled innocently and said, “When he gave me his car, I thought he might have trouble claiming mine. So I gave him Eva’s number thinking he could get paid for the car. He really didn’t act rich or anything.”

Reggie caught a distinct flash of amusement on the old Brit’s face and wondered what he knew of O’Reeley’s financial dissembling in life. But Reggie stuck to his role of studious financial advisor and sought clarification on matters of accounting and law related to the documents. Mr. Radband gave clear and well-informed answers, and Reggie concluded the deal was probably on the up and up. Sarah seemed remarkably unconcerned, swerving back and forth a little in her swivel chair.

Reggie said, “If I have my attorney, Phil Meyers, contact you, perhaps we could move this directly into a new trust in Sarah’s name?”

“That would be reasonable. Is Mr. Meyers familiar with international tax law and trusts?”

“He knows the business side well enough. I’m sure he’ll manage.”

“I was also asked to deliver this letter.” Mr. Radband produced a small cream envelope from his inside jacket pocket. He passed it to Sarah with the grace of a courtier. She slipped her finger under the back flap and opened it with a jagged tear.

“Do you know what this says?” Sarah asked Mr. Radband.

“I was informed.”
Sarah passed the card to Reggie. In it, Mr. O’Reeley wrote that his last request was for Sarah to use part of the inheritance to visit his childhood home of Killarney, Ireland. That was all.
“Can you explain why he wants me to visit Ireland or why he left all this to me?” Sarah asked Radband.
“I’m afraid not.”
With that, the solicitor rose, tapped papers into his briefcase, and took up his hat. In moments he was gone, headed straight back to London after less than an hour in Bangkok.
“What a schedule,” Sarah muttered as Reggie arranged her copies of the papers. The two of them stood and rejoined their friends in the wide hallway off the lobby. Emma and Aliana rushed forward like curious puppies. Howard waited a few steps behind, hands behind his back, alert like a bodyguard.
“You think it’s fishy?” Sarah asked Reggie.
“The paperwork seems legitimate.”
“Anyone?” Sarah asked around.
The other’s shook their heads and shrugged.
“Well, why don’t I treat us all to lunch?”

Aliana ended up choosing the restaurant and directing the taxi. Sarah sat next to Reggie on the drive there and tried to convince him to take charge of the money and use it, if needed, for his new telecom venture. He tried to say he wouldn’t, but she didn’t seem to listen. Why was she so determined that his project succeed when she didn’t want any part in it herself? Was she trying to send him away?

At the restaurant, a sort of revolving saucer-style room atop one of Bangkok’s newest towers, there was a short wait while a table was prepared for the five of them. Sarah pulled Aliana aside, and Reggie took the opportunity to use the restroom and wash.
When he came back, Aliana and Sarah were still huddled together. Emma and Howard stood staring at them.
Reggie heard Emma say teasingly to Howard, “Don’t tell me you’re interested in her too!”
“How’d you know?”
“Everyone likes her.”
“Who’s everyone?” Howard chuckled.
“People who’ve known her a lot longer than you.”
“I knew her before she left the states.”
“What? Oh, her!”
“You thought—Oh, shit.”
Reggie could tell from where he stood that Howard was blushing. He would have ducked back toward the restroom to avoid embarrassing himself or Howard further, but at that moment Sarah caught sight of Reggie and motioned him over to her and Aliana.
“Reggie, I think I’ve got a great plan. I’ve asked Aliana to come with me to Ireland. There might be things she can learn there.”
Sarah spoke with rapid excitement, but Reggie was caught completely off guard. He’d assumed that if Sarah actually went to Ireland, they’d go together. He said only, “What?”
Sarah bit her lip and whispered even more quietly. “Well, I traded a bit of information to James to have him sequence some DNA, Aliana’s, but he didn’t know that. And it came out just like I knew it would. She has the teep predecessor genes, the ones he originally found in a British sample. And Aliana’s from Ireland, and what if there were other people there like her, and maybe some of them have their teep activated, and—”
Reggie absorbed the information quickly but was annoyed he hadn’t been told before. “You’re going to go looking for another set of them in Ireland after all you’ve been through? And you think the PAD deal is too dangerous for you?”
“I didn’t say it was too dangerous for me,” Sarah mumbled, shoving her hands into her pockets. “I can do this for O’Reeley and Aliana, and you can do your work. Aliana thinks she can get someone
she knows to fly out for a vacation in Thailand, I’ll use that person’s passport to fly to Ireland safely, on a separate plane from Aliana. If I decide not to come back here, the other person will have to report the passport lost or whatever. But by then it’ll be harder to trace exactly where I am. Meanwhile, you can get safely out of the country to your new island and set all that up.”

“I could come with you. If you want to avoid PAD Island so badly, I’ll handle my part by phone.”

“No Reggie, I’ve been telling you all along, there are things you need to do. I don’t want to hold you back.”

Sarah’s reasoning made his head spin, as it had long ago. But he didn’t want to deal with what he’d heard Howard say or what he thought he saw when Aliana looked at his girlfriend. The fact that Aliana knew Sarah’s motives now, when he wasn’t at all sure, made it hard to be around them both. If Sarah wanted to go to Ireland without him, maybe she should go. Maybe she didn’t need him after all.

Chapter 22
June 30, 2025 – County Kilkenny, Ireland

Sarah took a deep breath of crisp, Irish air. Her shoulders pulled forward, her shoulder blades pressed out into the stretchy knit of her new striped sweater. She felt like a bird flexing her wings after long confinement in a cage.

She was perched, squatting, on a stone wall that might once have been a castle. Around her everything was green. It was the most consuming green she’d ever encountered, and she liked the damp, cleansing feel of it. So far, that green was what she felt of Ireland. She’d arrived yesterday, as a different person, with a new name and palm print. This morning she’d bought a cheap, old car and driven on the left side of the street until she was out of Dublin, away from people. There was a gnawing fear of people growing in her center. They felt like the opposite of green. Part of her didn’t want to meet Aliana this afternoon. Aliana could read her mind. Any person might be able to read her mind, or to hear a strange quiet. Any person might be trying to find her, to capture her, to use her, and she didn’t want to use her teek as a weapon, not even to defend herself.

Of course, telepaths were rare. Aliana was the only one so far who could reach Sarah’s mind, and she’d only been able to hear a couple others. But any person could be a threat. The rocks, the grass, the birds were not.

Sarah squatted on the stone wall until her legs ached. Then she unfolded and sat.

At five o’clock she drove into Kilkenny, where she’d promised to meet Aliana. Dressed more drably than Sarah had ever seen her, in a navy blue boat neck and jeans, Aliana stood waiting near the bus stop, luggage piled beside her. Jumping out of the car, Sarah gave her a hug, remembering how much she cared for her friend, even as her darker thoughts crowded around.

“I’m sorry,” Aliana whispered.

“I brought this on both of us. Let’s get your stuff in the car.”

Once they were driving, Sarah forced herself to talk, trying to control her thoughts. “How tired are you? Can we drive on through to Killarney?”

“Do you care if I fall asleep?”

“Not at all.”

“Then I’m yours to drive as you will.”

Sarah’s mood momentarily lightened. Then her mind drifted through twists on innuendo she didn’t want heard; so she tried to find something safe to think about that would let Aliana sleep. She started by trying to remember words to songs she’d learned as a child at summer camp. But soon one track of her mind was singing while another was saying what she wanted to avoid thinking about. She tried to remember which summer she’d first learned each song, which counselor had taught it, who she’d sat with when she sang it, how old she’d been, and what she’d understood. For a minute,
maybe two, she kept her mind fully on course. Then one strand drifted to wondering if there had been any telepaths at camp. If she’d wrapped people there in her mental cocoons, would any of them have been able to read her mind? Might she have welcomed it then, just to not be alone? Or would she have become even more monstrous?

This wasn’t what she should think about to let Aliana sleep. Aliana touched her knee and said, “Don’t worry about it.”

Sarah was flooded with sensation. Heat shot from Aliana’s hand up and down her body. There was something erotic in it. But mostly it was Sarah’s overwhelming need to be touched. As a kid she’d thought of herself as touch-starved when she’d had these extreme reactions and felt so empty and needy. But why should she feel that now? It had only been two days since she left Reggie, and he’d held her and loved her more than any body should require. But maybe it was that loss or maybe her almost phobic desire to distance herself from people now. Or maybe it was that she wanted that sort of closeness with Aliana even despite her horror at having her mind read.

Sarah became aware of Aliana sitting unnaturally still, gazing fixedly out the window. “You hear all this, but you’re pretending not to.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Hold me. Sarah knew her thoughts spoke the truth, but aloud she said, “I guess if I can’t manage to say things aloud, it’s polite for you to pretend not to hear them. But it doesn’t seem fair to you.”

“Who ever said life was fair? But if you wanted to stop someplace for the night, I would gladly hold you.”

Sarah couldn’t help but worry what her mind might say or want but not be ready for if she let Aliana hold her.

“Listen, Sarah. You’re worrying too much about hurting my feelings. I know the rules are different when I can hear thoughts you would never speak aloud. I’m not some clueless schoolboy who thinks desire entitles me to do whatever I want. I don’t think I’d even want to do anything until you were sure about it. But you’re hurting. You think I could ease that. Trust me as your friend, and let me help.”

Trust. That was the critical word in all this. No matter how much Sarah hated having to share her every thought, on some deep level she did trust Aliana, or she thought she could. And trust was something she’d hardly ever felt before.

There was no place to stop and sleep on the road to Killarney. But Sarah’s mind settled peacefully into understanding Aliana’s situation and sifting her own feelings around that.

Aliana fell asleep in the passenger’s seat. Her hair was in her face and she snored a little bit. Seeing her asleep, Sarah felt only good things toward her.

July 1, 2025 – County Kerry, Ireland

The next morning, Sarah felt as light as she had in the helicopter. Aliana had held her all night. Somehow it had been simple, like kids at a slumber party. Sarah felt able to deal with the world again. Aliana stared at Sarah with the fascination they had shared the day they first taught each other dance and gymnastics.

They asked the hotel clerk if he knew any relatives of Daniel O’Reeley. He shook his head and sent them to the town historian.

The historian turned out to be a withered old man who sat by a fire even in the middle of summer. Sarah imagined him as the historians’ poster child. He bent over his books and said there was no O’Reeley, but some O’Rileys lived out by the gap of Dunloe.

When they finally found an O’Riley, she looked at them funny. She was a plump, motherly woman in a skirt and apron. There was no Daniel that she knew of in the family, but she asked them to sit on her porch while she made a phone call. She returned with penciled directions on a small square of paper. They should go to the fishing hole and talk to Nadine. The woman waved goodbye to them without further explanation.

Aliana navigated, and Sarah drove down several dirt roads until neither of them was at all sure where
they were meant to be. But they came to what seemed a likely fishing hole with one other car beside it and a gray-haired woman looking out over the water. The woman wore a flannel overshirt, jeans, and boots. Her hair was short and curly, and up close, she didn’t look quite so old, maybe in her fifties or sixties.

“Are you Nadine?” Sarah asked.

“That I am, and you must be the two I’m s’pose to meet.”

“I’m Sarah and this is Aliana. We’re trying to find any relatives of a friend of mine, Daniel O’Reeley.”

“And why do ya’ wanna find them?”

“Well, he, uh, died. And one of his last wishes was for me to come here.”

“Di’ he say why?”

“Well, no. I was actually given the message after he died.”

“Was there anything peculiar ‘bout this Daniel O’Reeley?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t really know him that well. I sort of rescued him from a car crash and then he sent me a nice letter and helped me when I needed help. But I don’t know why he—”

“Aye, ‘nother set of young, lost ones. Let me guess, you’re scuba divers?”

“No,” Sarah answered, pulling back a bit.

“It’s okay,” Aliana whispered, “She’s a teep, and she can talk to me.”

Sarah gulped and looked away from Nadine. She looked for others who might be hiding, in the nearby bushes, too thin to give much cover, or in the reeds poking up from the water, a chilly but adequate hide. As she looked, she thought, and she knew her thoughts made looking pointless. Her mind raced back to her relatives’ betrayal and being chased in Cambodia.

“Peace, child.” Nadine placed dry hands on each side of Sarah’s face and looked her steadily in the eyes. “I’ve already gathered you’re a mover and people have na’ been kind to you so far. But they weren’t your people, and we are. Promise you won’t betray us, and you’ll have no trouble here.”

Her voice flowed like water, and her touch cooled Sarah’s fear. Was this some trick like telepathy? What did she mean by “your people”? Did she know about the two kinds of telepath genes and that Sarah had a different kind than Aliana? And how could she not betray them if there were other’s here who could read her mind? What could she promise? Would she be asked to keep more secrets? Nadine, still holding Sarah’s face, said “Hush, ya’ think too much and it pains me, but yer not the sort to run amok. Sit here by the water, and we’ll talk aloud.”

The three of them sat on rocks. Sarah found a smooth stone that fit the palm of her hand and tried to drain the cool and calm right out of it. Nadine began by asking their story so far. Sarah told all that had happened since she rescued O’Reeley. His name seemed like a joke now, and she couldn’t believe she’d never noticed it before.

In her telling, she tried to leave out details that would identify people, but knew it was hopeless. She wanted to regret ever coming to Ireland, but she couldn’t help wanting to know more about Nadine. Several times the gruff old woman said, “Finish your story an’ I’ll tell you some of ours.”

But when Sarah felt emptied, like she’d told and been questioned beyond all endurance, Nadine just turned to Aliana and said, “Now tell me ‘bout yourself.”

“She’s told you almost everything.”

“Not at all. Tell me ‘bout your parents”

“Well, they were Jim and Briana Sheppard. Both born and raised in Belfast; both claimed to be modern Irish agnostics. It was not spoken of directly, but I gather my mother was raised Catholic and my Dad was raised Protestant.”

“Wait,” said Sarah, “Are you doing something to make us talk?”

“Some fey enchantment you mean?”

“I don’t know why we’re telling you all this.”

“I’m doing nothin’ you don’t do yourself. We all burn with the energy. People react to it, especially our own kind. Now don’ interrupt your friend.” Nadine gave a curt nod and turned her attention back to Aliana. Aliana let out a small chuckle and continued her story.

“They were older when they had me, and the only grandparent I knew was my mother’s father. He’d
been taken with Alzheimer’s; so I didn’t know him well. My Mum died of cancer when I was twenty and my Dad shot himself though the head a few months later. I took off for Thailand where I could support myself dancing and teaching.”

Sarah cringed at the sad story and that she’d never thought to ask. She wanted to reach out to Aliana, then realized how ridiculous her reassurance would seem with her thoughts spread out before her. Aliana reached over and squeezed Sarah’s hand, and Sarah went back to scanning the marshy edges of the fishing hole.

“Your parents ne’er told any stories about magic or special powers?” Nadine asked.

“No, they considered themselves strictly modern. Besides, I couldn’t do anything until Sarah did her thing to me.”

“Nonsense. Ya’ danced.”

Aliana smiled and nodded.

Nadine gazed at them both and then out at the water. Surface bugs skimmed along. Birds sounded in the reeds. Sarah tried to feel green the way she had the day before, but instead she just wanted Nadine to talk.

“Aye, so impatient. But yes, there are many of us here. Ya’ think ya’ know all about telepaths, that there are two kinds, and that you’re not like us. But if you weren’t like us, then we wouldn’t hear your thoughts, and you’d never be a mover.”

“There are other telekinetics here, ones like me?”

“Aye, child, you’re so self-centered. But yes, we have nigh as many movers as mind-readers, and some who do both. While the outsider’s mind-readers can hear more people’s thoughts, the movers are truly ours. There are those who calm the animals and those whose gift is to see our kind. But our gifts only work if we contact the energy now and again. We have our own ritual, but sometimes it happens accidentally to those pressed by water or air or earth. I ne’er heard of a mover pressing one so, but perhaps you were the first to try.”

“What energy? Is there a source? Is it finite? Can your mind-readers only hear those who touch it? And why are they called mind-readers and not telepaths or mind-speakers?” Sarah asked.

“So many questions. The Gaelic is ‘cluin inntinn,’ which might translate as ‘hear mind.’ Some say the energy flowed differently then, that all minds spoke to those who could hear. Ya’ need to make a choice before ya’ know more. Join us, and you’ll learn to control your thoughts, but you must promise to keep our secrets.”

“How can I promise to keep secrets before I know what they are?”

“Do ya’ only believe in promises you want to keep? Our secrets are not freely given. The cost is a promise.”

Sarah imagined an evil sorceress extracting such a promise. If this were a story, it would lead to something terrible, like a secret plan to kill Aliana. Then Sarah would be forced to break her promise to save her friend.

“Sarah,” Aliana whispered, “That’s a bit harsh.”

“Harsh to you or to her?” Sarah asked, feeling numbed by imaginary pain. Then she berated herself for speaking without thought, realized some of it had only been thought, and wondered how much of her pain came across telepathically.

“Do ya’ enjoy such thoughts?” Nadine asked.

“No, but my promise wouldn’t mean much without thought.”

“When you’re older you’ll admire despair less.”

In the end, they promised, and were sent off to an artist’s colony at the coast. By the time they reached the last road, the one “past the farmhouse with two chimneys” and otherwise completely unmarked, it was mid-afternoon. The road curved along a sheep paddock, becoming more and more dirt and less and less gravel until it veered right before the ocean and then dead-ended by the side of a partially paved courtyard.

Beyond the courtyard stood yet another rickety old farmhouse with numerous boxy additions. There were a few smaller huts and igloo-style piles of stone, some connected to the main structure by short
hallways. The whole crazy construction was painted in earth-tones that looked like pottery glaze. The air stung with salt, and waves could be heard crashing just out of sight.

Sarah and Aliana stood by the car as a tall man approached them from the main house. He had curly hair like Reggie’s, but his arms were more muscular and his movements more rolling. At the back of his hair was a long, thin braid, and Sarah thought of how Reggie had always liked braids and wondered if he’d like to grow one. She’d gone on to thinking that Reggie would probably be jealous if he saw who they were staying with, when Aliana nudged her arm and Sarah realized the guy was probably a teep and could hear what she thought. Then he stopped and smiled at her with eyebrows that seemed to flex up at both ends, and Sarah was at once smitten and embarrassed. Aliana just giggled and they walked silently to the largest building.

Inside the door twenty or thirty people sat in a rough semi-circle. Most of them were young, in their teens or twenties. Most of them really looked like they could be artists. They wore distinctive clothes: all black, glorious hand printed patterns, flowing silks, or plush fabrics. They filled the large room to overflowing, each unique and yet part of the whole.

The room itself looked like it had been sculpted out of foam. Sarah had seen whole houses formed from foam blown into molds, but this one looked impossible, as if someone had switched off gravity while the ceiling was shaped and dried. Instantly she realized she could achieve the same effect, using telekinesis. She looked at the assembled faces, wanting to know who was also a teek and who had made the ceiling. A dark haired woman in flowing burgundy velvet over linen inclined her head toward the teenage boy next to her, then whispered in his ear. He smiled, then nodded toward Sarah, with a sweep of his hand he indicated that the ceiling was his work. Sarah gathered from the quick whisper that he wasn’t a teep. So why was everyone so silent?

A man dressed all in white stood in the center of the group. His hair was long, brown, and braided. His face looked solemn, maybe older than the rest. He stared for a moment at Aliana, then turned his gaze toward Sarah.

“Welcome to our house,” the man said. His accent was the strongest Sarah had heard so far, but trained, each word clear and distinct, like an actor in a play. “We are a group of friends who live together in openness and honesty. We hope that for a time you will be part of our household and we will all benefit together. But before there can be real sharing between us, you must be able to choose when to open your thoughts. So for the next few days, no one here will speak to either of you aloud or to Aliana mentally. Those who hear your thoughts will look at you to show they hear. We will react when appropriate with our actions. You may communicate with those who are not telepathic by actions or pantomime. This will at times be difficult for all of us, but when it is finished, you will be able to join us.”

Sarah thought it sounded like a cult. She mentally apologized for the thought. Still, it resembled initiation rituals that made people feel they’d joined something worthwhile simply because joining was so unpleasant. Anthropology was full of examples. Of course, it also achieved the mental silence the Thais coerced by slapping people or giving them electric shocks. Physical pain or mental humiliation? Electric shock was starting to sound pretty good.

Sarah looked up and saw everyone in the room staring at her, some looking rather displeased. She wanted to disappear, or more precisely, she wanted to not be heard, but she didn’t know how to do that yet. Her whole body tensed and her skin felt icy cold.

There were rustling and scraping sounds as people pushed back chairs and began to disperse. The muscular man who had brought them in motioned toward the door. Sarah realized she couldn’t learn anyone’s names until this silent phase was over. He looked at her and nodded, still with a mischievous bend to his eyebrows. Sarah and Aliana followed him back to the car to collect their luggage.

Much later in the day Sarah ran back to the room where she had left her belongings. She and Aliana were sharing the room with two other women, but at the moment it was empty. Sarah slammed the door and, finding it had no lock, she wedged a chair up under the door handle. Then she lay on the bed she’d been given and cried and kicked and hit her fists.
Everyone was always looking at her. Apparently her mind wasn’t quiet for one second, and the more they looked, the more she thought about things she didn’t want to share. Her mind was swarming with more verbal thoughts than it ever had before.

Someone knocked on the door. Her mind screamed, “Please go away!” She was momentarily glad her first reaction had included a please. Then she looked at the poor chair under the door handle and wondered why a teek would bother. She imagined someone trying to come in, to stare at her, to comfort her, just to get their own stuff, and she decided she’d hold the door by telekinetic force if she had to. Then she imagined a telekinetic battle to open the door. Then she imagined some poor teep having to listen to her childish defensiveness. Then she laughed right through her tears, but no one tried to open the door.

After a while she left the bedroom. She kept her head down as she followed the hallway toward the main room. There she saw a large table being set for dinner. There was no way she was going to sit in a room with all those people staring at her again. She couldn’t imagine they’d want her there either. Silently, she walked out the front door and kept walking until she could see only ocean.

The land fell off steeply. Sarah didn’t want to go down to the rocky beach alone. She found a large rock to sit on and studied the water. It was surprisingly interesting to watch the little waves unroll. Each broke in a different place. Each covered a different section of shore. At the same time, a cold wind blew her hair. She could feel it clumping into knots but couldn’t bring herself to care.

After a while she heard music from the house, a thin reedy sound, perhaps a recorder or tin whistle. She saw a few people go in from outside. It must be a call to dinner. Her stomach tightened at the thought of food, but the rest of her body ignored it. She’d wait until the others were done, then find something for herself in the kitchen.

It was mostly dark before Sarah heard someone walking behind her. She thought it was the teenager who had acknowledged shaping the ceiling. He was not trying to walk quietly, and he was not staring at her. If she’d understood correctly, he probably wasn’t telepathic.

He carried a can of soda and a plate with one brown sausage and several piles of vegetables. When he reached Sarah, he held them forward without making eye contact. She took them and tried to nod her thanks.

He patted a rock beside her, asking if he should sit there?

She shrugged, and he sat.

He stared pointedly out at the ocean, and Sarah decided she could go ahead and eat. The plate was warm on her knees, and a fork was braced under the cauliflower. As she ate, a blob of water detached itself from the surf and floated to just in front of them. It was about the size of an orange. Sarah wondered if it was safe to do such things out in the open. How good were spy satellites anyway? The ball of water became a dome, then sprouted four feet, a head, and a tail. It was a turtle, a turtle sculpted out of seawater. Sarah tried to let her amazement show on her face. She mouthed the word, “Wow!” and the teek sort of smirked and looked to the side, like maybe mouthing words wasn’t quite allowed.

Sarah wanted to see if she could shape water. But not knowing how to ask for a turn, she scooped up her own blob and brought it up next to the turtle. She managed to shape it into a pancake and then into a long cylinder, but when she tried to form a turtle, the water went all wobbly and Sarah let it splash down by their feet.

The boy made his turtle into a ball then threw it out toward the sea. It shattered into drops of silver before it landed.

Chapter 23
June 30, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand

Reggie walked along the wooden dock, absent-mindedly stepping on each buckled board and
knothole. The sun slammed off steel ships, all modern, international, unromantic. He tried to imagine himself a captain or a pirate, guiding the wheel on a deck of polished planks, rising on the breakers as he sailed out to sea. Right now he felt more like the maiden left waving from the shore.
The dock stank of grease and fish. Reggie wandered back toward the warehouse on shore to find his belongings and send them away again. First he had to find someone who spoke English. For all that Thailand had rushed into the modern economy, this area didn’t seem to bother with building numbers, and no one around him was speaking a language he knew. Emma had offered to come along and translate, but Reggie had shooed her away. Since Sarah left, followed by Aliana a couple days later, the teenager kept trying to help him, as if he was an abandoned pet.
“Do you know where I can pick up this container shipment?” Reggie waved his claim slip at a local holding a clipboard.
The stout man wiped his left hand on his pants and took Reggie’s claim slip. He held the yellow paper up close to his eyes and squinted at it. Then he gestured to his left and muttered something that might have included the word “farang.”
So Reggie went left and eventually showed his paper to another Thai man who led him a bit farther to an office where a white man with a buzz cut sat behind a cluttered desk.
“You here to pick up?” the man asked in an easy mid-western American accent.
“Not quite,” said Reggie. “I’d like to send everything on to a new address.” He produced a card with the mailing information for PAD island deliveries. From this direction, PAD routed through Samoa.
“Where the heck is that?” the man asked.
“Between Australia and Hawaii.”
“All just got here from California.”
“Plans change.”
Reggie stood quietly while the other expat entered the new shipping destination into his computer.
“You wanna check the goods now, for insurance reasons?”
“Can I just extend the insurance?”
“Nope. Have to check now and buy new insurance.”
Fifteen minutes later, Reggie was checking though the belongings he’d packed back in April. It was strangely disorienting to rifle through everything after living so simply. Like an old sea pirate in his treasure trove he appraised each item before sending it back to disuse.
He almost didn’t bother opening Sarah’s boxes. He couldn’t remember anything breakable in them, and he wasn’t sure he wanted to remember anything else.
Where was Sarah now? And why hadn’t she called? He’d given her a PAD before she left, as a parting gift. She’d held it awkwardly, and not just because it was larger than most cell phones. Why hadn’t he realized before that Sarah never used a phone or computer anymore? What was she avoiding in the outside world? Old friends? The news? Would she know they’d successfully taken over PAD? Most of the coverage was in business papers that Sarah never read, but some of the nightly news shows had mentioned the sale, especially the plan to reorganize PAD as a non-profit. Phil was taking care of that, though he called Reggie three or four times a day. Phil was all eagerness and energy for the new enterprise. Reggie wanted to celebrate, but the moment never seemed right.
He came to the box with Sarah’s Indian fabrics. Would she still care about these? Would they mean more to her than the eight million dollar trust she’d blithely handed over to him to manage or use for the PAD deal? Should he call her to say they hadn’t needed the money? She hadn’t called to congratulate him on the deal.
“Hey, Reggie!”
He looked up to see Howard striding across the warehouse.
“I thought I’d never find you. Emma said you were down here, but this place is a warren of unmarked docks and alleys.”
“Well, now you’ve found me.”
“Yeah, I wanted to congratulate you on the PAD thing.”
“Did Emma tell you about that too?”
“Are you kidding? It’s been all over the news. Your name may not be in the headlines, but that’s one big makeover you guys are planning.”
“The actual telecom operation shouldn’t change much, aside from accounting. Funding later clusters of NGOs will take a while.”
“Are they still NGOs? Isn’t PAD pretty much its own country and government?”
“In some legal fictions, but they’re not recognized by any major powers.”
“Still, it’s pretty cool.”

There was a long pause as Reggie resealed the box with Sarah’s fabric. “I need to finish some arrangements here. Is there something you wanted to talk about?”

Howard glanced from side to side. “I was kind of wondering if there was something I could do for you at PAD. I mean, news says you’re keeping most of the operations staff. I could help you see who’s reliable, who has other interests.”

Reggie let out a breath and shook his head. Was this for real or was Howard just hoping Sarah would be there?

“Wait, I can do a normal job too.”
“Like what?”
“Anything. I could answer phones, take inventory.”
“We’ll already have people to do that.”
“But people you can trust?”
“Listen Howard, it’s nice of you to offer, but there are other ways to handle corporate espionage and disloyal employees. Besides, you’re in school here; you can build a career, a life. Why would you want some dead end job on PAD Island?”

Howard looked around again. “You know my part in the Chiang Mai thing, right? Well, people cooled off a bit after Tom recovered and said he didn’t blame teeks, but it’s created new suspicions.”

“Did you try it?”

Howard made quick, startled eye contact then shook his head and relaxed. “No, my teek’s not as precise as Sarah’s. But, well, I think my relatives know I told. They’ll never say so aloud, but I can’t keep living here.”

Reggie looked at Howard, trying to judge if the guy was sincere or just a clever attempt by the Thai government to send a spy along to PAD. Howard always seemed honest, but Reggie was still annoyed with him for liking Sarah. That was childish though, and Reggie really did owe him for saving her life.

“I’ll think about it.”
“Emma says you’re leaving tomorrow.”
“I can call you once I get there. PAD is a telecom business.”
“If you want. But I’d be happy to leave tomorrow, if you know what I mean.”

July 1, 2025 – PAD Island

The next evening, Reggie looked out at his own warehouses. Five of them lined the airstrip where he, and Howard, landed on PAD Island. The road in front of them led up a hill to what looked for all the world like a modern tropical resort, an assortment of white foam buildings shaded by diagonal solar “sails” in tasteful shades of lavender. Reggie knew it was just the company founder’s economical spin on the ideal work environment. Employees could live in their own private huts with modern amenities and kitchenettes. They could use the pool, the private beaches, the fitness center, or the media hall. Not a bad dream, all in all.

Speeding down the road toward them was a bright yellow vehicle driven by someone in a loud shirt. Phil waved like the over-eager tourist he appeared to be and jumped out, which incidentally removed his foot from the accelerator.

“Reggie! Do you like it? We did it!”

The older man caught Reggie in a powerful hug, then grabbed his bags and practically threw them into the back of the souped up yellow golf cart.
“Hey Phil, good to see you. This is Howard. I said I’d find a place for him.”
“Welcome, Howard. Glad to meet you.” Phil shook Howard’s arm then threw his bags in the cart.
“You don’t mind riding in the rumble seat, do you? I didn’t know Reggie was bringing anyone.”
They all climbed aboard and sped up the hill. In the front seat, Phil gave Reggie the rundown on how the hand-over was going so far. “Scott’s flying out in an hour on the same plane you rode in. But he wanted to talk with you first.”
“Good, I want to talk to him.”

Reggie and Howard cruised in Phil’s wake as they rushed past the main bar to a small balcony where Scott, the original mind behind PAD, sat beside an already emptied tumbler. Howard was sent with someone to find a room while a cheerful server brought champagne for Reggie, Phil, and Scott. An hour passed in a mix of shoptalk and stories, but then Phil was called away. Scott leaned forward, his striped shirtsleeves bunched unevenly, his eyelids a bit over-relaxed with alcohol, and said, “You didn’t have this in mind all along, did you, Reggie? When I first called about donating stock? Were the wheels in your head spinning even then?”

“Nothing so complex. I was called out of the country suddenly. Not selling the stock just turned into serendipity.”
“I don’t mind, you know? Better you guys run it as a service to the world than some financiers make a bundle auctioning our satellites.”
“I’m glad you feel that way.”
“I’ll miss it though. I’m ready to leave, but it was nice having our own private island. I hope you enjoy it.” Scott slumped back in his chair and raised his glass, as if he was about to eulogize his creation, but Reggie forestalled him.

“Of course.” Reggie didn’t know whether Scott was beyond caring or just didn’t want to name names. Still, he was glad Howard wasn’t there to snoop. Even melancholy and drunk, Scott was a good guy, and he deserved the privacy of his thoughts as he said goodbye to the vision he’d built.

When Phil came back to drive Scott to the plane, Reggie begged off and hiked down to the beach. Soon he heard Howard, like a faithful dog, trotting along behind him.

“Please, don’t tell me you were spying already.”
“Okay, but you’ll be interested in what I found.”
“Not about Scott.”
“Phil first?”
“What? Oh, why did I agree to this?” Reggie threw back his head, staring into a darkening sky.
“Don’t worry. I didn’t read his mind. I can’t. It’s closed.”
Reggie stopped walking. “Really, I wonder why?”
“If he’s a teep he’s not admitting to it. So probably the government trained him.”
“Not Phil.”
“Well, a few people are like that naturally.”
“Okay. Anything else?”
“Well, Scott—“
“I don’t want to know.”
“You sure? He lied to you.”
Reggie thought about refusing again. Scott wasn’t obliged to tell him everything. Then again, it might make a difference to the new PAD succeeding, even to the safety of his employees or friends.
Before Reggie was sure he’d decided, Howard was burbling on.
“He’s suspicious of the pilot who brought you in and the new manager in the mail room. Higher up, he’s been threatened by the Chinese sysadmin who designed their overload protections. Not clear whether that’s personal or political, but Scott didn’t mention it because he feared retribution. You want to know what Scott really thinks of you?”
“Definitely not.”
“Yeah, I knew you’d say that.”
They both walked silently for a while.

Over the next few days, Reggie scuttled through the computer interface like a mouse in a maze. The account books he audited guided him the way smells might guide the rodent. He’d sent Howard off with an established employee to inventory every piece of equipment, all supplies, and even the staff on the island. Baring serious abnormalities, he didn’t expect to hear back from them for a week. Phil kept popping by, but Reggie tried to brush him off. There was something soothing about searching frenetically through the business they’d acquired. Reggie didn’t want Scott’s role as king or visionary; let Phil do that. It was easier to immerse himself in the business, become a trouble-shooter for the machine, play the magician in Phil Meyers’s court.

“Hey Reggie,” the king spoke, “How’s our web encryption and redirection?”
In a flash Reggie conjured screens showing how PAD could broadcast data with a self-checking security algorithm from any of its sixteen satellites. It could recreate a web site at old or new addresses faster than even a world power could take them down. And though nothing would disable the whole web, there were ways to broadcast direct to wireless clusters if it happened.
Later, King Phil wanted to know if they could broadcast direct to radio. This took Reggie an afternoon of scurrying through the network, but he was able to set them up for targeted or blanket broadcast.
Finally, five days after Reggie came to PAD, Phil asked about the overload protocols. Reggie had checked those first. They looked slick; the architecture and programming was first rate, beyond the insights of an MBA/accountant/techno-phile like himself.
“The programming’s robust, but I’m not the man to test it. If you’re expecting trouble, bring in a top notch programmer you can trust.”
“What about the sysadmin who built it?”
“It’s not always good to check your own work.”
“Someone new would need more start-up time.”
“Are there deadlines I should know about?”
“Are there security issues I should know about? I’ve brought in a new security advisor, not a programmer, but general oversight. Perhaps you’d like to meet her?”
A twitch of Phil’s head as he started toward the door told Reggie he was summoned. Dutifully he locked down his computer and followed.
Phil pulled out his PAD and in a moment was saying, “Cass, where are you? Great, we’re heading toward center from the other side. I’ve got Reggie along. Meet you at my office?”

The bookshelves in Phil’s office must have been added in the last five days. They completely covered the two side walls surrounding the picture window’s ocean view. Most shelves were taken up by multi-volume sets. Eight volumes of United Nations Trade Rulings abutted twenty-one volumes of International Agreements on Biology and Genetics followed by Supreme Court Opinions dating back to the last century. Reggie remembered the books from Phil’s office at Pronoia International and wondered what it cost to ship them out here so expediently. It wasn’t as if Phil was a Luddite. His electronic collection would shame any legal library from a couple decades back. As far as Reggie knew the books were an affectation, a way of marking territory. Phil sat down at his desk, gray hair toward the view, framed by his walls of printed books. The woman who must be Cass came in with a wire running from her ear to the PAD in one pocket of her techno-storing, oversized vest. No wire connected to her squarish watch, but Reggie would
bet it was linked to the micro-headset’s jawbone vocalizer and offered the security mavin a heads-up display. She glanced at it casually every few seconds.

“Cass, this is Reggie, our other director on the ground.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Cass replied in a voice like Aliana’s only lower and rough around the edges. Her hand was rough too, and she was glancing at her watch as they shook.

“When did you get in?” Reggie asked.

“Late last night.”

“From Ireland?”

“Yes,” the word grew longer as she looked at him, “Though I’ve worked almost everywhere, if you’d like to see my references.”

Reggie revised his estimate of her age from forty to fifty. “Did you and Phil know each other already?”

“She came highly recommended by old friends,” Phil cut in. “Did you have concerns about sysadmin Cho or anyone else she should be aware of?”

“Nothing beyond hearsay. But for cautions sake we might seek a second set of eyes.”

“Did you have someone in mind?”

“A few names; could we afford to fly one out to interview?”

“Video won’t do?” Phil asked.

There was a pause around the room.

Reggie said, “Sometimes you can tell more in person.” Then Reggie wrote a couple names on a piece of paper that he handed over to Phil. “See if either of those suits you and who they’re with right now. I have work I need to do.”

He was on the phone to Howard before he’d made it back to his building. “Have you accounted for the new hire?”

“You won’t like it.”

“Care to beachcomb?”

“Delighted.”

Howard jogged out onto the sand then pulled off his socks and sneakers while Reggie waited for his report.

“She’s unreadable. Phil’s administrative assistant is too.”

“No, but your Chinese sysadmin is unreadable, as is the manager in the mailroom, one of the custodians as well. I managed to catch the pilot last night when he brought the security woman in, and he’s readable, gossips a bit to the Tongan locals, but no subversion that I heard. Oh, and a lot of the regular employees are worried about their job security and pay.”

“Right. There’s two hundred people on this island, which could give us a couple with closed minds just by chance. There were three in the old staff, three with Phil, and you and me. Not so bad.”

“Except?”

Reggie shivered, and told himself the word didn’t require telepathy; it was an obvious guess. “Except nothing so far,” Reggie said, though he’d been thinking, “Except I’m sure that Phil is up to something.”

For the next two days, Reggie couldn’t tell if he was avoiding Phil or Phil was avoiding him, but work kept Reggie’s mind on other tasks. He crunched the numbers to improve the incentive package for employees who stayed the next year. He ran the income models for the next twenty years with varied assumptions about the life of each satellite. He pondered what would happen if someone shot them down, and plotted ways to keep global coverage while making the satellites trickier targets for each of the aerospace powers.

Finally, Phil called to say one of the programmers had agreed to come out for an interview. The next day, Reggie sat in a room and asked a friend of a friend questions knowing Howard was lurking
nearby, checking for information beyond the answers. Afterward, Howard and Reggie took their traditional stroll down the beach, and Reggie went back to Phil’s office.

Phil stood staring out at the beach. Reggie shut the door and paced to the other end of the window. The area where he and Howard walked was not directly visible from here, but Reggie didn’t doubt Phil knew. He was hoping they’d find a way to talk.

Instead Phil said, “So, you satisfied with the programmer?”

“Yes, you?”

He nodded, then said softly, “You’ve changed Reggie. Where’s Sarah?”

Reggie thought of Cass, whose accent reminded him of Aliana, the woman now traipsing around Ireland with his girlfriend. Or was it ex-girlfriend?

“You know she inherited money. You set up the trust. Now, she’s off fulfilling a last request of her benefactor.”

“And she’s not coming back?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Am I wrong?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Fair enough, Reggie. But if she can be used to hurt PAD, or if there’s some other reason you offered Howard a place with us—”

“Wait.” What was Phil saying? If he knew about telepathy and wanted to know why Howard and Reggie were unreadable, maybe he thought they were spies working against PAD? But short of telling everything, what could Reggie say?

“You brought in your own security,” Reggie nodded toward the door.

“How’d you know about the Chinese sysadmin?”

“Something Scott said, when he’d been drinking. Nothing certain.”

“And if you knew he was spying for China?”

“He’s what?”

“I want to work with you, Reggie, but there are some responsibilities—”

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“How’d you know about the Chinese sysadmin?”

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“And if you knew he was spying for China?”

“He’s what?”

“I want to work with you, Reggie, but there are some responsibilities—”

But?”

“They might cause trouble, unless, perhaps, you already know?”

“Know what?”

Reggie shook his head and walked a few steps away. “Things that could get people in trouble, even if no one overhears and they’re never repeated?”

“If I did, I couldn’t tell you anymore than you could tell me. Catch 22.”

Reggie knew he’d missed a reference, but he thought Phil had just confessed somewhat.

“Perhaps we should speak later,” Phil suggested.

“Perhaps,” Reggie nodded as he turned toward the door.

Chapter 24
July 13–14, 2025 – County Kerry, Ireland

After two weeks living among “artists”, Sarah’s lips were chapped and she knew the local tides much too well. A week ago, she and Aliana had been welcomed as part of the household and introduced to each person by name. Sarah could finally keep her thoughts silent, which saved her some embarrassment over constantly forgetting names. Everyone had finally stopped staring at her, but that didn’t make her feel comfortable around them.

Sarah and Aliana began the day outside, on the softest patch of ground they’d found, an area of well-packed dirt covered with soft creeping weeds. They stretched, danced, and did gymnastics until
lunchtime. Afterward, Sarah cleared the tables telekinetically, a form of practice that elicited community approval. Then she explored the activities of her new household. Beyond the main room, where a few still sat and chatted, there were those who wrote or drew in quiet bedrooms or out in the yard. One of the outer buildings contained a kiln and pottery studio. Yesterday that’s where she’d seen Oliver, the teek who shaped ceilings and blobs of water. But he wasn’t there today, and as she visited other workshops where people wove or painted, she realized she was looking for Oliver. Knowing others couldn’t hear her realization flooded her with relief, like hot tea on a cold night.

Eventually she found Oliver blowing glass alone in a building shaped entirely of foam. The room felt warm and still, small and safe. Oliver blew through a tube, forming a small balloon of green glass on the far end. He glanced at Sarah as she sat down to watch. There were some metal tools lying on a table by the fire, but Oliver ignored them as he watched his bit of glass. It rippled and stretched to form four feet, a head, a tail, and a shell. Then he started heating a golden blob of glass as the turtle floated in the air, rotating slowly so the glass wouldn’t sag. Sarah thought of the turtle he’d formed from water that first night and of the glass turtles Reggie had hung when they first moved into the fish tank. Thinking of Reggie made her remember all the scary things she’d done, and she was glad her thoughts were private again.

“Come to learn about glass?” Oliver asked.

“Do I need to study art to stay here?”

“Hardly. The teeps seem to believe it’s only art if no one will buy or use it.”

“Where does the money come from then?”

“Some of us aren’t very good artists.”

“And?”

Oliver smirked. “How much do you think that rock with the dolphins jumping over it will fetch?”

The piece he indicated was lovely. The dolphins seemed to flick their tales in a moment of escape from the sea. The rock was cracked open along improbably crystalline fissures. But Sarah knew she was no judge of art. Reggie was the one who understood beautiful things and how costly they were to acquire. Now Reggie was gone from her.

“I have no idea, sorry.”

“Over a thousand Euros,” Oliver answered as he ran a strand of liquid, golden glass through the air to suggest a pattern on the shell of his new glass turtle. “One afternoon each week I make glass, on commission or as I choose. It’s enough to pay the rent on this place for a month.”

“So you support them all?”

“No, there’s always four or five around who happen to like doing things that bring in cash. It gives others the freedom to create our legacy.”

“Teek and telepath art?”

“One minute.” Oliver blew another piece of glass, in deep red. As he took his mouth from the tube he began to speak again, spinning wings from the same color of glass. Sarah imagined them connecting to the blown shape and realized it would be a dragon. She tried to attend to what Oliver was saying.

“Within the community, it’s a privilege to come to a place like this. I gather you were sent through unusual channels. But I fought hard to get in, even though I’m underage. My sister was already here, and when I turned out to be a mover, my parents knew I couldn’t stay cooped up in the city for long.”

“What do your parents do in the city?”

“My mother’s gift is a way with animals. So she trained and became a vet. She can also spot others of our kind, which is useful when they’ve learned to guard their thoughts but still need guidance. My father is a mind reader, lived here when he was younger. He writes, mostly for newspapers now. My sister, Marian, is a mind reader; you met her last night.”

Sarah tried to remember which one was Marian and failed. Instead she watched Oliver spin spikes onto the neck of his dragon. “When did you know what your parents were and what you might be?”

“Well, they always told stories. Sort of hinted that we were special, people of the Sidhe. But we
were kids, and they didn’t give us any proof. They let us doubt and maybe hope. Then Marian started reading minds, and it was obvious she had some kind of secret. I was eleven then. So they told me the truth, gave me the energy to unblock my mind, and then taught me to keep it quiet. I still had to wait four years to see if I’d be anything. Almost all my relations on both sides have some gift, so it was likely. But mover is the best, so it was worth the wait.”

“Why’s it best?”

“Just my opinion. Most of the mind readers think that’s best. They think they’re going to transcend, become post-human or something. But it’s really just a fancy way of whispering. I wouldn’t trade a bit of what I can do to have that, too.”

“Don’t some people here have both?”

“Yeah, but the best movers always have just one talent. And I always had an eye for shape and sculpture, even as a little kid. So I wanted mover. Some say wanting can make it happen.”

“Are the other pure teeks here as good as you?”

“No, there are some older masters elsewhere. But you did as well with the water as anyone who’s tried. You wanna learn glass?”

“Think I could?”

The next half-hour was almost as good as when Aliana first taught her dance. Sarah knew she wasn’t artistic, and it showed in her first attempts at spun glass. But when Oliver started her blowing shapes, Sarah found she could just ripple it in and out as she blew and almost always create something pleasing. Oliver said people would buy such shapes for Christmas ornaments or window decorations. So Sarah tried decorating a few of them with spun glass and then had another try at spun glass creatures. It felt good to wrap her mind around the glass, incorporate its warmth, smoothness, and flexibility. It also felt good to do something useful with telekinesis that wasn’t risky or hurtful to anyone.

The spell broke when Aliana came to the door, jaw stiff and voice just a little tight. “Sarah, do you have a minute? I really need to talk to you.”

Sarah looked at Oliver. Drawn back to herself, she wondered what he thought of her simple first attempts. “Can I try again sometime?”

“You’re part of the household now. It’s all yours too. Just ask, and I’ll show you how to set up next time.”

Sarah thought his words sounded forced, and wondered if taking off with Aliana was impolite. Or maybe he’d just been caught up in the moment with her and felt adrift now as well. But Aliana’s impatience tugged at her, and there was no way to save the moment.

“Thanks,” she said, and soon found herself dragged to the rocks by Aliana.

Water crashed below them. The wind lifted Sarah’s hair, at once cold and soothing. Aliana stood silently, but her mouth tightened with whatever she wasn’t saying. “Okay, what’s up?” Sarah asked.

“My teep is fading, like you said it might, like people here imply it does after awhile. I think it’s time for you to do that thing again.”

“Are you sure you want it back?”

“Definitely.”

Sarah felt her eyes moisten, but the wind kept any tears at bay. “You aren’t worried about becoming a monster?”

“No, and I think you should let that go. The things you beat yourself up about, you did them all for good reasons.”

“But you saw how Nadine and everyone here recoiled from my thoughts. You can’t honestly say you never see me as a monster.”

Aliana looked her right in the eyes and said, “Honestly, you may be the one person on earth I’m most certain is not a monster. Now, will you help me?”

Sarah’s breath caught, as if she’d just heard the secret she needed to know most. “I guess I can if you want. But I think they do—”

“I want you to do it.”
“Right now?”
Aliana nodded.
“Right here?”
Aliana nodded more vigorously.
“Okay.” Sarah wrapped Aliana with her telekinesis. Her hair and clothes held still and flat, defying the wind off the sea. For a moment Aliana was frozen, like she’d stepped out of time. Then Sarah gently released her.
“Wow,” said Aliana. “I must have been really distracted last time.”
“That was my intent.”
“It’s sort of creepy.”
A cold shiver ran through Sarah, “You told me to do it.”
“No, creepy in a good way. I wanted to pay attention this time.”
Sarah shrugged, a little light in the head with her confused reactions. She started to turn back to the house, wanting to sort her thoughts.
“Wait,” Aliana caught her hand. “Sit a minute. I need to talk to you.”
Sarah sat on a rock. This was just where she had sat with Oliver on that first night. The rocks seemed rougher now, full of tiny holes and scratchy edges.
“There are things we need to talk about—Don’t look away, this is nothing to hide from.”
Sarah pushed aside her surface shyness like she was opening a roll-top desk. She could feel her pulse racing in her neck and her eyes opening too wide for the light, taking in Aliana’s intent gaze, her hair and blouse tugged backward by gusts of wind.
“Even before I could read your mind, I’d been a little obsessed with wanting to seduce you. Not that I’d ever have pressed it. I generally avoid anyone who isn’t fully secure in their own desire for me, but I let myself think about it with you, a lot. Once I could read your mind, I knew you were struggling with desire for me. Honestly, I felt you were deluding yourself about your sexuality at first and that you were way too insecure in general.”
Sarah started, “I’ve been struggling about stuff between me and Reggie through everything that’s happened since we came here, and—”
“Shh.” Aliana put a finger to Sarah’s lips, and Sarah pulled her face away a few inches.
“I’ve changed my mind. I think some things you do that seem very conservative or off putting aren’t quite as they seem. What Nadine said, about the effect people like us might have on others and especially each other, you’ve been feeling it and so have I. We just didn’t know what it was.”
Sarah began to look away, remembering how recently her thoughts had run freely to Aliana. But she forced her gaze back, not wanting to hide from honesty now that she had free choice. Still, she had no desire to open her thoughts directly.
“Hear me out. The night that I held you in that B&B, I heard almost nothing from you that whole night. It was the quietest your mind’s ever been.”
“What?” Sarah shifted, suddenly aware of the cold rock beneath her and the loud waves crashing below, aware that she couldn’t keep track of everything that was happening.
“Really. I had the feeling your mind was still very busy, but only small pieces came out as words. What I learned was that you weren’t just being prudish about not having sex with me. You were afraid you’d hurt my feelings with your thoughts or violate something private between you and Reggie—”
“I’m sorry—”
“Don’t be, because that’s when I realized how much you’re aware of within yourself that you deal with all alone. When you seem overly worried or contradictory, I think it’s because you confront yourself honestly in ways most people never could, they would crumble under the scrutiny. The other thing I learned was that you understand touch in a way I never did. Like something much bigger, much more complicated and adaptable. It included sex, but there were all these other parts, parts like being held that night and how you felt all sorts of other things, things that mattered just as much or more to you. These things you had no words for were more important to you than anything I could read in your mind. But you felt like no one else could understand. Except, I felt that I could
understand now, if you’d let me. I felt like I was starting to understand because of how you changed me and because you let me be there, holding you.”

The wordless thoughts Aliana spoke about tore through Sarah’s mind, throwing themselves outward, fleeing backward, making her aware of them in the moment. Sarah closed her eyes then asked, “What else did you find out?”

“What do you want me to say? If you still feel that way, maybe you should say.”

Sarah looked at Aliana fully, without reserve, for the first time. She saw veins standing out on her forehead, a slight trembling by her lips, flushed cheeks. “I think I want it more now than when you couldn’t help but see my mind. I want to touch you, to have you feel the way I do, in a way that doesn’t just rise and fall but can bring two people closer, without— I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Because it’s bigger than words, beyond any thoughts I could hear from you.”

“It might not fit with words, with the rules and expectations caught up in words.”

“Are you worried I’ll expect sex or a relationship afterward? I don’t try to bind my friends like that, especially you, and I’m willing to accept this is something different, if you are.”

“You really want this?” Sarah asked aloud, while the part of her without words shouted out that it was true.

“More than I once wanted to seduce you. And now, when my sense of touch is most like yours—”

“So it does fade for you then? I didn’t want to ask.”

“I can feel it growing back now. Should we go to the house?”

“No, stay here, or no, meet me over by those trees. I’ll get us a blanket.”

Sarah walked quickly back to the house, blocking thoughts in words from her own awareness, just as she’d learned to stop their broadcast to others, letting herself feel the breeze on every inch of her skin and the ground pressing under her feet. She knew what she wanted to do and didn’t want words tangled into it. She collected a jug of drinking water, a thick sleeping bag, and some lotion. Then she hurried out to the small patch of trees where Aliana was waiting. Finding the most private spot, Sarah unzipped the sleeping bag and laid it out flat. She stared at Aliana for a moment and dug her way back out to words.

“Here, have some water first. To do this, you know, I think I have to set the words out of my mind. To be honest and try to understand, together, well . . .”

“It’s all right. I think I know.”

After they each drank some water, Sarah removed Aliana’s shoes and her own, trying to let the words slip from her mind. Her fingers hovered over the strap marks left by Aliana’s sandals. The cold from Aliana’s foot seemed to pull the warmth from Sarah’s hand. She took some lotion and began to stroke in curves, following the lines of Aliana’s feet, extending to toes, cuticles and nails.

Giving touch, she felt the return pressure from flesh and bone and skin. Warmth flowed from her to cooler parts of Aliana but returned from warmer places. Sarah moved so their bodies touched along one side, and then she reached out with her mind, feeling touch as a pattern of pressure and warmth, but also as something more, something beyond words.

As Aliana reached out to her, Sarah’s senses opened to every nuance of Aliana’s touch, including the indirect sensations replaced and reinforced, along tiny hairs on face and neck.

For Sarah, the use of her physical body wove seamlessly with the invisible touch from her mind. The smoothness and warmth of Aliana’s skin, the response of muscles beneath, and the reactions shown in sighs, caught breath, and pulse—those became all of Sarah’s awareness. She let go of time, the world outside, ideas, and worries. She held herself firmly in contact only with the moment and with Aliana, who seemed almost a part of herself. She let herself feel everything.

When words finally returned to her, the glade was growing dark. Sarah’s head rested on Aliana’s stomach. Aliana’s hand was threaded through her hair.

The part of Sarah that valued discretion considered their present appearance, whether anything that might upset them afterward had happened, and whether anyone might have seen. It was like gazing back on a dream. Their clothes were still basically in place, though Sarah could remember the feel of
Aliana’s skin beneath the palm of her hand while the gauzy smooth blouse slid across her knuckles. Her skin was a memory of touch layered on previous touches, and so in some way was her other sense of touch, the part she used for telekinesis. Nothing overtly sexual or painful had happened, but some of it wasn’t what she’d expected, wasn’t what she’d known of herself before. Sarah realized that anything the two of them chose to do together would have been all right, because they’d both been communicating more precisely than they ever had before. Whether anyone from the household might have noticed them was beyond what Sarah’s myopic memories could answer. Defiantly, she told herself that shouldn’t matter either.

It was at this point that the music coming from the house registered on her increasingly verbal thoughts. Aliana must have been aware too, because for the first time in hours she spoke.

“There’s something more I don’t understand. If you can feel this, create this with touch, why do you hardly ever touch anyone?”

“I think, since childhood, I’ve been on the edge of this every single day. And until now, there was no one else to feel it with me.”

There was a longer pause than usual between spoken messages. Then Aliana asked, “Do you want to go in for dinner?”

“Not really.”

Aliana curled around Sarah and pulled the sleeping bag over to keep them warm.

The next evening Sarah was almost late for dinner. She’d been exploring the beach and felt sticky all over from the salty spray. Usually, she tried to be early, so she could sit at an empty table and let others chose to sit with her or not. Tonight everyone had turned up for dinner and there was only one space left. So Sarah found herself at a table where all the rest fancied themselves writers. She wasn’t sure if they were all mind readers other than her, but they were polite enough to speak aloud during the meal.

Nonetheless, Sarah’s mind drifted. She noted the tables in the room where no one spoke aloud, and tried to remember who sat there so she wouldn’t intrude on them in the future. She tried to memorize names and talents. Someone across the room said “full moon tonight” and “renew the energy again.” Sarah tried to hear more of that conversation, but couldn’t piece together the half-heard words through the mumbling accent.

Then she made the mistake of finishing her stew and biscuits before the more talkative members of her table, and probably meaning to be polite, one of them tried to involve her in their topic. “Have you done any writing?”

“Not fiction,” she answered, “I never think up stories. Guess I’m not creative that way.” She thought of Reggie and how he was always dragging her into some fiction of his own.

“Of course you’re creative. All our kind are creative. Where does your mind take you that other people’s don’t?”

Sarah wished she’d made her previous answer shorter. All she could think of was the night before with Aliana, the complete lack of words, which she certainly wasn’t able to talk about. “In college, they said I was good at spotting researcher’s misassumptions. But I was studying anthropology, and while the profs and students all assumed I was like them, I never believed any of them were like me.”

“Well, that’s probably a form of creativity.” The questioner gave a cut off chuckle and a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, then let the conversation drift away.

After dinner, Sarah helped clear tables, fold down leaves, and move things to their non-mealtime places. She was about to slip off for a shower to remove the ocean grit when Doug, the one who always wore white, entered in a long, flowing, and of course, white robe. It looked like something a monk would wear, though his long brown hair and multiple braids gave him a sort of new age ambiance.

The room was suddenly quiet. Doug opened the door and walked out. Everyone else fell in line behind him. Sarah was just wondering whether she was meant to go along when Oliver jerked his
head to motion her toward him, and by the time she reached him, there was little choice but to follow out the door.

In the moonlit darkness outside, with the noise of wind and waves, the human silence seemed less oppressive. Oliver whispered, “Movers always go first, after the Druid,” and Sarah noticed that the people ahead of them were the ones she’d mostly known were movers. And Doug must be “the Druid.” Once again she was glad her thoughts could not be heard, because her knee-jerk reaction to the term was not entirely tolerant. Still, his white robe made him easy to follow across the dark field. Once in the woods, they formed a tight circle nearly shoulder to shoulder, just a few yards from where she and Aliana lay the day before. But now there was a rectangular pit, a shallow grave surrounded by four tidy piles of dirt. Running down a tree, across the ground, and into the pit was a metal reinforced plastic tube. From the work she’d done on her mother’s house, Sarah identified it as conduit. But there were no wires inside this tube, just an empty hole.

The lower end of the conduit rested on top of a sleeping bag, a rather light-weight mummy bag made of blue nylon. It was lying on the bottom of the pit, about three feet below ground level. As Doug pulled forward the hood of his cloak and began to chant in some language Sarah couldn’t place at all, the last mind readers from the colony arrived, making the circle complete. Sarah glanced furtively around, trying to think like an anthropologist and not laugh at Druidic rites involving conduit and camping gear.

Expressions ranged from expectant to bored. Doug was the only one with the relaxed expression she associated with religion or meditation. It disappeared the moment he finished chanting. He set his jaw in a matter of fact smile, reached behind him for a tan linen bag, and pulled out something that looked remarkable like a mouth-to-mouth resuscitation mask. He handed it to the woman next to him, the first mover in line. She crossed to a corner of the pit, between two piles of dirt, and jumped onto the foot of the sleeping bag. Then she shimmied into the bag and attached her little plastic breather mask to the long tube of conduit. She lay back, put the mask on her face so she could breath through the tube with the plastic cup covering her mouth, and pulled a drawstring to bring the sleeping bag tight around the tube, completely hiding her from view.

Suddenly, dirt from all four piles flowed into the pit. A wooden board from under the dirt now flopped on top of the loose packing. The four nearest people stepped forward onto the board and then off again, and the board flopped back as the four piles of dirt neatly dug themselves up out of the hole, leaving the mummy bag almost completely clean.

Sarah realized her mouth was open and closed it. Her heart was racing with surprise, though she knew she should have expected it. They were applying pressure to keep their powers working, just as she had done twice for Aliana. Who knew it could be done with dirt? But why bother with this ritual when they had movers standing by doing the work anyway? Or was the dirt just misdirection and the movers were what really made the difference?

As other movers took their turns in the pit, Sarah’s mind split off into anthropological suppositions about how this ritual had begun. How long ago? Was there a blanket and a reed tube before the modern gear came into play? Had this been a real Druidic ritual back before the Catholics came to Ireland? And if so, had people kept it going all those years or lost it and rediscovered its usefulness? Sarah only cut loose from her web of thoughts as Doug handed her a clean breathing mask and motioned her toward the pit. She did her best to place herself just as the others had. She felt sticky and ridiculous as she scooted down into the sleeping bag. Pulling the drawstring reminded her of how she’d tried to wrap herself up, even before she’d discovered telekinesis and learned to do this mentally.

The pressure of the dirt and of people stepping on the board felt amusingly familiar. There was a sense of cold, either from the earth or from the dampness of her own sweat. And the pressure was a bit greater than what Sarah applied herself. There was a moment of tense fear as Sarah realized she couldn’t move and this wasn’t something she’d done to herself. But she instantly knew she could teek her way out even from this bound position, and she pitied the non-teeks who had to endure such vulnerability. Then the dirt was off of her and she removed herself from the sleeping bag and was given a hand up from the pit. The teek who had gone first, held out a bag for her to drop the used
breathing mask in. Overall, it was a well-run operation, and she hadn’t even gotten dirty.

Sarah looked up just in time to see Oliver ostentatiously connect his breathing apparatus and pull the string on the sleeping bag completely by telekinesis. Well, he was only sixteen and a tad bit proud after all. Sarah helped push the dirt in and out, realizing that was probably why all the teeks were up front together. By the end of the night, it would add up to a lot of work. So she did her part as they passed around the circle, with Doug taking his turn last. The Druid brought the sleeping bag out with him and pulled up the conduit. Sarah thought he looked sweetly absurd and anachronistic. Then the movers pressed the dirt back into the pit and the group wandered quietly, but casually, toward the house.

Once inside, everyone stayed in the main room. A fiddler who often played before dinner picked a tune they could have danced to, but no one danced. Instead people sat down together, leaning up against one another, lacing arms around shoulders or waists. The two couches in the room, over by the fire, filled first. But people pulled chairs together or sat on the floor such that they could be close while listening to the music.

Sarah thought of Aliana, and how she described her sense of touch as strongest shortly after Sarah created her cocoon. Were all these people feeling that? People here were always quite familiar with each other. There was a fair amount of casual touching all day, as one might see in some families. But while Sarah had gathered there was general tolerance for anyone’s intimate choices or degree of promiscuity, she’d rarely seen people leaning against each other or cuddling in public.

Looking around the room now, some couples or groups were definitely employing their heightened sense of touch. Perhaps, these people were now more like her than any group she’d ever known. Yet she felt completely alienated, her sensitivity no different than it usually was, her beliefs about touch still deeply her own. And she barely knew most of these people. The days of silence and embarrassment a week ago still stung of violation.

Aliana touched her knee, and Sarah actually jumped. The fiddler had given way to someone with a guitar who was singing folk songs from before any of them were born. Sarah tried to relax her muscles and couldn’t.

“Easy,” Aliana whispered. “Do you want me not to touch you?”

Sarah said, “No,” when what she really meant was, “Not here with all these strangers around.” But Aliana’s brow wrinkled and Sarah knew she’d hurt her feelings.

“Do you want me to stay with you tonight?” Aliana asked.

“Do what you want. You don’t need to worry about me.”

Aliana remained beside her for a while, but Sarah mostly ignored her as she watched the rest of the room and wondered if she could ever really belong with these people. She barely even noticed that some woman had come to sit beside Aliana and was gradually becoming more and more familiar.

“You don’t care if I go?” Aliana asked, quite a while later when Doug was taking a turn making music on some smaller cousin of a bagpipe.

“Go ahead,” Sarah said and smiled. She saw the glow in Aliana’s face and wanted her to enjoy. A momentary longing for Reggie weighed down Sarah’s face and shoulders, but she physically shook it off.

The room was more than half-empty now. A few more couples left, and when Doug finished his music, there were only six people remaining. No one else had left alone, but Sarah wondered if she might now escape to take a shower and go to sleep.

Oliver, who had been leaning against someone’s legs, crossed over to the kitchen and returned with a bag of marshmallows. As he walked back toward the now empty couches by the fire, he said aloud to Sarah, “Come on, you can sit with me and Marian if you’re not taking off.”

So Oliver claimed the middle of a now vacant couch by the fire. The woman he’d been leaning up against, evidently his sister Marian, went to sit beside him. Sarah smiled at how she’d been left behind with the kid, his chaperone, the Druid, and whoever the other two were. But she walked cheerfully over to the empty spot on Oliver’s couch by the fire. The Druid brought an armchair over beside them, and the two remaining stragglers took the other couch. Oliver tore open the bag of marshmallows and then began roasting one telekinetically over the fire,
rotating it gradually near a pile of glowing embers.
“Come on Sarah, you can do this, too.”
Sarah thought she caught a raising of Doug’s eyebrows. “Wouldn’t it be easier to use a stick?” she asked.
“But that’s so messy. And it leads to slouching.”
Marian laughed and swatted her brother, evidently a family in joke. The other five around the fire seemed comfortable, used to sitting together this way.
“Shall I start with a story?” Doug asked.
The rest nodded, and he began a story of mind reading fair folk and strong willed peasants. Sarah took a marshmallow and demonstrated that she could roast, cool, and eat it quite nicely without leaving any sticky bits on her fingers or a stick, but it required a lot of concentration. Meanwhile, the heat from the flames made her face feel dry as scorched paper. Perhaps it was also chapped from her time at the shore today.
Doug finished his story, and the man Sarah didn’t know by name recited a humorous poem-story about gold prospectors in Alaska. Sarah took a marshmallow and demonstrated that she could roast, cool, and eat it quite nicely without leaving any sticky bits on her fingers or a stick, but it required a lot of concentration. Meanwhile, the heat from the flames made her face feel dry as scorched paper. Perhaps it was also chapped from her time at the shore today.
Doug finished his story, and the man Sarah didn’t know by name recited a humorous poem-story about gold prospectors in Alaska. Sarah was several lines in before Sarah realized he had an American accent. She was pretty sure she’d never heard him speak before; so he was probably a mind reader.
The woman beside him sang for her turn. During the song, Oliver curled up to lean against his sister and tucked his feet up next to Sarah. His feet ended up touching her leg, and Sarah wasn’t quite sure whether this was presumption, flirtation, or friendliness. But it seemed kind of sweet and strangely pleasant. She tried to pay attention to the singer, but found herself worrying that she’d have to go next.
Marian saved her by offering to tell a story. The story she told was thoroughly modern and possibly true. It was about a pair of young women who tried to find a boat that would take them from Ireland to Australia. After many humorous misunderstandings, they took off as crew on a small solar yacht, only to be arrested once they reached international waters. The person they’d thought was the captain was only a hired hand, and he’d been using them to steal the boat.
Sarah tried to think of an amusing story and how to tell it as Oliver took his turn sculpting water from the bucket by the fire. He did this without a word and without stirring from his sprawled position next to Sarah. His rendition of a small boy peeing was quite impressive, but it caused Marian to whap him with a pillow. And then Sarah knew she was supposed to entertain.
“I’m not really an artist or even very creative. I mean, I’m a gymnast, and maybe a dancer, but neither of those is really useful right now.”
“You could answer a question for me,” Doug spoke as if seizing the opportunity.
“Depends,” Sarah said.
“Yesterday morning, Aliana’s mental speech was fading. I wasn’t sure she’d make it to the full moon. Then you two went away for the afternoon, and tonight she did not need what we did.” Sarah felt her face flush, but realized she might be able to learn as much from Doug as he hoped to learn from her. “I don’t know how much of what you do here is ritual and how much you think is necessary. But I accidentally triggered Aliana’s telepathy by wrapping her with my telekinesis for a few seconds several weeks ago. We knew the effect might wear off. So when she felt it fading, she asked me to do it again. Doesn’t anyone else do it that way?”
Doug looked at Oliver, who shook his head and sat up.
“We didn’t know that was possible,” Doug answered. “How do you do it?”
“I just wrap the person up, like applying direct pressure to a cut, but over the entire body.”
“Can you show me how?” Oliver asked, suddenly awake and eager.
“Want me to wrap your hand?”
“Sure.” He thrust his right hand forward. She enclosed it for half a minute, long enough for him to try to flex his fingers and then use his own telekinesis to try to remove her wrapping.
“That’s great, do all of me.”
Sarah looked to the others, feeling a little uncomfortable. But they all seemed fine with the situation. So Sarah wrapped up Oliver, just as she had wrapped Aliana, just for ten seconds or so.
Oliver’s face broke into an open-mouthed smile afterward. “I’m sure I can do it. Let me practice on
myself first.” He started staring at his hand.
Doug asked Sarah quietly, “You do this to yourself, too?”
“Yes.”
“Do you have to plan ahead, to do it before your energies ebb?”
Sarah bit her lip and sighed. “I’m not sure that happens to me the way it does with you guys.”
“Meaning?” Doug asked gently.
“I went years without wrapping myself up like that, and my abilities never changed. Also, well, Aliana says her sensitivity to touch fades in between times. Mine doesn’t. I always just thought I was oversensitive that way.”
Doug’s eyes were off to the side, his brows tensed as if thinking rapidly. His voice retained a practiced calm, “Maybe when you’re asleep?”
“Could be, but I don’t think so. Do all of you have to bury yourselves in dirt every few weeks to keep your abilities?”
“I’ve heard of some very old movers who can go long periods in between. But if they use something like this, no one’s told me of it. You don’t go scuba diving or anything?”
Sarah laughed, “Does that work too? No, I’ve never been scuba diving. Do you know,” she wondered how much they already knew from when her mind spoke unprotected, “Do you know if scuba or these other things affect the telepaths who aren’t like you?”
“You touch here on matters usually left to Druids and planners. But given what we all know of your past,” Doug paused and Sarah saw some uncomfortable shifting from all except Oliver, “I think I could tell you a little.”
Doug leaned forward, pushing the sleeves of his white robe back to his elbows. His arms looked like dark wood against the white. “Our people sometimes joke that there are a curious number of Irish folk teaching scuba around the world. Mostly, they try to help those who discover their abilities in that way. But occasionally, they find a newly unshielded mind terrified at the loss of the other kind of mental speech. What happens then depends on certain details.”
Doug seemed to have come to the end of what he would say. There was an awkward silence, broken when Oliver said, “I’ve got it figured. Can I try it on you now, Sarah?”
Sarah nodded obligingly and Oliver went ahead. He held the pressure a bit longer than necessary, and Sarah realized she couldn’t breathe. But before she had time to worry, he let her go. Sarah tingled all over with the sensation of having been touched by another teek that way. Some feeling lingered, almost like afterglow.
Sarah blushed and said, “You’ve got it, but you don’t need to block the nose. It’ll work anyway, and then the person knows they can still breathe.”
“Sorry, but I can do it! Doug, can I try it next time, instead of the dirt, to see if it works when I do it?”
Doug gave an almost paternal sigh and said, “Probably we should have you try it on yourself and one other person. But let me think on it first.”
There was a pause, then Sarah said to Doug, “Could I ask you a question?”
“I expected you might.”
“You say there’s a network of some sort. Do you know if there are scientists, people working out the genetics of all this?”
He looked her in the eye, “That’s not what I expected you to ask. But yes, there are some. It’s not something most of us inquire about.”
“But you’ve got to be curious. You say all movers are part of your people. But the other teeps aren’t, except when they’re also movers, and then they aren’t as good, but is that just because they don’t renew their energy every so often? And just from talking to a few people, it seems like there might be patterns in your abilities. Movers seem to always have one mover or mind reader as a parent. Spotters seem to show up more randomly. And why aren’t there any of the animal people here?”
Doug closed his eyes and shook his head. “You’ve clearly never lived around an animal person. If even one were here we’d all be coated in cat fur or supporting a barn full of hurt wild creatures. As for the rest, if you really want to learn, I can make inquiries, see if there is someone who might teach
“Yes, please. But with animal people, do they all have to be buried in the earth, too? There were
people where I lived who seemed to have a way with strays, especially cats—“
“You’re speaking of someone close to you, a relative?” Doug was using his trained, soft voice again.
“All of our abilities can emerge in limited ways without renewing the energy. Movers are usually the
only ones who suspect. The mind readers think it’s intuition or empathy. The spotters are drawn to
certain people without knowing why. Animal people do well with animals, especially smarter
species.”
“I think my mother, and some of her friends might have had that.”
“She’s passed away?”
“Before I knew what to ask.”
“I’m sorry.”
Sarah stopped, looking away, then asked, “The spotters, do they ever spot the other kind of
telepaths?”
“Some do, why?”
“Just a suspicion.”

Chapter 25
July 24, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand

“Parasites!” James thought to no one. His toes bounced up and down as if he wore tap shoes.
He saved the thesis he’d been failing to read for an hour. Somehow, a treatise on “the genetic
vulnerabilities in dopamine production among subjects with high pain tolerances” was not moving
him today.
He pulled up a window with the new genotype Sarah had brought him last month. How had she
known? She’d asked him to check for the sequence he thought was a predecessor to modern
telepathy. The sample had been homozygous for that rather rare sequence.
“How did you know?” he’d asked.
“I did what I’d done to Tom, and she could read my mind.”
“But you’re silent to the rest of us.”
“This is big, isn’t it? You didn’t know there were others.”
“Was this part of some experiment?”
“No, and don’t say anything about me. That’s the deal.”
Sarah’s “deal” had been that he could have a blood sample from someone who might be a different
kind of telepath. In exchange, he had to tell Sarah if the sample contained the presumed telepathy
predecessor sequence, he had to promise not to help anyone identify who the sample came from, and
he had to not mention that Sarah had anything to do with bringing it to him. The strangest part was
that Sarah cared so much in the first place. Maybe he should encourage her to study genetics.
James hadn’t seen Sarah since he gave her the results, and there were rumors she’d disappeared. He
spent days mining the new data, trying to solve a puzzle still lacking many pieces. He used genetic
comparisons to predict common ancestors. The usual telepaths in his database needed two copies of
the new telepathy sequence which may have only developed three or four hundred years ago. So
he’d known they were all closely related. Most of the Thai telepaths had emigrated from China in the
last two generations, usually as family groups, so there were all sorts of confounding factors when he
analyzed their DNA.
But when he compared the new sample to the rest of the telepaths, they’re last common ancestor was
probably four thousand years ago. Doing the same comparison with Reggie’s DNA and the Thai
telepaths gave an estimate of eight thousand years, about what he’d expect for random samples from
across the globe. But if he compared the new proto-telepath sample to Sarah’s or Reggie’s DNA, the
estimate moved down to a thousand years, or less. They weren’t kissing cousins, but they shared
some heritage. The new sample had the bipolar correlate the U.S. wanted to buy, too. He was glad Alak had let him refuse to sell, but not glad enough to tell Alak the news, at least, not yet. He still wasn’t certain if the sequence Minerva wanted was related to the other telepathy. Did all the other world players know about both types already?

What if the simple genetics of telepathy weren’t so simple? James ran tests on all his samples looking for any commonalities he’d missed. He searched and scanned with every computer in his lab. He almost didn’t hear the woman who asked about sandwiches. He typed hard and fast until his fingers hurt, but neither his hands nor his feet made any diverting movements.

In time, he found every telepath sample he knew was homozygous for neurochem prime on chromosome thirteen. A websearch showed prime was the dominant allele for the sequence, with thirty-five percent of people homozygous. That wasn’t unusual enough for him to notice when he was analyzing his tightly related sample. But now he took a closer look. The public DNA index showed two functionally different variants had been identified at the site. There were scans showing slightly different neuroconnectivity related to each variant. Those homozygous for the prime variant were statistically more sensitive to light touch, but apparently not enough to affect daily life. There was no evidence of genetic selection for or against prime in the last three thousand years.

James searched for more recent articles on the subject and found only a few. Clearly it wasn’t a hot topic. But one of the articles caught his eye. The author was Leonard Knockham. James had seen the man at genetics conferences, but he was a parasitologist, so they’d never had reason to speak. Knockham did have a closed mind, but that was common enough at conferences.

James pulled up the article. It was a study of subjects with colitis or Crohn’s disease. This was outside James’s usual specialties, but the lure of the puzzle kept him reading. He managed to deduce that both conditions involved an overactive immune system, which only became problematic when previously endemic intestinal parasites were removed from a community through sanitation. This appeared to be old news in the field. What Knockham had discovered was that all known cases of colitis and Crohn’s disease were in subjects homozygous for neurochem prime. The discussion in the paper pointed out that this vulnerability hadn’t mattered until the parasites were controlled; so there hadn’t been time for natural selection against the prime allele on this front.

James hadn’t heard of anyone in their teep community having colitis or Crohn’s disease. Given the rarity of such conditions and his limited sample size, that wasn’t unreasonable. Even if one or two teeps had either problem, Dr. Yu would know, not him. But if he called with this question, politeness would require an explanation. It wasn’t worth the bother, and suddenly James had a better idea.

The letters on the keyboard rattled as he thumped through them, following a hunch. He searched for biographical information on Leonard Knockham. There it was. He’d been at Oxford in 2013 and 2014, while James was still there. Why hadn’t James remembered him, recognized him in all those years of conferences? Then he saw a reference to “Loopy Lenny,” and suddenly it all made sense. Loopy Lenny had been an undergraduate known for his shaggy hair, bottle green overcoat, and eccentric ways. He left diagrams on classroom whiteboards without any explanation. Usually silent, he’d occasionally flash into the spotlight with moments of brilliance. James had noticed back at Oxford that Lenny’s mind was closed to him. He’d wondered if Lenny’s insights came from probing the minds of his professors or admirers. But James was just breaking away from his father and the American telepathy program at that point. So he never tried to identify himself as a telepath to Lenny, and Lenny had never broadcast anything to him.

Then James remembered the day terrorists destroyed Heathrow. Thousands had died. All of Britain was filled with hurt and angry thoughts, and most of them were broadcast.

Universities and other possible targets were officially evacuated, but the country lacked the people or organization to forcibly empty the schools. So James snuck back to his office in the Oxford biology building. He worked quietly all day outside the telepathic range of seething public thoughts.

Then, while he foraged in the lounge, putting together crackers and cheese to eat as dinner, Loopy Lenny came in. If Lenny was usually a clown, today he was a sad mime. He bought a candy bar from the machine and drooped into an armchair.

“I’ve never gotten so much work done, no interruptions.”
“You ever heard of mock apple pie? I think it’s an American snack, made with crackers?”
“Don’t know it.”
“Ah well, we probably don’t have the spices.”
James remembered being glad then that Lenny’s mind was closed. Maybe he’d even wondered if Lenny was escaping other people’s thoughts the same as him. He hadn’t tried to ask, and Lenny hadn’t either.
As James left the snack area that day, Lenny said, “Sometimes it’s best to be alone with your thoughts.”
Once safely back in his office, James tapped his hands and feet with uncertainty, but when the feeling passed, he put his suspicions away.
Perhaps because Lenny had been so obvious with his crazy mane and green coat, James had dismissed him. When he later saw Leonard Knockham at professional conferences - short hair, dull suit, closed mind – he hadn’t connected him to loopy Lenny. James sighed at his oversight and brought up every article he could find by his former colleague. If Knockham was a teep, he almost certainly worked for some government, and even if he didn’t, anything overtly related to telepathy would be censored by the powers that be. But James knew how often his own published work touched on areas he’d researched for classified projects, and the paper on the prime allele suggested Lenny might be playing similar games.
Soon James found a paper by Knockham on skin parasites related to arthritis. Two different strains of the parasites were discussed, but there was no mention of human genetics in the article. James was not equipped to isolate and study such specimens. But Sarah had managed to deactivate Tom’s telepathy for weeks by applying telepathic pressure to his skin, and she seemed to have triggered latent telepathy in someone else through similar means. James’ fingers, on both hands, began to tap rapidly up and down, so lightly they didn’t press letters on the keyboard.
Now he knew why none of the cells he’d tested reacted with the protein produced by the telepathy sequence. He’d tested against a standard panel of all human cell types grown laboratory-clean from stem cells. What if his protein triggered activity in a parasite? What if the parasite produced a protein critical to human telepathy?
Knowing he was on the right track, James tugged at his ear, then his other ear, in frustration. How long would it take to develop the skills needed to prove this? Would Sarah resurface, and if so, would she provide skin samples from herself and the newly created teep? Did he need to figure this out by July 28th?
James dredged up records from the four conferences where he’d received notes. Sure enough, Leonard Knockham had attended every one. James brought up his calendar and gave himself a dot for deciphering who sent the note. Funny how he’d solved that puzzle only after he thought he’d given up. He wouldn’t take credit for the new genetic links or the connection to skin parasites until he had more proof.
A knock interrupted his thoughts.
“Hi, James!” It was Lisa, all bright and cheerful in a spaghetti-string dress, traipsing in with Robert in tow. “I brought lunch for Robert; so of course I brought some for you. Should we eat outside or in here?”
James decided there was no option but to thank Lisa and give up on working for at least half an hour. He cleared off most of his desk, and Lisa unwrapped sandwiches poorly protected by parchment paper. James refolded his paper in half with the edges aligned and only the clean side facing out. Then he lifted one triangular half of the sandwich and bit off a side point.
“So what have you been working on?” Lisa asked before James took a second bite of his sandwich. “Nothing. Just failing to answer questions.”
“Such as?”
James sighed. He hadn’t told anyone about the notes, and he wasn’t ready to tell Alak about his scientific suspicions. But there was little reason not to tell Lisa and Robert. He was supposed to be
working with Robert, and Lisa kept making an effort to be friends. He switched to tight telepathy.
“There’s a scientist in Britain. I’m convinced he’s studying telepathy, knows things I don’t, and
wants to share the information. He left me a note that said, ‘Be ready on July 28th,’ and I have no
way of communicating with him before then.”
“What’s on July 28th?” Lisa asked.
“I don’t know. Someone leaves me these notes, and I think that it’s him. I don’t know if he wants to
defect or just share scientific information. But I have no way to even try to speak with him until the
next Swiss conference, and that’s in October.”
Robert, usually laconic when Lisa was around, was sitting up straight as if invigorated by the rush of
information. “What is it you need to communicate?”
“Well, I want to ask him if neurochem prime is necessary for telepathy and if he knows the role of
two other sequences that might relate to telekinesis. I want to confirm that he’s the one sending me
these notes and find out why.”
“Has the Thai government tried to recruit him?” Robert asked.
“I don’t want to scare him if that’s not his goal, and anyway, they’d be too slow.”
“I could send a friend of mine to find him, maybe on his way home from work, and ask him nicely if
he would answer some questions from you,” Lisa said. She smiled as if it were the simplest little
favor.
James shook his head.
“No really, let me try,” Lisa looked into his eyes. Her look said she cared because it mattered to him,
and that was strangely flattering. He thought she was going to touch him, which she didn’t, but just
looking at her arms he could feel them. There was something in the way her thin peach blouse
rippled around the shoulders that made it seem like she was reaching out.
When all the sandwich papers were finally thrown away, she left carrying his list of questions.

Chapter 26
July 25-26, 2025 – County Kerry, Ireland

Sarah sat alone in the cluttered and dimming room she shared with Aliana and two others. She’d
slipped away after dinner, borrowing a large bowl filled with water. Now she’d set it on the floor,
centered in the square of diffuse evening light from their solitary, east-facing window. The end of
Sarah’s bed, where she sat, was in shadow, but she didn’t cross the room to turn on more light.
The bowl on the floor was metal, and Sarah found she could make music by spilling the water onto
various parts. Okay, it probably only counted as music to those who enjoyed the sound of
overflowing gutters, but it was hers. She ended her aquatic composition and resumed trying to sculpt.
She found herself shaping a phone out of water, a PAD. She held the shape while she dug her own
PAD from a bag under the bed then adjusted her image to match reality. Pushing the on key, she
checked for messages. There weren’t any. Still. She stared at the phone then put it away and let the
water phone seep back into a puddle.
Next she shaped a watery version of her own hand reaching up out of the bowl, and as it rose she
formed her arm. Perhaps she didn’t have an artistic eye, but she might have a future in 3D rendering.
The door opened and Sarah held the form because it was easier than controlling the splash down.
“Amazing,” said Aliana, closing the door behind her.
Sarah let the arm melt back to a flat surface. “It’s nothing much. Oliver can sculpt most anything.”
“You’ve been seeing a lot of him since you sat up with the abstainers that night.”
“The what? They were just telling stories and stuff.”
“Don’t play naïve. So are you being faithful to Reggie or have you fallen for a sixteen-year-old?”
“Oliver is sweet, an awesome teek, and much too young. Reggie, I dunno. I miss him, but I’m just
getting over calling myself a monster, and no matter how he denies it, I think he’ll still see me that
way sometimes. Maybe I’m not giving this place a chance, but I can’t seem to settle—”
“Do you regret what you did with me?”
“No. Never.” Sarah reached out to touch Aliana’s cheek. It was warm and slightly chapped by the mouth. She could feel Aliana ease into the touch.
“You want to do it again?” Aliana asked.
Sarah almost pulled forward in physical response, wanting to be back in that moment. But stones in her center weighed her down, and she heard herself say, “Sometime, but right now I couldn’t clear my mind.”
“From thoughts of Reggie?” Aliana had her eyebrows raised and wore just a trace of a smile, like a big sister who mostly had Sarah’s best interests at heart.
“Yeah, but the point is, to be that close to someone, I need to-- I need to be settled with myself, and right now I’m not.” In fact, Sarah felt like a kite being flown by something she vaguely recognized as her self, a kite anchored to that heaviness she couldn’t lose.
“Because you won’t call him?”
“How’d you know that?”
Aliana smiled, then she sat down and squished beside Sarah on the bed. Her arm looped behind Sarah’s back, holding her close so their thighs and torsos touched along one side.
Sarah relaxed and lay her head against Aliana’s shoulder even as her mind wondered what Aliana expected and where they were heading.
“Your mind is full of words now, isn’t it? You let me touch you, but I can feel tension all through your body, and it’s almost like hearing your worried thoughts again. Lie down; let me give you a back rub.”
Sarah moved across the bed on limbs like shattered glass. Aliana was right, her mind was a swirl in words she wouldn’t want heard, especially not by Aliana right now. But her body struggled to pull back to the mindless openness they’d shared when Aliana’s sense of touch was at its peak. Sarah wasn’t sure she could survive the combination. When Aliana had pulled her close, the skin she touched had felt like boiling water. It flowed as if to merge with Aliana, but each molecule at the surface hissed like steam as her mind spoke uncertainty.
Now Aliana’s hands kneaded her shoulders, the burning fluid feeling was both painful and pleasurable.
Sarah’s arms were crossed under her head, a wrinkled quilt beneath them, disheveled hair above. Aliana said, “Bring your arms down. Hasn’t anyone given you a massage before?”
“No,” Sarah answered as she quickly moved her arms.
“But you seemed to know so much the other day.”
“It’s just that stuff I don’t have words for.”
“Oh, Sarah,” Aliana said, her voice softening to a smooth Irish lilt. Then she didn’t say anything as she worked her hands slowly down along Sarah’s spine.
The touch was almost unbearable. Sarah wanted it, and on one level it felt good, but her mind practically screamed, bringing tension back each time her muscles began to release. Sarah was fighting so hard to relax that it startled her to feel tears on her face, as if she’d temporarily lost contact with that part of herself.
Aliana kept one hand massaging her back as she wiped the tears away with warm fingertips.
“Should we talk about it, Sarah? Is this about Reggie or something else?”
Sarah cried harder. Aliana just stroked her back for a while, then she gently kneaded her shoulders and upper arms.
Finally, Sarah calmed a little and said, “Maybe something I used to call jealousy is more like loneliness, or some kind of separateness I don’t have words for.”
“Try to tell me anyway.”
Sarah’s eyes had been closed for a long time, and she couldn’t make herself open them if she was going to talk. “Part of me’s happy that you fit in here and that you—”
“That I’m sleeping with someone,” Aliana kindly filled the awkward pause.
“Yeah, because I can’t be that for you now, but what we shared was so important to me, and I need to understand it. There’s so much I didn’t understand with Reggie, and when I’m ready, I think I
need to understand better with him, if he’s still willing to talk to me. But I’m terrified to even call him, because there are these moments when he looks at me like I’m a monster.”

This time the pause stretched, and Sarah could feel her muscles tightening even as Aliana continued to knead. Finally Aliana spoke, while pressing hard into Sarah’s back. “Have you ever been involved with anyone but Reggie?”

“Not seriously,” Sarah squeaked. She opened her eyes. The room was darker than before. With her head to the side she was barely able to see Aliana above her, but she needed to know her reaction. Aliana watched her own hands, but a quick glance showed she knew Sarah was looking. Her face showed no judgment, and her hands kept moving.

“And until recently, you never told anyone about the way you feel touch or about your telekinesis? Not even family?”

“Since they turned me in, probably a good thing.”

“But your mum, a close friend?”

“There was so much I didn’t know, couldn’t explain.”

“And now you’ve let me in because you had no choice about sharing.”

“It’s not just that. You gave me a choice when you could, and there’s so much I admire about you —”

“Thanks,” Aliana blushed, something Sarah hadn’t seen before. “I think I should have checked in on you sooner. But well, I was trying things out, with telepathy and what you taught me about touch and meeting certain people here, there’s so much to experience. I was probably a little selfish.”

“It’s okay,” Sarah said, closing her eyes so she wouldn’t cry again.

“It happens. But I think you were more vulnerable than I realized, even having read your mind.”

There was a pause as Aliana walked her fingertips all around Sarah’s back. “You know, even when I had to hear how much you hated having me hear your thoughts and how uncomfortable you were with mind readers, I never heard you think of me or any of them as monsters.”

“I could never think of you as a monster, and the people here may freak me out sometimes, but I don’t think any of them are monsters.”

“So, I don’t know Reggie very well, but from what I saw, he really cared about you. Even if he might ‘freak out a bit sometimes’ as you say, do you think he ever really saw you as a monster?” Sarah couldn’t form words. She let Aliana’s hands stoke big circles while tears fell from Sarah’s eyes.

Then very softly, almost as if she was talking to herself, Aliana said, “You know what I realized, just before I came here tonight? I realized that I trust you, and that it was making me feel vulnerable. What I didn’t realize was that you’ve been trying to trust me this whole time, or maybe the part of you that feels did trust me, and the part that thinks in words didn’t want to believe it.”

Sarah heard Aliana say it, and suddenly the whole jumble in her mind fell into order. Aliana was right, and the words were all Sarah needed. Her mind grew quiet and suddenly the backrub and her trust in Aliana were the most wonderful things she’d ever felt.

“Now you’re relaxing,” she heard her friend say and then she drifted without words for a very long time, just letting herself feel, relax, and trust.

Late the next afternoon, Sarah was shaping a bowl on a pottery wheel while Oliver adjusted the kiln. Glimpsing the pilot light, she asked, “Can you light fires with your mind?”

“No,” Oliver laughed, then turned with mouth slightly open, “You’re saying . . .”

Sarah’s bowl wavered on the wheel as her hands shook. She finished with just telekinesis, then said, “It’s got to be part of telekinesis. I don’t want to be the only one.”

“So teach me.”

Closing the kiln door, Oliver pulled an emergency kit from under the sink. In it was a tea candle. Oliver set it on the table, and Sarah lit it.

“But how?” he asked.

“How do we do any of it? I focus on something and want it to catch fire.”
Oliver blew out the candle and stared intently. Just then, Doug looked in at the open door. “Sarah, could I speak with you for a moment?” Oliver lowered his chin, and gave Sarah that “aren’t you popular look” he’d mastered so well, but only said, “I can finish up here.” Sarah washed her hands and followed Doug out past the garden to a bench beside their grove of trees. She sat at the far end of the bench and picked at clay caught beneath her fingernails. Without preamble he asked, “Do you still wish to know more of our science?” “Yes.” “Can you truly fool a palm lock from a copy of a hand print?” Did he know that from her mind? Had she thought about it here? Doug didn’t wait for her reply, “There’s a scientist who will answer the sorts of questions you were asking if you’ll help him board a plane as someone else and then take his place for one night.” “Why’s he leaving?” “Not our place to know, but the offer wouldn’t have come through me if the Druids didn’t trust him.” “Did you know I’d say yes?” Doug pulled out some papers. “Here’s a picture so you’ll recognize him, and in case you want to trim your hair to better match. You can travel to Heathrow as Tasha, here’s your passport.” The woman in the photo was a decent match for Sarah. Was she someone else who asked a favor from the Druids? The photo of the scientist looked less like her. “Cutting my hair will not make me look like this guy.” “You’ll have his Macintosh and hat. With luck, it may rain. The hope is you’ll fool security cameras from several feet away. He’ll also give you papers with his palm print when you meet him.” Sarah shrugged and shook her head, but her heart was racing and her shoulders tightened. “This packet needs to be delivered unopened. It contains his papers, including the palm print you’ll use to start him on his way. Tomorrow I’ll drive you to the airport, and you’ll meet him at Heathrow.” Sarah nodded and looked at the thin parcel wrapped in white paper. The seams in the back were glued not taped, and a pattern of Celtic knots had been painted over the edges, making the seals quite tamper-proof. Doug stood and placed a heavy hand on her shoulder. The sun was behind him and Sarah wondered if that was intentional. She imagined a class in Druid school about how to impress the peasants, and was once again glad that her thoughts were now silent. Then Doug was gone and Sarah stood to walk back to the house. “Back here,” came a whisper from the trees. Sarah turned and saw Oliver. She rolled her head back then went over to him. “So they’re using you as a courier. With a teek that usually means danger, but Doug asked me about the palm lock trick at lunch, so I kind of suspected. Could you teach me to do it?” “Did Doug know you were here?” “Who can guess with Druids? Can’t give the mind readers too much privacy though, they’d take advantage.” “Would they?” “You know what I mean. They talk mentally even when we’re around, and that’s rude. Like if I spoke New Gaelic with Doug when you were standing by, you wouldn’t like that.” “You know New Gaelic?” “Of course I do. Just like you know step dancing.” “I was just amazed when I saw Aliana do it, and then I found out it was something I could do fairly well myself.” Oliver stared at her with his chin poking forward. Her hands started to sweat on the curious white package. She shifted her fingers and looked to make sure they hadn’t left clay smudges. “You should wrap that,” Oliver said. “Remember, my folks were in the community? Druid parcels are much less conspicuous when covered with wrapping paper. Come on, I’ll show you where it’s kept.”
Sarah followed Oliver into the pantry where he pulled a box of used wrapping paper from a bottom shelf. They were like kids before Christmas, digging through the box of tissue and slightly creased paper. Finally, they found a decent piece, a deep blue with lighter stripes, and covered over the painted white parcel.

After cleaning up the scraps, Sarah was eager to stash the package and begin packing. But Oliver leaned against the kitchen counter, his eyebrows rippled with worry. Sarah noticed a large ceramic bowl soaking in the sink. She reached out with teek, and Oliver followed her gaze to the hand rising up, first fingers, then palm, wrist, and arm. Sarah made it wave, and Oliver smiled.


Every muscle in Sarah’s back was sore as she sat in the diner at Heathrow waiting to meet the man in the picture. The diner, like most of the terminal, was smooth-walled, with rounded edges at floor and ceiling. It was a faddish, modern look that should have seemed clean and careful. Instead, it reminded Sarah of public bathrooms with curved plastic baseboards and smooth plastic walls that shouted out, “Hose me down with disinfectant.” Not really the message she wanted while trying to eat lunch.

She’d ordered a bowl of onion soup. It was too salty, and Sarah kept having the urge to play with her food. Learning to teek liquids had its disadvantages.

Finally, the man came. His hair was short, and his face had a slightly doughy look, even less like her than in the picture. She nodded to him as he caught her eye. He smiled quite naturally and joined her at the table. A whiff of his cologne reminded her of burning cedar logs, making him seem older than a moment before. Then the salty smell of onion soup reasserted itself.

“How are you?” he said.

“Fine. I brought you a present.”

“You shouldn’t have,” he shrugged lightly, as he took the package and slid open both layers of wrapping with one motion. He removed a passport and airplane ticket and tucked them inside his suit coat. The rest he put into his briefcase.

“The items in the bag are for you. I’ll carry them until we leave. There’s a coat, a hat, and a muffler if it’s cold enough. Keep in mind that London’s the most surveilled city in the world. I left you instructions to my flat and to information you may want on my computer. It’s very good of you to do this.”

Sarah smiled at the man. He didn’t seem like a scientist or a Druid. He reminded her a bit of Oliver, only older, about to leave on a trip to who knew where.

“Do you want something to eat?” Sarah asked.

“No, no time. I’ll just wait while you finish—”

“I’m done.”

He pulled ten Euros from his wallet before she could object, and they were walking down the causeway toward the planes.

“Would a glance at the passport be enough, or do you need time to study the print?” the man asked softly as they trotted along.

“It’s safest if I’m looking at it while you hold your hand just a fraction of an inch above the scanner.”

“Very well.”

There was almost no line at security. As their turn arrived the man handed Sarah his large shopping bag and pulled out his papers. He handed the passport and air ticket to the security guard who scanned them then passed them back. The scientist turned to Sarah and said, “Have you seen this picture of me? I look quite daft.”

He handed her the passport to look at just before he reached his hand out over the palm scanner. Sarah stared at the palm print on the facing page and teeked the machine until a green light came on. Then she returned the passport saying, “No, I think it’s a fine picture.”

They hastily said goodbye before he passed behind the barrier, and Sarah found herself walking through a strange airport with a mysterious bag of stuff. There were cameras everywhere, not
attempting to camouflage amidst the mostly smooth and new walls. As she entered an older section, one not renovated for some reason, she figured the only logical thing to do was to visit the bathroom. Surely they wouldn’t spy on people in the stalls.

Once there she read the note and realized she needn’t don her disguise until she exited the tube station nearest the man’s flat. Turned out his name was Leonard. She’d been left his real passport along with instruction to his home. She was to be there by ten o’clock tonight, ignore the retinal scanner on the front door (he’d faked an eye infection to be excused from it), use the palm locks at both the street entrance and his apartment door, and leave between six and seven the next morning. Someone would be alerted if he wasn’t in his apartment between ten and six. There was a postscript detailing video cameras in the tube station and in front of his building that probably weren’t monitored, but she might want to keep her head down. There was a post postscript suggesting she find a place to catch the news after she’d left his place the next morning.

Sarah thought Reggie would have loved this adventure. He liked to read spy stories and imagine himself as one of the operatives.

Noting her own energy and alertness, Sarah wondered if she didn’t enjoy these exploits more than she wanted to admit. But her hands were also frozen with tension, and the thought of Reggie made her want to give up and cry. Last night she’d realized she trusted him, heart and mind. In her dreams she’d imagined sailing to be with him, but something always blocked her from getting through. Her overnight things were packed in a small bag over her shoulder. She’d brought the PAD. Did that mean she meant to use it?

Twenty minutes later, Sarah sat on a park bench by an artificial pond. Instead of exploring London, she was staring at the phone again. Just holding it sapped her strength and dragged that hand down to her knee. Brits walked politely by without a glance in her direction. A few stray ducks waddled over, but left when she didn’t produce any food. The park was dimming peacefully and Sarah’s stomach gave a rumble. Finally, she dialed Reggie’s number.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Reggie.”

“Sarah! Are you okay?”

“I don’t like phones.”

“You never answered my calls.”

“You didn’t leave a message.”

“They could have captured your phone.”

“So then they’d know you called me?”

There was a pause. Sarah’s stomach felt like ice.

“You’ll never guess who’s here,” Reggie said more softly.

“Howard?”

“No, he came with me.”

“What?”

“Tom. He just showed up a few minutes ago.”

“No way.”

“I’ll have to warn Phil about him.”

“Does Phil know anything?”

“It’s been weird. He gave my parents a trip abroad. He’s taking me scuba diving this afternoon.”

“Don’t!”

“You’re telling me what to do now?”

Reggie sounded annoyed. Sarah kicked at the gravel with her toes and wondered what she could say on the phone.

“Just wait on the scuba. You might lose something you value, or it might just change. When I see you I can explain—“

“Are you coming—“

“Do you want me to?”
“Yes.”
“I’ll call back soon.”
“You sure?”
“You’re so patient.”
“Is there a choice? I love you.”
“I love you, too.”

Sarah put the phone away and buried her face in her hands. The palms felt like cold glass on her burning cheeks. No wonder she hadn’t called Reggie before. Every molecule in her body wanted to tunnel through the planet to be with him right now. But she had promises to keep and information she had to retrieve.

Rising from the bench, she set off across the park. She’d pick up bread and sandwich meat at a grocery store and see what Leonard had left her on the computer. Then she’d know if there was more she had to do for herself or “the community.” Then she’d know if she was free to be with Reggie.

That night Sarah lay awake in a strange man’s bed. He really was strange, too. His overcoat and hat were bottle green. His apartment looked generic, like it had come furnished. But green blankets had been thrown over the sofa, the armchair, and the bed. The digital clock in the bedroom was a green, imitation cuckoo clock. The background screen on the computer was a field of grass.

But Leonard had left her files explaining all the genetics she had asked about and more. He’d even left her an index translating his abbreviations into plain English. All of the “unusual abilities” seemed to require tiny, microscopic creatures called zootochloro pasuriti which seemed to cover almost every surface, including every creature, on the face of the earth. For humans to interact with the zoots, they had to inherit certain nervous system genetics from both parents.

Leonard believed that those genetics had been selected for up until two to four thousand years ago when the new zoots, or zootochloro interferoid, started colonizing humans and other mammals. The new zoots didn’t replace the old zoots, but they joined them in their favorite niche, at the base of mammalian hairs, and somehow altered the frequencies of some energy transmitted and received along the hairs. This muted the old abilities.

Sarah imagined the new zoots spreading like a plague, leaving a community of mind readers silent. Would that be worse than a disease that left everyone partially deaf? Or had mind reading been a rare gift, its loss like retribution from the gods? She stared at the silent computer screen.

Had there been people who celebrated when their thoughts could no longer be heard? She remembered Doug leading his household through the burying ceremony. How quickly had such rituals evolved, and had everyone submitted willingly?

Without discussing history, Leonard’s files went on to explain how the new zoots couldn’t withstand high pressure, but would recolonize within a few weeks of eradication. Meanwhile, a few hundred years ago, a genetic mutation in the sequence that allowed mind reading had created some humans who could hear and transmit thoughts using the new zoot frequencies. If someone inherited that mutation from both parents as well as the original nervous system coding, they could read minds without using pressure to kill off their new zoots and without any other genetic factors.

Although they couldn’t read the mind of anyone without new zoots, these new mind readers created two problems. First, there were several diseases linked to the new zoots, such as colitis, Crohn’s disease, and some forms of arthritis. Leonard thought there might be others, but the new zoot “teeps” as they liked to call themselves, wanted the information suppressed and no research done. Also, because the older “unusual abilities” all required at least one other genetic sequence to activate them, they were not likely to breed true as often as the “teep” ability. Leonard said the older abilities might lose in the war of natural selection unless something changed.

As the clock approached midnight, Sarah waited to see if the cuckoo bird might pop out of the digital imitation cuckoo clock. She didn’t really expect it too. It hadn’t on the previous hour. Meanwhile, she imagined old zoots, like fuzzy brown caterpillars, crawling all over her, the bed, the floor, the
pencil she could easily teek from across the room. She also imagined new zoots. She wanted to be fair, but instead kept picturing them as spiky black caterpillars that snobbishly chose their homes on warm mammals, where they walked all over the fuzzy old zoots and left them cowering in fear at the base of hair follicles.

At twelve o’one, not having sighted a cuckoo bird, Sarah climbed out of bed and went back to look at the chart Leonard had left her explaining the genetics behind each of the abilities.

“teep”: BB 11
mind reader: AA 11, 2 or 3
animal person: AC or BC 11, 3
spotter: not AA, not BB, not AB, 11 S
mover: AA, BB, or AB 11, 2 or 3, M

She’d already figured out she must be BB, which made James say she was genetically a teep. But somehow she’d wiped out the new zoots before she’d ever really known about telepathy, and, if what Oliver said was true, that probably allowed her to be a stronger teek. She pieced together the various combinations, like that one person could be both spotter and animal person the way mover could combine with either form of mind reading, but an animal person couldn’t also be a teek or teep. So had her mother been BC113? Had she carried the M that let Sarah be a mover?

Sarah woke to a faint “cuckoo, cuckoo.” She was curled up on the sofa near the computer. Light came in around the drawn curtains. Sarah jumped up and was in the bedroom looking at the clock before her mind really started thinking. It was six o’clock. Leonard must have set the cuckoo as an alarm. She was supposed to leave between six and seven. So she went to the bathroom and quickly cleaned up. Then she shut down the computer, carefully gathered all her things into the shopping bag, and put on the green coat and hat.

Outside the morning mist was just burning off. Soon it would be too warm for an overcoat, but all she had to do was make it to the tube station. Then she’d change and leave this stuff in a locker. She’d find some breakfast, listen to the news, and decide how to join up with Reggie. It felt good to finally know what she wanted. She felt lighter. Her new understanding filled her like helium in a balloon. Some string was still tying her down, but she felt very close to flying away.

Then a man approached her.

“Excuse me, are you Leonard Knockham?”

Sarah coughed into her arm, hiding her face in the stiff green fabric and buying herself a moment to think. The man speaking to her was Chinese. Was this some covert contact? But he didn’t seem sure of her identity.

She coughed a rough, “No,” and shook her head. Attempting what she hoped was a brisk walk, Sarah tried to reach the tube station. As she passed a clump of bushes at the end of the road something jabbed her from behind and the voice said, “I know you.”

In that moment Sarah realized the accent was Thai and that she’d just been tranquilized.

Chapter 27
July 28 - 29, 2025 – PAD Island

“There you are,” Howard gasped, “Beach?”

Reggie swallowed the bite of fish in his mouth. Spending most of July on an island could cause some to tire of fish, but not Reggie. Tonight he was eating mahi, caught an hour ago, grilled before his eyes as he sat by the pool. His workplace had briefly seemed like the tropical dream resort it was designed to imitate. Now the fish lay limp on his plate and the diners around the pool looked like computer geeks and technicians. Reggie set his napkin on the table and followed Howard out to the sand.
“Did you know someone was coming?”
“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Reggie sat down on a low shelf of rock and dumped sand out of leather shoes.
“Cass whisked him away while supplies were being unloaded from the plane. Looked to be in his forties, classic British face, short brown hair. Unreadable, of course.”
Reggie’s PAD rang.
“Hello?”
“Hey, Reggie. You busy? Could you meet me in the small conference room?”
“Sure, be there in a minute.”
He hung up and turned to Howard, “There. Bet I’m going to find out who your mystery man is.” Howard did not look appeased.

Reggie broke stride as he entered the conference room. Phil was sitting there with Tom. Maybe this wasn’t about the mystery man.
“Come on in, Reggie. We’re going to need Howard here too. You want to call him, or should I?”
“I can call him,” Reggie said as he dialed. “What’s up?”
He thought he heard Howard’s PAD ringing down the hall. What a great spy. The noise receded before Howard answered and agreed to come.
Phil said, “I wanted to ask the three of you to monitor the all company meeting from here. It’ll be on the monitor in about ten minutes.”
Reggie glanced at his PAD for the time. It was ten ‘til eight on July twenty-eighth. He had left himself a reminder about the meeting, but he hadn’t thought it was that important.
“What do you want the THREE of us to monitor for?” Reggie glanced pointedly at Tom, whom he’d explained to Phil as an uninvited and possibly dangerous guest.
Tom smiled at Reggie, showing a lot of teeth, then tossed his head and looked away.
“Your own reactions, and afterward these terminals will open up to let you gauge net reaction.”
“Open up. You mean—”
“The machines in this room and the auditorium where our employees are gathering have been taken offline. During the meeting, everyone will see the same video we’re sending out. Afterward, you’ll be able to monitor web reaction, but nothing’s going out except through me.”
Howard walked in then, clearly having stalled to even take that long. After one glance at Reggie he cringed and took a seat at the far end of the room.
Reggie was staring at Phil, body tensed, jaw locked, but silent.
Phil shook his head gently, then moved toward the door. “You still have your PAD, and I’ll try to take your calls—”
Phil was out the door, and Reggie heard it lock. He stared around the conference room with its black leather chairs and cool sea foam walls. Howard hunched forward with his elbows on the table. Tom stretched back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head. Still standing, Reggie moved to loom over him.
“You know what this is about. You are a spy here!”
“Don’t I wish. Unfortunately, no one paid me to avoid getting locked in this room with two rather good looking and adrenaline-strung men. But here I am.”
“You know something.”
“Of course I do.” Tom leaned forward and fluttered his eyes at Howard. Reggie heard his voice rise, “Howard! You wouldn’t tell him anything?”
“No!” Howard protested, but Tom was standing beside him in a flash, laying a hand on Howard’s chest.
“Oh come now. Reggie won’t be jealous. I think he’d like to join in. He’s missing his teek lover, you know.”
Howard was blushing. Reggie pitched his voice lower again, “Tom, tell me what you know, or I’ll—”
“Forget it, Reggie. Tom doesn’t know anything. He’s been baiting me mentally since he came to the
island. If he’d known something was happening tonight, he would have used it. This is just personal.”
Reggie realized the two were carrying on their own silent argument. “You mean you and Tom are . . .”
“He has a thing for teeks, we did it a couple times. I already knew what a turncoat he was; so it was just sex.”
“Just rather amazing sex, please,” Tom drawled
“And I thought you had a thing for Sarah,” Reggie mimed hitting his head. He remembered worrying that Howard was competition, that Sarah and he might have experimented with teek sex.
“That’s different.” Howard looked at the floor, then forced an awkward smile, “Male or female. Teep or teek or neither. You can’t have everything.”
“But after he betrayed her?”
“About when he called for calm, actually, and he didn’t know about the Chiang Mai attack ahead of time.”
“Is that why you agreed?” Tom pouted in camp amusement. “You little slut.”
The video monitor flickered as Tom tried to swat Howard’s butt. Reggie turned toward the screen as it showed, “Stand by for broadcast.”
“So none of us know what this is about?” Reggie waved toward the words.
Howard shook his head, and Tom said, “I doubt I even care.”
“That’s him!” Howard hissed as a doughy-faced, short-haired man came on screen and began to speak.
“I’m Dr. Leonard Knockham, and I hope you will look for my data on the web whether or not this broadcast is cut off. We are interrupting radio and television transmissions to tell you that at least four major governments have been hiding essential information for more than a decade. I love my country, as do most of you, but we also have responsibilities to each other, to all people. Government secrecy has caused thousands to suffer needlessly with colitis, Crohn’s disease, and various forms of arthritic and immune disorders. Perhaps for some time secrecy was justified, but recently there has been covert international testing and recruiting that could lead the world to war, or worse. Several of us, as concerned scientists and responsible human beings, have decided the lie must end, but first everyone must know why the lie exists.”
Reggie stood in the middle of the room, staring at the screen. Phil had locked him in with Tom and Howard while this Knockham spoke about—Was he jumping to conclusions?
“Among us, there have long been those with certain talents, talents which developed naturally, through genetic selection, thousands of years ago. It will be hard for many of you to believe until you have reviewed the data we are making available, but these talents include the ability to read minds, to move objects telekinetically, and to soothe and occasionally communicate with animals. Many of you may possess these potentials unknowingly. Due to changes in symbiotic organisms living on human skin, most of these talents can only be activated by increased pressure, applied simultaneously to all parts of a person’s skin.”
A bar appeared at the bottom of the screen with web addresses flowing across. Some of the sites Reggie recognized from NGOs he’d worked with, others were strange word combinations that he knew could be generated indefinitely by the anti-censorship program he’d helped devise. But the terminals by him were still deactivated.
“This increased pressure is also key to relieving the painful medical conditions, such as colitis, that I mentioned before. I would encourage everyone to take the time to fully understand the new possibilities and procedures, before using pressure treatments to control medical problems or explore other possibilities.”
“Shit,” said Tom, the image of a movie tough guy betrayed.
Howard kicked at the floor. “If he’s right, they’re going to squish us all, if they don’t just kill me first.”
Reggie said nothing. The doctor continued with his speech.
“Above all, I ask that everyone, around the world, join together to make this a day of triumph and
understanding. There are those who say humans are too suspicious, too full of hate, to bear this revelation. They say it must lead to global slaughter and destruction. But I believe that our only chance of avoiding such tragedy is to face the truth with honesty and integrity. We can find new ways to live together in peace and unity.

“Finally, for those of you who are still receiving this transmission, let me begin to explain some technical details. I know you will have doubts, but full genetic explanations, along with medical and political evidence, will be kept available online. As an overview, there are symbiotes on human skin that suppress many of the older abilities. These may be called zootochloro interferoid, or ‘new zoots’ for short. While these new zoots seem to trigger some forms of arthritis and other disorders, there is also a new strain of telepathy that only works when new zoots are present on all parties involved. Government secrecy over many years has limited research into other ways the new zoots may benefit people with certain genetic variations.”

Computer terminals in the small conference room came on with a slight hum. Reggie’s attention tore between the man still talking on the main monitor and the urge to seek data and reactions from the web. He stood, as if frozen, where he was.

“There is another strain of symbiotes on human skin, and on most every other animate or inanimate surface, called zootochloro pasuritni.”

Reggie collapsed into a chair and typed as he listened.

“These ‘old zoots’ appear to be necessary not only to the original special abilities, but also to some functions of our immune and nervous systems.”

Reggie reached a major news site as he heard Tom and Howard start typing.

“These microscopic creatures have—“

“He’s published DNA sequences,” Howard said, “They’ll be able to identify us by cheek swab.”

“What Sarah did to me. She must have known—”

“She didn’t,” Reggie said.

“Someone must have known. All those government bastards questioned me and studied me, and they never told me about “zoots”, or other telepaths—”

“The Bin Hali are threatening to bomb PAD island,” Reggie whispered.

“If China doesn’t first,” Tom said as he typed a little too hard.

“If you guys read the data page Dr. Knockham put out?”

“We’re putting it out,” Reggie answered, “I set up the procedures to keep his data on the web, and Phil’s locked me out of our internal system so I can’t even see how it’s doing.”

“Our teep genetics are way simple compared to the older stuff,” Howard said. If I let them squish me, I might lose my telepathy, but my teek might be as good as Sarah’s.”

Reggie’s fingers collided for a moment. Had Sarah heard the news? Was she safe?

“China has no official statement,” Tom said. “Anonymous sources say they’re breeding a teep/teek army. Someone’s accused them of creating the new zoots.”

“The U.S. is getting panned too, blamed for the cover up. There are links to the AIDS vaccine scandal that say they’re recruiting teeps. They report a riot starting in D.C.” Reggie added as he checked his favorite blogs for opinions.

The video transmission of Dr. Knockham ended and the screen went blank.

“Reggie, maybe you’re a spotter,” Howard said. “They’ve got sequences for it in the old genetics. They don’t mention it showing up with the new zoots still present or working to spot the new teeps, but if teeks can work despite new zoots, who knows.”

Reggie looked at Howard. The guy was still studying Dr. Knockham’s data page. Was this what most people around the world would do? Or would they prepare for war? Or bury themselves under heavy household furniture? Reggie imagined the death count the next day from people smothering themselves to get rid of new zoots. Of course, if half the planet died in war tonight-- Reggie picked up his phone and dialed Phil.

“Let me out of here Phil. There’s work I can do.”

“I’m sorry, Reggie.”
“Let past be past. I can help keep us up and running. You know I can.”
“Your friends are new telepaths. What are you? What’s Sarah?”
“I don’t know if I’m anything. Sarah’s a teek. Maybe she could have been a new teep but she didn’t have new zoots or something. Why does it matter?”
“A teek? What happened with her and the government?”
“You knew! Did you send the car that tailed us in Jamaica? Were you reading my mind at Pizza Pop?” Reggie’s voice was rising as he thought it through.
“Wait, Reggie. I could never read your mind, and you refused to try scuba diving, so I thought you knew—”
There was another voice in the background, and then over Phil’s phone came the voice from TV, “Reggie, this is Leonard Knockham. I think we’ve made some mistakes. If your Sarah’s who I think she is, our people did send a car to Jamaica, but just to watch; we couldn’t risk being discovered then. Phil knows nothing about it or that Sarah helped me escape from England yesterday. I had no idea—”
“Is Sarah safe?”
“She should be.”
“She better be. So what side are you working for?”
There was silence at the other end, and Phil came back. “Right now, we’re on the side of free information. I can give you full access to our system and open a video conference line. But you’re probably safer staying in there. There’s some chance of rebellion within the company.”
“And the people outside threatening to bomb us?”
“We have some influential friends. Can you vouch for the people you’re with?”
Reggie looked at Tom who rolled his eyes as news scrolled across his computer screen. Howard looked up from the data he was still studying, “If Tom tries anything, I’ll pin him against the wall for you.”
“Promises, promises,” Tom muttered without dramatic effort.
Reggie shook his head, “I think I’m safe enough in the room with them, if that’s what you mean.”

Reggie didn’t know what he wanted to ask next, so he dug into his work. The attempts to wipe their data off the net weren’t very sophisticated so far. The automated anti-censorship routines were rooting themselves firmly in cyberspace. Saudi Arabia had taken their whole country offline. China was suggesting that good citizens look to government sources and not trust corrupt capitalist media. The U.S. government was denying any knowledge of anything. So far, not bad.

Less than twelve hours after the broadcast, official statements were released simultaneously by the Chinese and American governments saying the crisis was over and peace would prevail. Reggie stared at his computer in disbelief, then turned to the video conference screen where Phil still worked at his desk.
“Is that success?” Reggie asked.
“Could be.”
“Care to tell me how we pulled this off?”
“Follow the money. Big business pulled every string they had to keep the markets stable.”
“Are they controlled by teeps and such?”
“No, nothing so direct. A few may have had unfair advantages in the past.”
“Care to let me out of here so I can get some sleep?”

Reggie had just returned to his room and undressed when his PAD rang. He picked it up expecting to hear Phil and was quite surprised to hear a terrified teenager on the other end.

Chapter 31
July 28, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand
The morning of July 28th was ordinary. James came into his office around 9 AM. He leafed through his paper correspondences and turned on his primary terminal. Triaging email, nothing required an immediate reply. Checking his calendar, the only meeting listed was the summer soirée at the Johnson’s house.

Four times a year the Johnsons invited an eclectic group of friends over to discuss current events and political trends. At first, James thought they invited him just to fix him up with women. But since the conversations inevitably turned to invasion of privacy issues in the U.S., which often involved genetics or at least medicine that James could explain, he’d developed his own niche in the group. He wondered if he should go today. What had Knockham’s last note meant? Was some event about to happen or was someone coming to see him personally? He set up windows on his computer to monitor breaking world news and a science discussion group. He thought about staying in his office all day, then realized someone trying to meet him might use the soirée.

The food at the Johnsons’ was excellent, as always. There was a meat appetizer cleverly bound up in banana leaves and a quiche with something not quite like spinach in it. But James had trouble sitting still. There was no one here he hadn’t met before. Maybe he should have stayed in his lab.

“James, what do you think of the finger prick ID legislation in the U.S.?” Ida asked, probably being a good hostess.

“The challenge on behalf of government employees? They have no chance in the current Supreme Court. Now if private employers try to require DNA matching, that will probably fail. So far genotype privacy has held, even in the U.S.” No need to suggest why to Ida, but most of her guests weren’t teeps, so that was that.

“Do you think they’ll really use it, have automated blood draw machines at the entrances to important buildings?” a young woman in a speckled orange sari asked. Her mind was silent and James wondered if she worked for the government.

“No, just an excuse to increase their database. Even if someone designed a machine that couldn’t be tricked and posed no disease risk, most people aren’t ready to trust it.”

James felt the fingers on his right hand begin to tap up and down his glass. He discretely mirrored the movement with his left hand then tried to keep still.

“Why don’t they just use cheek swabs or retina scans?” the citrus clothed woman asked, tilting her head and perturbing a wave of long black hair. Could Ida be planning to fix him up with her?

“No, just an excuse to increase their database. Even if someone designed a machine that couldn’t be tricked and posed no disease risk, most people aren’t ready to trust it.”

During the slight conversational pause, an older woman in a flowery dress, Mrs. K-something from the university literature department, approached Ida. “Oh Ida, where’s Emma-dear, I brought her a book.”

“You’re too kind. I’m afraid Emma’s exploring adolescent sulking.”

“Is it a boy?” the woman cooed with a smile, while thinking that Emma was a good girl and mothers always worried too much.

Ida’s expression changed not a bit as she said, “No, just some friends of hers moved away, and she’s blaming us. Let me call and tell her you brought something.”

“I have her number on my cell.”

“Oh, it’s changed. She has a PAD now. Costs her four times as much, but her friends use them; so she thinks they’re de rigur.”

James wandered by the dessert table and selected a mango tart before heading across the courtyard and calling a taxi.

He hadn’t noticed the music from the taxi’s radio until it was interrupted by a man speaking in English.

“I’m Doctor Leonard Knockham . . .”

James leaned forward, gripping his hands on the front seat as the message he’d been waiting for
came through. When the radio station regained control, after the phrase “symbiotic organisms,” the driver muttered “crazy farang.” James wanted to ask him to try another station, see if the message was still breaking through somewhere. But he could hear the driver’s mental skepticism in Thai. Without understanding all the words, James picked up the cabby’s disbelief, mixed with some reasonable fear.

He sat back and examined his own fears. What if a mob came pounding at the lab door as he furiously tried to delete files? If they gave him a chance to talk, what could he possibly say? Would he be hearing horror and fury from a mob of minds the whole time?

Society had accepted tetrachromats and men with extreme pheromone sensitivities, would telepathy be so much harder? He imagined posing that question to a non-telepath, and the devil’s advocate part of his brain shut up.

What if society required anti-telepathy treatments? James knew it was possible genetically. He’d discovered a couple mechanisms himself, but as germ warfare they would have been tricky. With a modern legal and medical system involved, it could be done, and there might be even easier fixes involving the parasites. James imagined himself voluntarily stepping forward to give up telepathy.

How often had he wished not to hear people’s thoughts? How many friendships and activities had he scorned because he couldn’t stand eavesdropping on the people involved?

His fingertips began to tap rapidly against his palms, excited at the thought of giving up his teep. But was it only wishful thinking? He might be even less socially competent without some outside input. Was there any place left for him in the normal scientific community?

Then he thought about Sarah. He imagined a mob chasing her down, beating her to a pulp. He imagined her hurting someone in self-defense and hating herself for it, or just having to give up telekinesis. Wasn’t what she could do useful to society? But wasn’t it even more frightening than telepathy?

James hadn’t prayed in fifteen years, but in the back of the Thai taxicab, he folded his hands together and made what was either a wish or a prayer. Just let people get through the next few days, and don’t let them hurt Sarah or anyone like her.

Back in his office, James retrieved the day’s broadcast and data from the web. It was so much more than he’d figured out on his own. He checked his samples with the new data while he monitored scientific reaction on his preferred discussion groups.

There came a knock at the door and Alak strode in, mindspeaking, “So you’ve heard? Are these other types legit?”

“Probably, but I need time.”

“We have no time. We may need weapons and defenses.”

James didn’t even look up from his computer. “I’ll work fastest if you leave me alone, and send me any relevant information.”

Alak left quietly and James barely noticed. He was halfway to what might be a discovery. Using Lenny’s simplest notation, Sarah was indeed a mover and had two of the rarer alleles where just one would suffice (BB 11 23 M). The other two movers in Thailand were BB 11 2 M, which made sense.

The problem was, James himself should be a mover according to the new data. He was BB 11 2 M. Would he be a mover without zootochloro interferoid? Why could the others function despite the new zoots?

He checked the relatives of his known teeks, but none of them had the 2 M or 3 M which should make them teeks. He searched his whole database and found two other teeps who were 2 M like him. He started searching for how they were like him and unlike the teeks.

In minutes his analysis gave a simple answer, a single region of DNA. Was this a factor Knockham had missed? Was it only necessary for BB telepaths to express telekinesis also? Or was it a false lead hiding a more complicated answer?

James checked and the paranoid schizophrenics with what he’d called “precursor telepathy” or what Knockham labeled “AA” also had the sequence he lacked. He tentatively labeled it “4” and looked
to see if there was a way to contact Knockham. He found none and wasn’t surprised. Then James began to wonder if his father had been BB 11 2 M without the 4, if he’d been spreading teek genetics without knowing he was almost a teek. He didn’t have access to his father’s genome, but he could try to find out if Sarah was his child or his father’s. That might give a needed clue. He punched up the analysis and wondered why he hadn’t checked before. The answer popped out. Sarah was almost certainly James’s child, not his half-sister. So that didn’t tell him anything new about his father’s DNA. Carefully, he erased all of Sarah’s records from the machine. Her genotype was in his pilot and his results could be recreated trivially, but at the moment, he was a little more worried than usual about someone breaking in. Wherever possible, he safeguarded his data. Then he went back online to study the reactions of the scientific community.

Two groups of parasitologists, one in Johannesburg and one in Oslo, were releasing articles on zootochloro interferoid they claimed journals rejected for reasons they hadn’t understood at the time. A well-respected German researcher was the first to report his lab had partially confirmed Knockham’s data. A grad student had supposedly checked his own records, found he carried the sequence for telekinesis, and stepped forward to be a test case. When someone raised ethical objections, the young man had threatened to hire someone to bury him under dirt if his colleagues were going to waste the opportunity. An hour later the lab had sequenced his DNA, isolated both new and old zoots from initial skin samples, borrowed a suitable pressure chamber across campus, taken more skin samples showing only old zoots survived, and conducted a telekinesis demonstration in front of cameras and witnesses. Skeptics were still trying to debunk the demonstration, but the lead scientist had good credentials and had verified his own identity on camera and by web signature. Meanwhile, several non-scientist were posting their own evidence of diseases mitigated or abilities triggered through various pressurizing experiments. Some radio enthusiasts were trying to detect transmissions from the zoots, but James couldn’t find anyone respectable posting on that topic. Mostly he found a lot of confused people posting questions that were answered accurately or not by people who thought they understood genetics. James kept careful track of his preferred sources, but most of them had no means to replicate such results quickly, and researchers in many countries were keeping diplomatically quiet.

Eventually, James realized he was falling asleep while reading. A glance to the corner of his screen told him it was past ten. He stood up from his desk and stretched, pops along his spine proved he’d been still for too long. One side of his neck cracked and he tried to elicit the same reaction from the other. Failing that, he stretched to each side again, in reverse order, and paced out into a silent hall to look for coffee.

There wasn’t any brewing in the break room at the end of his floor. So he started microwaving some water and stared silently out the window. It was a view he never looked at, not liking to linger in what was often a busy space. This was later than he usually stayed, and the quad below was dark, with only a few people walking by. One couple stopped across the way, facing each other, and James was surprised to identify Lisa kissing a short Thai man. He was even more surprised when that man stepped back and turned out to be Alak. James supposed he should be happy for them, but instead he felt a bit queasy. It must be the smell of old coffee in the break room.

As Alak walked away, James realized Lisa was heading up the steps of his building, probably to his lab or Robert’s, both on this floor. He spun away from the window, hit the stop button on the microwave, and raced back down the hall. He hunched quickly at his desk and brought forward the window with the science discussion groups he’d been monitoring. After a couple minutes his heart stopped racing, and he decided Lisa was checking in with her brother after her date. He felt a little silly remembering the cup of water he’d left in the microwave.

There was a knock on the lab door. Lisa blew in before James could speak, and he decided it was even sillier to think she’d be meeting her brother here after a date.

“Good that you’re awake. We need you to test a genotype and check for old and new zoots.”

“We?”

“I’ll explain as we go.”
“I’m not really set up to test for parasites.”
“There’s DNA is on the web. Can’t you just scrape some skin and run it through your machine?”
“It’s not that simple.”
“Dr. Yu said you could do it.”
“Dr. Yu is a fine physician, but he is neither a geneticist nor a parasitologist.”
“Oh come on, James, as a favor to me?”
James paused wondering why he let Lisa speak to him this way and if he really seemed so easy to manipulate, but he gathered the materials he might need and followed.

In the car, Lisa did not explain. She said, “I’ll tell you when we get there.”
James sat on his hands. He was uncomfortably aware of Lisa’s nearness in the dark car, and he kept picturing her kissing Alak.

“There” turned out to be Dr. Yu’s house in Chinatown. James followed Lisa up the front steps with some misgivings. He’d never actually been inside Yu’s home. He didn’t want to be involved with anything in Chinatown, especially not now. But Yu opened the heavy front door himself and led them through the deserted entry to what he clearly used as an exam room.

Lying on the table, bald and motionless, was Sarah.
“What happened?” James asked aloud, as images of Sarah attacked by a mob came back to him.
“We sent someone to question Dr. Knockham for you, and she was there, walking out of his building, wearing his overcoat and hat.”
“When?”
“This morning, before the news broadcast. By the time our man realized it wasn’t Knockham and who it was, he had no choice but to drug her and bring her back.”
“No choice? Why?” James turned to Lisa. “You said you had a friend who could ask Knockham some questions.”
Lisa let out her breath in a huff. “She’s a teek. She might have recognized him, and who knows who she’s working for. We had a private plane ready in case the scientist wanted to defect.”
So Lisa was part of whatever was going on in Chinatown. He should never have told her about Knockham, but instead of stopping the broadcast, it had led to this. Whatever had happened here, James felt viscerally responsible, as if he was part of a mob that had trapped Sarah.
James stepped closer to the exam table where she lay unconscious. Her face and bald scalp looked pink and swollen. The scar from her bullet wound stood out above one ear, but showed no recent damage. A white patient gown covered her shoulders, but her arms lay bare above a white sheet. They were hairless, and by the wrists and hands there was swelling and some rash.
“What did you do to her?”
Dr. Yu stepped forward. “By the time the plane brought her to us, we had, of course, heard and studied Dr. Knockham’s information. I gave her another sedative, but knowing that could not be a permanent solution, and hoping to make the best of an unfortunate situation, we started testing something new. We shaved and then used a chemical depilatory to remove all her hair. We want you to test if this has removed all the new and old zoots. If not, we can try removing the top layer of skin.”
“We know nothing about the immune or disease implications—“
“How better to learn?”
“Who authorized this?”
“All you need to do is test to see if we’ve removed the symbiotes. Also, if you don’t already have genomic information on this person, as Lisa believes, I’m sure you’ll want to confirm that she matches the expected types.”
“What you’re asking me to do is illegal.”
“Would it absolve you to be ordered to do it?”
“What is your thing for her?” Lisa cut in; Yu glared at her.
“My reaction would be the same regardless of who lay on the table.” But James noticed his hands
were shaking and he carefully pressed each thumb to each finger to steady his hands and his thoughts.

“Your objections will be noted,” Yu continued. “If you wish to check with your government contact, then do so. Otherwise, please take your samples and get the job done.”

James knew what Alak would say, given what he’d just seen in front of his building, but he called anyway, to make it official. He wasn’t sure who Alak, Lisa, and Yu were working for. The Johnsons, or certain others, might be interested to find out, but solving that puzzle wouldn’t help Sarah.

“All right,” he said as he hung up the phone. Let them think he’d cooperate just on Alak’s orders. “If I’m going to be involved in this, I want to do my own medical examination to make sure the patient is stable.”

Dr. Yu nodded and gestured toward a prep tray by the table. James began by checking Sarah’s temperature and pulse. Her temp was a little high, possibly just a reaction to surface trauma caused by the depilatory. Lisa and Dr. Yu stepped outside the open door as James uncovered Sarah and confirmed that the topical reaction was no worse on other parts of her body. He carefully took skin samples from several areas and a small blood sample from her arm.

Replacing the sheet, as gently as he could, James lifted Sarah’s hand, touching the rash along her wrist for a moment. On impulse, he bent and kissed her forehead.

The door knocked back with a thump, unnecessary since it had been open the whole time.

“I was wondering about you,” Lisa said with an audible sneer. “You like them dead, or just helpless?”

“She’s my daughter,” James said, then paced out of the room, surprised by the lump in his throat and the pounding in his chest. Lisa caught up with him in the entryway. Yu appeared in a nearby doorway of what must be his office.

“How?”

“Not as you think, but it’s none of your business. I’ll run your tests and let you know in a few hours.”

“By four, if you can, so I won’t have to sedate her again,” Yu said.

James stepped outside and flagged a cab from the busy street. He rode it back to the university. When it left, he walked past his building to the nearest noisy nightspot. It was a retro, neon lit club called The Mystic Temple. At this hour the students wandering in seemed sedate, their clothes unrumpled, their night just beginning. The music that reached the sidewalk wasn’t even deafening yet.

James found another cab. He had it drop him by a house near the Johnsons’. Then he hiked around to the path that led behind their estate. Step by step, he picked his way through the dark until he could see what he thought was Emma’s window. There was a light on. Hopefully that meant the teenager was awake and alone. He tried to focus tight telepathy at her through the closed window.

“Emma, can you hear me? This is James Morton, from the university.”

Her face appeared in the window, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, but I need to get a message to Reggie, very secretly. I heard you had a PAD now. Can you contact him?”

“What’s this about?”

“It’s about Sarah, but if I tell you, you must promise to only tell Reggie. If anyone else finds out, or if you try to do something on your own, you might endanger her life and ours.”

“Is this for real?”

“All too real. Do you want to help?”

“Of course.”

“Then tell Reggie that Sarah is a prisoner in Dr. Yu’s home. She’s currently sedated, but they’ve removed all her hair to see if that will stop her telekinesis. I don’t think this is government sponsored. I might be able to get her out of there, but they’d need a way to remove her from Thailand.”

“Don’t you think my parents could help?”
“Emma, I’m not sure where everyone stands in this. I came to you because you were Sarah’s friend, but I don’t want to bring trouble to your family. Please tell me you’ll call Reggie and then forget the whole thing.”

“Nobody needs to bring trouble, but I’ll call.”

“And then stay out of it?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Chapter 29
July 28, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand

Pain, cold pointy pain, was everywhere. Sarah felt static like on a TV screen was pricking her from all angles. When she rubbed against the sides of the TV screen it scraped her skin away. She tried to pull a cocoon around herself, but it wouldn’t come. She couldn’t open her eyes or move her body. This must be a dream, and she should wake up, but she couldn’t wake up. Someone took her hand, held it. Warmth flowed through. Fingers touching the back of her hand and wrist sent stabs like the pins and needles when an arm falls asleep. But it was okay with the warm hand holding her own. Someone kissed her forehead, like the kiss of a thistle. She felt blood flow to the surface, the flood of neediness in a sick child kissed that way. There was the sound of a door thumping, so much more rational that anything she was feeling. A voice she almost recognized said, “I was wondering about you. You like them dead or just helpless?” It was Lisa. Lisa was that voice.

“She’s my daughter.” That was James. James was her father.

Chapter 30
July 29, 2025 – PAD Island

Reggie knocked and pushed open the door of Phil’s office, then slouched against the doorframe, arms crossed. Phil’s broad oak desk was layered with sketches and printouts. Cass and Knockham flipped through a pile at one end, huddled in their own discussion. The crisp morning light off the beach hit much too hard on eyes that had been open all night.

Phil looked up with a tired smile, “Couldn’t sleep or came to take over?”

“I need to rescue a prisoner of war. Thought I should check in first.”

Dr. Knockham and Cass faced him with a start, but Phil just rubbed his temples and leaned his chin on his left palm.

“Sarah?”

“Of course.”

“And you need?”

“A posse of teeks and political pull would be nice, but I’d settle for a get away plane and someplace safe to land.”

“Is this because she helped me?” Knockham asked. “Who has her?”

“In Thailand again, unclear who. I was thinking of pulling her out of a window and running. Did I mention they removed all her hair in an effort to stop her teek?”

“Did it work?” the scientist asked, then looked down as everyone carefully looked elsewhere. “She certainly deserves our help.”

“I can bargain for a plane,” Phil said, “You want it without press?”

“If she wants to return to Ireland, we seem to owe her.” Cass said gruffly with a glance at Dr. Knockham. “Tell me all you know.”
It was evening again as Reggie rode in a cab through the clamoring streets of Bangkok. The setting sun reminded him of the sleep he’d failed to get on the plane. The plane and pilots they’d negotiated in exchange for giving E.U. News exclusive access to PAD island. Conveniently, Phil had previously decided their coverage was the best political move he could hope for. Reggie also had a PAD videophone, a Swiss army knife, and a puzzle ring on his person. In the cab with him were Howard, who refused to be left behind, and James, who they’d just picked up from the university. They had the driver let them out at a busy intersection in Chinatown, then gave him decent money to wait.

James went first, hoping to make a nonchalant visit to check on Sarah. Reggie watched him tromp up the stone stairs of an ornate Chinese facade building. Once he was in, Reggie walked down the street and casually ducked into the unfenced side yard. It wasn’t full dark yet, and Reggie felt conspicuous as he pulled a recycling bin under a rear side window and peeked in. He wanted to feel like part of a gang, but kept getting distracted by his racing heart and trembling hands.

The light inside was on, helpful for taking pictures. Dr. Yu and Dr. Morton stood beside a padded table. Sarah lay on the table, bald, gagged, and wearing what appeared to be a straitjacket. Reggie risked taking a high-resolution still with the PAD videophone then ducked out of sight. He dialed the number Phil had given him.

“You there? I’m sending an image,” Reggie whispered.

“Go ahead,” Phil answered.

As he transmitted, Reggie heard voices. He hadn’t heard Howard ring, but he heard Dr. Yu at the front saying, “Can I help you?”

“Dr. Yu, perhaps you don’t remember me. I’m Howard, Mei Mei Chen’s nephew. She’s not handling, you know, recent news so well. And I was wondering if you could give her something?”

Then James had the window unlocked and open. There was a radio news station playing inside, and Reggie could no longer decipher the front door conversation.

“It’s an old screen, doesn’t pop out,” James said.

Reggie hooked the PAD onto his pocket and pulled out the pocketknife, stabbing in firmly. The knife was sharp, but the window screen turned out to be a sturdy metal weave that only cut in fits and starts.

James said something to Sarah then lifted her gently off the table. She let out a very small whine. Reggie looked up in time to see her cringe as James removed a taped gag from her mouth. Then James stood by the window, holding Sarah in his arms, while Reggie, who wanted to slash heroically through petty obstacles, instead sawed with all his strength just to finish one downward cut. He imagined background music speeding up as he tried to force his knife across the bottom of the screen to continue the opening.

There was a loud thump, and Dr. Yu rushed into the room, followed closely by a muscular young man, not Howard.

“Stop,” Yu said, as he pulled a gun from a desk by the door.

Reggie stopped cutting but pulled the new PAD from his side.

“Smile Dr. Yu, you’re on PAD video. And if you don’t let her go, we will broadcast.”

Reggie had been transmitting continuous audio. Now he clicked for another burst of high-res without checking his viewscreen for alignment.

“Care to tell the world why you’re torturing this woman and why you just shot a man?” Reggie asked smoothly.

“We didn’t shoot him,” the burly man said, “Just knocked him out. And he—”

“Shut up,” whispered Yu.

Reggie tried to continue cutting the screen while holding the PAD in full view.

“Stop cutting,” said Yu, pointing the gun toward the window.

Reggie lowered the knife and heard his own voice waver as he said, “Would you as a telepath, Dr. Yu, like people to shave and scorch you to block your ability?”
Sarah, still in James arms right beside the window whispered, “Reggie,” and as he looked to her she hissed, “Duck!”

He did and the window screen blasted out above him, taking with it parts of the wooden frame. Popping back up Reggie saw Yu scrambling for his gun, now lying across the floor, the muscle man scrambling for James, and James passing Sarah through the suddenly cleared window.

Reggie shoved both knife and PAD into his pocket and pulled Sarah through the window as quickly as he could. The straitjacket protected her top half. But Reggie saw the wire mesh scratch her bare legs as he fought for balance atop the plastic bin. He thought he saw James pushed to the floor in the moment before he and Sarah landed clumsily on the ground.

“No,” came Dr. Yu’s voice from the far side of the room above. Reggie was frustrated by not being able to see, but he should still be sending any audio he could hear. “I don’t know the value of the boy in the entryway, but I’m guessing that if we hold Dr. Morton, they’ll choose to keep events private.”

Reggie could see the man restraining James now and guessed Yu would soon be at the window with the gun. He hurried down the side yard calling, “If you let us all go peacefully, we have no need to increase fear.”

“You’ve taken what you came for. Now leave.”

“Go on,” James said, “I’ll see to Howard.”

“But—”

“Don’t waste this chance.”

Reggie was around the corner of the side yard before he knew he’d agreed. Sarah squirmed in his arms and he realized how hastily he’d gathered her. He noticed that beneath the straitjacket was a hospital gown, and beneath that was absolutely nothing. The way he carried her, the outfit might raise eyebrows even in Bangkok.

“Put me down.”

Coming to the same conclusion himself, Reggie put Sarah down and started unfastening the straitjacket.

“Thanks. Oh, Reggie, there’s so much I need to thank you for and talk with you about, but it’s going to have to wait. Now what?” Sarah asked.

“There’s a cab waiting, and then a plane.”

Sarah looked at him like he was a puppy bringing her slippers in the middle of the day. “Reggie, I love you. But what about James and Howard?”

There was the distant sound of yelling from the PAD in Reggie’s pocket. He pulled it up and both Sarah and Reggie listened as Phil said, “Do you want me to transmit? Should I call the Thai authorities?”

“Wait,” said Reggie. He’d finished untying the straitjacket, and Sarah was now draping it around her waist, making it look more like a normal jacket, and covering the opening in the back of her gown. “Let’s get to the cab and think.”

Reggie took Sarah’s hand, holding the PAD in his other. Sarah looked bad, like she’d escaped a fire with half her skin and none of her hair. She didn’t look like she should be able to walk around, but her grip on his hand was not weak, and she was setting a brisk pace as they rounded the corner to meet their cab. It wasn’t there.

“Some rescue,” said Reggie. “The cab didn’t even wait.”

“We don’t need a cab; we need to get Howard and James out of that building. What good is it to rescue me if we gave them another teek and an additional hostage?”

Reggie didn’t know what to say to that. “It doesn’t look like their experiment worked, anyway,” he offered. Sarah threw her hands to her head in exasperation, and he added, “I just mean them having another teek won’t matter.”

“It did work. I only have the slightest bit of it back.” Sarah’s voice was so measured, Reggie almost missed the pain behind the words.

“You blasted a window screen and a gun.”

“Because I couldn’t cut the screen and jam the gun.” Sarah ran her hands over her bare scalp like
fingers through invisible hair. From the set of her jaw, it must have hurt like passing her hands through fire. “A few hours ago I couldn’t do anything. Now I have force but no control, so I was waiting. Why did you risk anyone for me? They’ll try again on Howard, he might not recover completely, and it hurts like hell. And who knows what they’ll do to,” she paused and got quieter, “James.”

Reggie was puzzled by the softening of her voice, but at least it was a tone he knew, not the steely forced calm that came before. He wanted to hold her, but that obviously wasn’t an option. “Do they know? Maybe they won’t try on Howard. You could blast Yu’s house apart bit by bit until they surrendered.”

“They could hurt James or Howard in retaliation, we’d draw a crowd, and I might hurt someone through lack of control.”

He nodded and swallowed, deciding he wasn’t very good at playing the hero, “What do you suggest?”

“We could call the Johnsons.”

“Just to confirm that we’re trouble makers?”

“Isn’t this what diplomats are for?”

Reggie stared at her a moment, then spoke into the phone, “Phil, I’m going to switch lines so Sarah can make a call. Just hold on to our transmission and hope we don’t need to use it.”

Chapter 31
July 29, 2025 – Bangkok, Thailand

James waited at Dr. Yu’s dining room table. He drummed his fingers like slow drips of water along the over varnished cherry, watching the fingerprints he left behind, repeating his drumming on just the same spots. Howard, a bit bandaged and bruised, sat beside him, completely still. The guy who had beat him up stood in the doorway with his arms crossed. A radio in the kitchen still rattled off the news, and there was a stench of old tea. Dr. Yu could just barely be heard above the radio. Since agreeing to meet with the Johnsons, he’d been making one call after another, all of them in Chinese. Lisa was presumably still with him in the office.

“She doesn’t even speak Mandarin,” Howard said.

“No talking,” said the thug.

“How stupid,” Howard thought at James. “He knows we can talk this way. I think he’s watched too many movies.”

“Maybe he’s listening elsewhere.”

“Trust me, the part in Mandarin is even duller than the radio.”

“I don’t think the radio’s dull.”

“This afternoon, China offered expedited citizenship to all telepaths of Chinese descent,” the radio announcer said, as if to confirm the point. “Similar legislation has been introduced in the U.S., but —”

The doorbell rang. Lisa could be heard greeting Samuel Johnson. Yu’s conversation ended, and the tough guy swung into the kitchen to turn off the news. Soon Samuel, Yu, and Lisa had joined James and Howard at the table.

Samuel looked at Howard’s bandages, then spoke to James, “I trust you’ve both been treated well?”

James nodded. Howard ignored the question, eyes fixed forward like a statue.

Samuel turned to Yu, “And you must realize by now that PAD and the powers of the day are involved in this situation?”

“What happened with Sarah was not planned,” Yu said calmly.

“Your would-be assassin just couldn’t resist a second chance at her?” Howard said, scowling at the man in the doorway.

Samuel showed no reaction but looked toward Yu, who didn’t respond.
James pressed both hands against his legs to keep still. So that’s who shot Sarah on her way back from Chiang Mai. No wonder he’d feared being recognized.

“You did warn her!” Lisa yelled. James startled at the sudden noise, then held very still.

“She rescued us, and you tried to kill her.” Howard’s stillness broke as he leaned forward, his bruised hands forming fists on the elegant table.

“She could destroy our telepathy.”

“She destroyed some new zoots on accident. You tried to kill her. You kidnapped and tortured her, on purpose!”

The cousins were leaning toward each other now across the table. James vaguely remembered telling Lisa about Sarah’s Chiang Mai plans. Was he responsible for Sarah being shot? Had Lisa been using him for information? Before or while seeing Alak? And he’d felt sorry for her? As his stomach began to twist, he felt his pulse pounding behind his eyes, but he swallowed hard and kept the nausea and panic back. He kept his hands balled together beneath the table.

“They captured my father!” Lisa scowled.

“Oh,” Howard paused, hands releasing from fists, face falling, then countered, “That’s still no excuse.”

“What?” James asked, but the argument had switched to tight telepathy, and he was ignored. He’d thought Lisa and Robert’s father was dead, but hadn’t he died in China? Whatever group the Chinatown teeps were involved with must also have Mr. Chen. Had the rest of the family been recruited from the states or only once they reached Bangkok’s Chinatown?

The potential assassin stepped back toward the doorway, and James realized he’d moved in as Howard and Lisa argued. Yu and Samuel glanced at each other then both looked away.

James felt his heels tap: left, right, right, left. The rest of his body was already so controlled and rigid, he let the heels silently continue: right, left, left, right. It was all beginning to make sense.

Samuel folded his hands on the table and announced, “There are many emotional issues here, but I don’t want them to distract from our goal. Dr. Yu, will you allow Howard and James to leave if PAD agrees to destroy the evidence of what happened here tonight?”

“Many people would agree with our actions,” Yu said.

“You want the video aired?”

“No, but we want the patent rights for sequence two as well.”

Samuel looked baffled, “What?”

James said, “Who’s we?”

“In my name, for now.”

“No. Those rights will be my parting gift to the Thai government. Or don’t you care about Thailand anymore?”

“You want to leave the country?” Samuel asked calmly, turning to face James.

“Yes.”

“And these rights revert to Thailand how?”

“They already oversee most of the rights by contract. But all my agreements with the government specify I’m free to leave so long as I let Thailand keep the patents.”

“You can’t leave,” Yu said.

“I’m leaving. So’s Howard.” James heard his own confidence, his feet now still. “The people who have evidence against you will have no reason to use it once we’re safe.”

“Whose side are you on?” Lisa asked, suddenly back from her silent argument and focusing on James.

“The side of science, but you don’t know how many sides there are.” James didn’t look at Lisa as he rose from his chair. “Come on Howard, Samuel. We’re going.”

“I can’t let you do that,” Yu said.

James sent directly to Yu, “You will, because if this is made public, both China and Thailand will realize you’re working with an organization of teeps powerful enough that you knew about Knockham and sent a plane to England to contact him. And I’ll bet you did it without either country’s help or knowledge.”
Yu was silent, both mind and mouth, as James and the others walked out of his house. Mentally, James added a dot to this day on his calendar. Then he climbed into the car where Ida and Emma were waiting.

Samuel made a couple of quick phone calls from the car, and the five of them were able to drive directly onto tarmac at the Bangkok airport. Sarah and Reggie stood waiting by a plane, holding hands like they were glued to each other. “You did it!” Sarah said to Samuel as they emerged from the car. “I hope I played a part, but I’d have to give most of the credit to James.” “Really?” said Sarah, turning to James with a broadening smile.

James shrugged, “I don’t suppose one of you could place a call to Leonard Knockham for me?” “I can try,” Reggie said, eyebrows only slightly raised. “Give him my name, I think he’ll take it.” A few moments later Reggie handed James his PAD.

“Are you there, James? This is Lenny.” “Congratulations, you seem to have changed the world,” James replied. “I had some help.” “Could you use more?” “Had you figured it out?” “Not enough, but I may have something new for you.” “There might be questions, security issues.” “I’m ready to lose the new zoots and be questioned.” “Really?” “I have several lines of research to pursue.” “Hmm, perhaps I can guess. If you want to go with Sarah and Reggie, I’ll make arrangements.”

As he hung up the phone, Howard was saying, “Do you think it’s safe to travel with you?” Sarah seemed to blush at the joke, but it was hard to tell beneath her rash. “I think you’d best take your chances,” Samuel said. “As a teek, you might be happier away from here.” “Do you see that sort of reaction forming?” Reggie asked, “Against those with both heritages?” “Too early to tell. War might have united the outcasts, but if peace prevails, well, I don’t know if humanity’s ready for this, and Howard’s certainly in an awkward position here.” “It couldn’t have stayed secret much longer,” James said. “Youth. Whether reckless or brave, there’s no standing in its way.” The older man smiled at James, as if he and the others were all kids. “Then let me go with them,” Emma pleaded.

Samuel glared icily, but Ida put an arm around her daughter and said, “Be nice to your father, and he might not ground you for keeping secrets last night.” Emma handed Sarah an overnight bag, moved as if to hug her, then pulled back. “I brought some clothes and things for you. Are you going to be all right?” Sarah hugged the girl, gently, and said, “It’s not so bad, just like scrapes from falling off a bike.” Emma kept looking at Sarah, head cocked like a bird. Sarah used her hands to lift a string of beads from around the girl’s neck, and held them at arm’s length in her palm. Then without moving she made them jump up about a foot and fall back down. Emma had tears in her eyes as Sarah replaced the beads around her neck in the normal way. “I thought you might recover quickly,” James said. “The samples I ran this morning contained a surprising number of old zoots. Perhaps that will discourage such attempts in the future.” “And new zoots?” Sarah asked. “Absolutely none. But given their susceptibility to pressure and their limited biological niche, they may be less resilient.”
Mrs. Johnson wrinkled her nose and shook her head, “I’m still not used to the idea of zoots. But however it works, I’m glad to know you’re recovering, Sarah. And I’m sorry if we seemed a bit harsh in asking you to leave our home.”

“You’ve all done more for me than I could ask. I’m hoping to stay well away from trouble now, and maybe once things have calmed down, you could let Emma come visit.”

Ida smiled but kept a protective arm around her daughter. They said their goodbyes, and all but the Johnsons boarded the plane.

Thailand was well out of sight by the time they reached altitude and the noise of engines faded enough to allow conversation. Reggie and Sarah were in the front row, on the right hand side of the aisle and were the only ones to break the silence. They had been huddled together talking in low voices throughout take off. Now Reggie sat up straighter, smiling, his forehead and eyebrows becoming visible over the seat. Howard was seated directly behind the couple, clearly visible from James’ place, across the aisle and back a row. As Reggie filled Sarah in on recent events at PAD, James stared and listened. He missed about every fourth word, but tried to fit what he heard with what he’d learned at Yu’s and guessed from conversations with Alak.

“There’s some…organization behind Knockham, players…finance and politics.”

“I sort of guessed,” Sarah said, her higher voice carrying. “The Druids handled the travel papers for me and Dr. Knockham, but then I had to take his place, like he was sneaking away from someone.”

“Cass still…they owe you. She promised to get us all E.U. passports, and the E.U.’s…privacy and free travel, probably a good place to be right now.”

“Well, I’d like some time off. And you’ll probably be busy, working with PAD, building a brave new world. But if you asked very nicely, I might be willing to recuperate at PAD Island, instead.”

There was a stretch of silence, or rather the steady roar from the plane. James tried to read something from the top of Reggie’s face, but all he saw was stillness.

“Is that what you want?” Reggie asked, at once louder, so that James could hear easily, and more tender, so James wished he wasn’t listening. He tried to focus on clouds outside his window.

“I was on my way back to you when, well, you know,” Sarah squeaked, also oblivious to their audience.

“Funny, I was thinking I might ditch PAD, take a long vacation, wander by Eurorail, maybe make it a honeymoon.”

James couldn’t help glancing at the couple. He could see Sarah’s profile, frozen, staring intently at the seat in front of her. He noticed Howard watching, became mindful of his own gaze, and looked away.

“Are you saying…? What about your work? Did the world change that much?” Sarah asked

There was a scuffling sound and a tearing, then a click as Reggie unfastened his seat belt, and went down on one knee in a narrow wedge visible between their seats. He pulled out a ring from what looked like a tiny paper pouch and said, “Sarah, I am fully determined to stay with you through whatever life you choose to live. Now, will you marry me?”

Chapter 32
July 30 – August 20, 2025 – County Kerry, Ireland

Sarah stepped out of the plane first. The metal staircase the airport provided echoed slightly with her steps. The rail felt cool under her palm, though the sun was bright. Even here on the tarmac, the air wafted wet and green. She filled herself with that air, wanting to be part of this place again.

Standing fifteen feet from the plane, positioned almost exactly as the Johnsons had been in Thailand, was a small welcoming committee. There were two men Sarah didn’t know and barely noticed. But Aliana was there in a snug golden blouse and a long silk skirt that whipped about her calves in the airport wind. Sarah wanted to scamper down and hug her, but immediately reconsidered, both for Aliana’s frame of mind and for her own sore skin.
Nonetheless, Sarah’s eyes were on her friend as her foot jarred against solid ground and hope bubbled through her center. Aliana stepped forward and gently took Sarah’s hands, guiding her a few steps away from the others.

“Are you all right?”

“I will be soon. Why are you here? Who are they?” Sarah asked, even as Reggie was shaking hands with the two men and making introductions.

“They’re useful people, sent to help the heroes through customs. I was sent on behalf of the household to invite you all to stay with us.”

“But, they know? They want us all?”

Aliana squeezed Sarah’s hands a little too tightly and the skin on the back of each pricked like a splinter. Sarah had the urge to reach out telekinetically, to touch in a form that wouldn’t hurt, but she knew her control hadn’t returned enough for that. Funny, to finally live in a world that knew about teeks and start out barely being one.

“I hurt you.”

“Don’t let go.”

“We know what PAD did, with the Druids, but Doug barely told me what happened to you. I assume you have something to tell?”

“You wouldn’t believe all I have to tell.”

“I’m used to that. Tell me the biggest thing first.”

“I’m not sure it’s biggest, and I’m not sure you’ll like it.”

“You doubt me? After everything?” Aliana smiled and shrugged her eyebrows such that Sarah just had to hug her. Aliana hugged back so gently that Sarah only felt the warmth of her arms through the cloth above her skin.

“So?” Aliana prompted.

“Reggie and I are getting married.”

“I knew it. You two are such throw-backs. Have the wedding by the sea, the whole household will go nuts. They all wanted to come collect you from the airport, but Doug wouldn’t let the rest.”

“Why? I wasn’t that well liked.”

“People were always intrigued by you. Besides, our whole world just changed, and somehow you’re tied up in it. They know you came back with two new zoot teeps, and Reggie who helped the Druids and planners change the world. You’re like the circus coming to town.”

“I’ll be the bald clown.”

“You just don’t want to share the center ring. But come, and we’ll nurse you back to health. Besides, somehow I think when the story is told, you’ll be stealing the spotlight as usual.”

“I so don’t want it. But I’d like to be with you. I’ll ask the others”

Sarah sat in bed the next morning on satin sheets someone had provided to soothe her delicate skin. She ran her fingers along Reggie’s empty pillow, enjoying the cool smoothness and noting the infinitesimal snags on her ragged hands. She wanted some time alone with Reggie. He’d stayed up late last night telling stories from the previous days while Sarah begged off to sleep. This morning he’d sprung out of bed and told her to wait while he brought breakfast.

Somehow, she and Reggie had been given a large room with excellent light, all to themselves. There was a huge mirror above the dresser, and Sarah could see that her face was no longer red and puffy. Her bald head looked pathetic though. She reached up to pat where new hairs grew more like divots than bumps, barely discernable beneath the skin. In a few days they’d probably have that miserable prickly feeling that on her legs made her run off and shave them before she could stand to wear socks. She couldn’t resist poking at the rest of her skin, finding the few remaining sore spots, searching for little hair follicles on her calves where they were most visible.

She tried to teek open a dresser drawer, and couldn’t. But she was able to float a borrowed robe from a chair across the room into her hands. It was more than she could manage yesterday. Sarah pulled the robe on smoothly, enjoying how little pain it caused her.

Soon Reggie came through the door, gracefully balancing a breakfast tray on one hand. The scent of
baked tomato and sausage filled the room. She could see that Reggie had taken time to shave, rather ironic, and dress in yesterday’s clothes, which had somehow been washed and ironed. In the light from the window he looked like a radiant young god. Sarah tried not to catch her own reflection in the mirror again.

“I bring you greasy Irish food, but at least it smells good.” Reggie set the tray next to her on the bed, then perched himself carefully on the other side. “Jam on your toast, my dear?”

“I love you,” Sarah said, feeling tears rise up.

“I should hope so,” Reggie answered, “Yesterday you agreed to marry me, remember?” He began to spread jam on toast.

There was a knock at the door.

“Who’s there?” Sarah called out.

“It’s me, Oliver. Can I come in?”

Sarah glanced at her robe and at Reggie, then said, “Sure.”

Oliver trotted in with a nod to Reggie and pulled the one chair in the room over next to Sarah.

“I didn’t much get to talk to you last night. But Reggie told most of the story, and everyone’s on about this wedding. They’re all guest lists and china patterns, but I’m not into any of that.”

“What then?”

“Well, I mean, this is going to be one of the first weddings, at least of our kind, since the world knew about us. So, the way I see it, the big question is, are we going to MOVE things?”

Sarah laughed. “What, you want to fly the ring down the aisle, perhaps with a small ring bearer holding it?”

“You could have dancing flower petals, or ice sculptures that are really liquid and can move. We could even form the tide into a bower for you to stand beneath.”

“The Druid could simply float away as he performed the ceremony,” Reggie said.

“Doug’s doing the ceremony?” Sarah asked.

“He offered, after James told everyone my genetic—”

“What? I’ll never go to bed early again. What did he say?”

“Well, he says I’m a spotter, and if I get rid of the new zoots, I’ll probably be a better one. I also have variants ‘A’ and ‘3,’ which evidently means, should we have children, that they’ll have a fifty percent chance of being either animal people or teeks. You want to hear the odds of them being spotters?”

“They’re talking about our future children?” Sarah asked.

“Welcome to Eire,” said Oliver.

There was another knock at the door.

“Come in.”

Aliana swooped in, “Still in bed? I brought you tea.”

“They’ve been filling me in on my future children, based on my father’s genetic analysis.”

Aliana set the tea cup on the tray beside the untouched juice. “Go ahead and eat. Are you saying James is your father? That would explain the teek thing.”

“What?”

There was another knock at the door.

“Come in,” Sarah said, a little louder than the last times. “You might as well leave the door open for the rest of the household.”

Howard leaned against the half open door, still holding the handle. The angles looked precarious enough that Sarah wondered if he was using telekinesis on the door. “I could wait ‘til later if you’re busy.” He held a bouquet of flowers in one hand.

“Actually, I wanted you to try something.”

Howard visibly bit back a coy remark, and said, “At your service.”

“From what James said a ways back and what we know about zoots now, I thought maybe I’d be able to hear you if you said something telepathically.”

Howard shook his head and looked downward rather gravely, “I’ve been trying since yesterday, but James said there weren’t any new zoots on you when he checked.” Howard looked way more
disappointed than she felt.
“Is he likely to drop by?” Sarah asked.
“As you wish,” Howard smiled, and James walked through the door.
“What’s all this?” James asked. “Are you all right?”
“Seems you’d know better than I. I hear you’ve projected the genetics of your potential grandchildren.”
“How did you know?”
“Everyone told me.”
“No, that I was your father,” James said softly.
“Oh,” Sarah suddenly calmed down from near mania and realized how crowded the bedroom was.
“I guess I heard you tell Lisa. Should I not have said?”
“No, I was just not saying until I spoke to you.” James leaned against the dresser, hands clenching and unclenching along the top edge.
“But you talked about my genetics?”
“Just your kids. Reggie could deduce almost all of it from knowing about himself and that you’re a teek. Did they tell you about mine?”
Sarah shook her head. James’ hands were still now, but his face seemed a little pink. Was he blushing?
“Well, according to Dr. Knockham’s information, I should be a teek too, without the new zoots. Since I don’t have both at the same time the way Howard does, it’s possible there’s another sequence involved. I’ve located one possibility. But not having proper research facilities, and well, for reasons of inter-community trust and security, I’ve decided to rid myself of new zoots, at least temporarily. So, I’ll know tonight, one way or the other.”
“Tonight? It’s not a full moon yet,” Sarah said.
“They’re going to do a special ceremony,” Reggie mumbled, passing her more toast, “They’ve asked if I want to participate too. I was going to discuss it with you, all of it.”
“Do you guys know what’s involved?” Sarah glanced at Oliver, wondering if there were taboos on what could be said, but he was busy stealing a piece of her toast. “About the touch sensitivity and the silent treatment and all that?”
“It was explained,” James said, “But if Howard and I are going to work with these people, letting them read our minds is the easiest way for them to trust us. That part won’t work on Reggie though. Learned resistance to telepathy happens at a cognitive processing level. It doesn’t change with the symbiotes.”
“And I didn’t say I’m doing this, at least not tonight,” Howard said, still propped in the doorway at a curious angle, looking more like he was leaving than standing still. The flowers he’d been holding now lay on the dresser, and Sarah guessed he must have teeked them, because he’d stayed pretty well glued to the door.
Sarah felt as if she was drowning beneath waves of data and change. Where she’d once been separated from the world by secrets she kept, she was now distanced by a rapid flow of information. And the memory of her own silent time in this house tore like an arrow in her side. She didn’t want Reggie opening up to touch when she was so limited, and she didn’t want to be part of any of it here.
“Would it be okay if we continued this later?” Sarah asked.
There were many looks of concern, but the crowd rapidly cleared. When only Reggie remained he asked, “Should I go as well?”
“No, please don’t.” They sat silently together eating breakfast, slightly cold.
“Reggie, I don’t want to be here for their ceremony tonight or while they’re teaching James to guard his thoughts. And if you’re not too eager to lose the new zoots, I’d really rather you waited.”
Reggie leaned toward her eagerly, despite her appearance and limitations. He kissed her tenderly without laying a hand anywhere else on her body. “We could go on a practice honeymoon, maybe scout for a place to stay.”
“I love your practical side,” she said.
As Reggie gripped the metal safety rails and lowered himself upside down to kiss the Blarney stone, Sarah felt her back tighten, teek ready, to catch him if he started to fall. Not that anyone could fall here; it was all made so convenient and safe for tourists. But part of her wondered if there mightn’t have been teeks instead of safety rails at some time in the past.

Full of luck now, Reggie moseyed over to where Sarah stood. “Should we stay longer, or go elsewhere?”

“Let’s find some other old stones. Everyone here looks at me with the same pitying sweetness. They think I’m a cancer patient or something.”

“I like your hair. It feels fuzzy.”

As Reggie ran a cool hand over her prickly stubble of hair, it sent shivers down Sarah’s spine. A week after Broadcast Day, Sarah’s telekinesis and sense of touch were back to normal, or back to abnormal, the way they had been before. But the slight fuzz of hair growing in all over her body bothered Sarah on many levels.

“Let’s find someplace to stay for the night and check our messages.”

“For someone who didn’t want me making calls or checking email more than once a day on this ‘practice honeymoon,’ you’re awfully eager for news.”

“James said he’d contact us when they were talking again. He’s probably fascinated by the whole ordeal anyway. But I keep remembering how I felt when I first arrived there. It’s like vicarious torture.”

“I trust our real honeymoon won’t trigger this?”

“I assure you, your first week without new zoots will be an entirely different experience.”

“Worth saving myself for our wedding night?” Reggie asked in falsetto, batting his eyes.

“The way this week is going, you wouldn’t have much to look forward to otherwise.”

“As you were saying, let’s go find a room.”

“But Reggie,” Sarah pulled back, grounding her hands against the cool stone, “Are you sure we want to do this?”

“What? Wander around Europe without a care in the world?”

“I always thought you needed to work. You can’t look at any situation without getting ideas, wanting to help.”

“And you?”

“I know, but what if we get tired of traveling around. What if we want different things? Right now I have an urge to build a house out of stone. What if one of us wanted something like that and the other couldn’t stand staying put? What if the world never makes it safe for us to have a settled home?”

“What if we both tire of traveling at about the same time and find things we want to do in the same place?”

“But Reggie, life doesn’t always work like that.”

He bent forward and kissed her nose. “Yeah. Sometimes your girlfriend turns out to be a teek who has to flee the country and your business partner turns out to be helping Druids change the world. Nothing’s ever certain, but so far—“

Sarah looked at him and shook her head. “You’re right. Let’s get a room.”

The message from James said, “I’m a mover. I can keep quiet. Everyone’s talking again.”

When Oliver found Sarah back in the household, the first thing he said was, “I have a palm lock, but I can’t make it work. Come out and show me?”

So Sarah and Oliver went to sit on the rocks above the sea. The rough jags of stone felt familiar and homely by now, though the tide was low and the sun seemed too strong. The breeze blew salty and fresh. Oliver had a battery operated palm lock, fresh out of the box, not yet hooked up to anything that needed locking. He’d programmed it with his sister’s palm and brought a print she’d made in ink.

“Well, let’s see if it works,” Sarah said.
She looked at the ink print and placed her hand above the lock, teeking the correct dips and ridges.

One click, and the lock identified her as Marian.

Oliver threw back his head and made a small growl in his throat.

“Oh, quit that,” Sarah handed him the lock.

Oliver pouted with his whole face but tried again. It didn’t work.

“How did you learn this?”

“I had my mom buy one, but it mostly worked right away. You can do the trick of wrapping someone up now?”

“Haven’t tested it for zoot destruction yet, but it seems right.”

“Can you write words on your arm?”

“What?”

Sarah held out her arm and forced up, “Hi, Oliver,” overflowing with excitement that she could do all this again.

His mouth gaped, then he held out his arm and said, “Teach me.”

“Just use your teek like suction—”

“Sarah, Oliver.” They both jumped as James came up behind them. “Sorry, am I interrupting?”

“No, it’s Teek Tricks 101. Join us.” Sarah slid sideways on their boulder to make room, but James stood staring at Oliver’s arm.

“Easy Oliver, you’ll leave a bruise,” Sarah said, then turned back to James, and wrote a new greeting on her arm. “He’s trying to learn this.”

At that point Oliver managed stripes, then leopard spots, then “Got it!”

James sat down shaking his head. “I’ll never be able to do that.”

“But you can direct your thoughts to a certain person,” Oliver said, pretending to sulk as he had about the palm lock.

“That’s a good trick, but I guess you had a lot of practice,” Sarah said, “Or is it genetic? Maybe whatever made your teek not work with teep, lets you direct thoughts without old zoot mind reading.”

“My mom learned to let out directed thoughts when she wants to, and she’s an animal person,”

Oliver continued, mouth still in a slight pout.

“Maybe if James checked your whole family’s genetics—”

“I’d love to. And if you’d like to study genetics yourselves?”

“Too trendy,” Oliver smiled.

James seemed not to hear as he continued, “I think I’ve already found one teek amplifier that helps at least with new zoots. And Sarah has both factors two and three; so I’m looking for people with both. If one of your parents is an animal person then—”

“Teach me directed telepathy, and I’ll get you samples from my whole family,” Oliver offered.

“Samples might show it’s genetic not learned,” James said.

“Wait,” Sarah held up a hand to silence them, cold growing out from her center, “You didn’t know about factors two and three when you studied my genetics.”

“Actually, they were the bipolar and paranoid schizophrenic correlates I pointed out to you.”

“Oh.” Sarah felt her face warm, and she looked down.

“But there is something I should tell you.”

Sarah waited for what seemed a long time before James spoke again. She saw his hands clench together and whiten in his lap. “When you first asked me to delete your genotype, I did. And when Dr. Yu asked me to type you later, I took the sample mostly to keep others away from it. But the first day we met in my office, when I went to clean the sequencer, I realized there was still usable blood on the slide. I knew—I ran the analysis again and hid the data. It actually turned out to be useful when I started exploring Knockham’s work. I’m sorry. I destroyed the file completely before leaving Thailand.”

In the awkward silence that followed, the lock, on which Oliver had refocused his attention, clicked open. He looked up with a stifled grin.

“You did it!” Sarah smiled with tears in her eyes, tangled in emotions of the moment. More slowly
she said to James, “I guess I’m glad you told me. And it’s good you figured out more of this. I hadn’t heard anything about amplifiers.”
“Dona’t think Knockham looked for them. He’s more interested in the symbiotes and how the system functions. Now that I’m somewhat accepted by this community, I’m going to see if we can pool some of our research.”
“So you’re going to stay a mover and give up the other telepathy?” Oliver asked with tentative approval.
“I think so, even if I’m not a very good mover.”
“Never know ‘til you try.” Oliver passed James the palm lock and ink print.
“That reminds me,” James said, “I have a letter for you, Sarah.” He pulled a sealed envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to her. She tore the flap and read:

Dear Sarah,
I’m sorry I couldn’t say goodbye in person. Watching what James has endured to be trusted by these people and how limited his new ability seems, I see no point in experimenting without new zoots. Phil has offered me a position with PAD as I am. Whether I’m a token new teep or it’s truly the start of a new order, that’s where I most belong right now. Good luck with your wedding and your new life. Remember I’ll always be here if you need me.
Love, Howard

“Was Howard okay when he left?” Sarah asked. She remembered him standing in the bedroom doorway, leaving flowers, and she wondered if he’d had something to say that was lost in the chaos of that morning.
James shrugged and turned his hands palm up.
Oliver hesitated and said, “He talked with me out in the pottery shed the day before. The whole silence thing, the other mind readers being able to hear James’s thoughts—I think he felt bad, left out.”
“I can sympathize with that,” Sarah said.
“I know, but he was still a teep, too. Had he ever been where there was no one he could hear before?”
“So he decided he couldn’t give it up,” Sarah sighed.
“Interesting. I hardly miss it,” James shrugged, examining the palm lock.
“Some people—Wait, if you studied my genetics after all this news came out, what about my mother?” Sarah asked.
“I can identify three sequences you must have inherited from her: ‘B,’ ‘1,’ and ‘3’. She could have been a teep. But that’s not enough—“
“Could she have been an animal person?”
“Sure. With a ‘C’ and another ‘1’.”
“How likely is it?”
“Hard to say. Do you have reason to suspect—“
“Suspect what?” lilted a new voice coming up behind them. This time they didn’t jump, but Sarah was shaking her head as she turned toward Aliana.
“Oh nothing. Let dead people keep their secrets.”
“Well, that’s a cheerful thought for someone who’s getting married in three days. Care to try on your dress?” Aliana asked.
“What dress?”
“Some of us have been preparing for this wedding while you were off gallivanting and conspiring.”
“I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have to—”
Aliana dropped her serious manner like a dirty dishrag and replaced it with a welcoming smile.
“Don’t be. I enjoy costuming and production. Planning a wedding, especially yours, has been a lark. Still, if you’d like to be a tad bit involved . . .”
“Gotta run guys.” Sarah shrugged, stood, and leapt off the rock. Aliana looped an arm over her
shoulders as they walked.

On August 20th, the household crawled like an anthill. The wedding was to be in the afternoon, looking out over the ocean, and though she was the bride, Sarah felt like a smell-blind ant. She tried to help chop vegetables in the kitchen, but was quickly told to fill a platter and distract her guests outside. The only guests so far were Phil and Dr. Knockham who had appeared at breakfast, greeted Sarah and Reggie, then sat elsewhere. Sarah wasn’t even sure whether Knockham was here for her wedding, to meet with James, or as Phil’s guest.

The two of them were still seated, chatting silently at a cleared breakfast table while every other surface in the room was busy with hors d’oeuvre creation and flower arranging. Vegetable platter in hand, Sarah dutifully led the way outside, where she nearly ran into the Johnsons, as they pulled a shiny rental car up very close to the front door.

“Emma!” Sarah caught her friend in a one armed hug as she piled out of the car. She teeked the vegetable tray to keep it stable on her other hand. “No one told me you were coming.”

Emma’s hair had been cut into stylish, sophisticated layers, but she smiled so big her tongue stuck out, belying any adult image. “I can’t believe you’re getting married!”

Reggie swept over from setting out chairs, just as Phil introduced himself and Leonard to Samuel and Ira. Sarah realized she’d forgotten them, even as she marveled at how precisely Phil fit with the Johnsons. They nodded and smiled with matching tilts of the head. Phil’s and Samuel’s shirts seemed to be of the exact same fabric and cut. Knockham in his khaki blazer and Ira, wrapped in Thai hill tribe weaves, seemed eccentrically confidant in unique, but similar, ways.

Reggie whispered, “Surprise,” as he took the vegetable tray and led them all to a circle of chairs. Aliana appeared with sandwiches, tea, and water, and soon James joined them, like it was a reunion. There followed a long discussion of public sentiment and politics since Broadcast Day, which Sarah was eager to hear, but kept forgetting to listen to as she glanced around the circle or caught glimpses of preparations beyond.

“Something is still stirring in Bangkok’s Chinatown,” Samuel said. The roll of his voice, as sure as ever, offset the puffiness around his eyes and new creases below his mouth. “The way they caved in to keep your PAD pictures secret may be the best evidence that they’re part of something larger, something that still doesn’t want any publicity.”

“We may strive for openness in science,” Knockham said, “But I doubt we’ll ever see it in politics.”

Samuel let out a huff, “With all that’s happened to Davies—”

“What’s an American president without a special investigator?” Phil nodded at Samuel as if they were confidantes, and Samuel nodded back.

Somewhere in this discussion Emma and Aliana slipped away. Sarah was tempted to go look for them, but she also wanted to stay with Reggie and felt some obligation to the other guests.

Then Reggie’s parents arrived, with an enormous rental car full of shopping bags and boxes wrapped in white ribbons. Sarah followed Reggie out to meet them, and he had barely said, “This is Sarah,” before they started eyeing her like a fortuitously split geode.

“So you’re Reggie’s sweetheart,” Mr. Malone said, removing the leather cap he’d worn while driving and inclining his head. “I knew he’d choose well. Now are you sure you want him?”

“Oh, darling! I’m so glad to meet you!” Mrs. Malone cooed, rushing forward and kissing her cheek.

“Not having met you, and seeing as there’s no registry, I wasn’t sure what you’d like . . .” With an airy wave at the packages in the car, she began a travelogue about shopping in Iraq and Ireland.

“What were they doing in Iraq?” Sarah whispered to Reggie as they guided his parents toward the other guests.

“So you’re Reggie’s sweetheart,” Mr. Malone said, removing the leather cap he’d worn while driving and inclining his head. “I knew he’d choose well. Now are you sure you want him?”

“Phil hinted they should be someplace not too cozy with the U.S. for a few weeks while we were reorganizing PAD, and I had to find a country with decent tourist facilities.”

“I never thought of it as a shopping destination, and didn’t you tell them no presents?”

“You’ve a lot to learn about your new mother-in-law.”
When Doug came by shortly before the ceremony, Sarah was more than a little relieved. “If you’ll excuse the wedding couple, they need to prepare now.”
Doug walked with them halfway to the house, then stopped and spoke. He was dressed in his white robe and his hair was tied back in a woven clasp. “Here are your new EU passports, with your new names. They should simplify travelling a bit.”
“Wow, Thailand only managed temporary residence papers, and we were there for months,” Sarah said.
“Thanks,” said Reggie.
“After you dress for the wedding, it is traditional for the couple to walk the circle trail beyond the clearing and remain out of sight until you hear the violin music which will mark the start of the ceremony.”
Doug gestured them toward the house, and Sarah wondered how many other traditions she was unaware of. As the nervousness of the day poured through her like ice water, Sarah hurried inside where she found Aliana and Emma waiting to help her change.

“I like it,” Emma said, as Sarah pulled on the filmy dress with its floating layers of silk. “But why’s it green?”
It was a very pale green. Sarah had wondered about that when Aliana first dragged her in for a fitting, but she hadn’t dared to ask. Besides, she’d been quickly distracted by how pleasant it was to wear. Aliana had sewn a smooth lining so there were no scratchy seams. It was the only formal clothing Sarah had ever enjoyed putting on.
Now Sarah looked to Aliana who said, “Doug, the Druid who’s officiating, told me her dress should be green. I figure it’s one of their traditions. I chose a quite light green as a compromise with the standard Western white, and because I think Sarah looks stunning in pale colors. Then there’s the veil.”
Aliana lifted from a box the headdress and veil she’d personally crafted to cover Sarah’s still ravaged scalp.
“It’s gorgeous!” Emma squeaked.
“I agree,” said Sarah. “I can’t believe you did all this for me.”
Aliana paused a moment looking Sarah full in the face, “The funny thing is, you love all these people and we love you, but you never quite realize how much.”
Sarah didn’t know what she could say to that, but she hugged Aliana. Then she hugged Emma, and then she went to find Reggie so they could begin their walk around the property.

“Up here is where they bury people, to rid them of new zoots,” Sarah said as they looped almost to the end of the path.
“I’m glad you aren’t planning to bury me tonight.”
“Fringe benefit of marrying a teek.”
Then they both stopped short. There was someone standing in front of the great tree at the foot of the covered pit, a wrinkled old man in a green twill vest. Sarah’s mouth fell open and her eyes seemed to nearly burst, but the words escaped her mouth nonetheless, “Mr. O’ Reeley? What are—How could—”
With a quaint old bow and a frog-like smile, the little man said, “I’ve come to wish you luck on your wedding day.”
“The luck of the Irish?” Reggie quipped.
“Or something smaller.”
“The luck of the leprechauns, perhaps?” Reggie asked, and Sarah shifted uncomfortably as the men sized each other up.
O’ Reeley tipped his hat and said, “There are more things in heaven and earth than dreamt of in your philosophy.”
“You’re not going to claim you wrote that?”
“Course not, it was an Englishman.”
Sarah recovered her voice to say, “But if you’re still alive, I should give the money—”
“Nonsense. Things are as I intended.” He gazed at her, and Sarah saw laugh lines deepen around his
eyes and mouth, making her smile as well.
“But why?” she asked.
The strange man gave an elaborate shrug. Sarah looked toward Reggie and caught his eye. As they
looked forward again there was no one between them and the tree. O’Reeley was gone from sight,
but a scent of vanilla and cloves lingered.
“You spoke strangely to him,” Sarah murmured.
“I can’t quite explain. Something about the way he moved. It wasn’t like the teeps, or you, or
anyone else I remember seeing. But, there was something very peculiar about him.”
“Maybe if we’d let you get rid of the new zoots already, let you be fully a spotter—”
“Or maybe not. If I could tell so easily as I am, and I’m sure I’ve never seen anyone like that, not
even before I learned to spot teeps, then what more could we have learned?”
What more? Sarah’s mind boiled with questions. Had her first meeting with O’Reeley been mere
chance? Had he known this time how Reggie would react?
“Doug sent us out here. We’ll ask him after the ceremony.”
“We can ask,” Reggie said.

When the violin music started, Reggie and Sarah walked out from the forest. Doug stood on the cliff,
just in front of the sea, tall and regal in his full white robes. There were poles holding flowers
standing in a circle from behind the Druid, all around the guests, to the farthest edges of the center
aisle. Two baskets full of rose petals stood by the two front poles. As the wedding couple
approached, petals flew up from the baskets and scattered along the walkway, almost as if a sudden
breeze had moved them.
When they reached the front and Doug began to speak, Sarah noticed the flowers perched above
them seemed to rearrange themselves ever so slightly. Then the Druid had the couple light a candle
to symbolize their unity, and the flame appeared a moment before it should have and briefly rose
high in a tenuous double spiral. Sarah couldn’t help but glance at Oliver, sitting a couple seats back
on the right. He winked at her, and the significance of his gift brought tears to her eyes.
The ceremony moved forward as she and Reggie made their vows. There was no more telekinesis
until Reggie pulled back Sarah’s veil, and some invisible hand seemed to smooth the lower edge into
place. Then Sarah was kissing her husband, and the kiss was both innocent and newly intimate.

Sarah was burstingly happy, though she couldn’t remember a word that was said during the
ceremony or as people came to hug and kiss her afterward.
When she finally caught up with Oliver he was ladling punch from a crystal bowl. Within it floated a
sculpted swan. Sarah guessed it was not really ice even before it craned its neck to gaze at her.
“Having fun?” she asked him.
“Isn’t everyone?”
“I’m certainly happy.”
“You should be. You’re the bride. Congratulations.”
“Thanks.”
Then the household’s string quartet began to play, and Sarah and Reggie were called upon to dance.
For the second song Sarah danced with James. He overcame his usual awkwardness and proved a
competent partner. Sarah felt tears in her eyes as she realized once again, she had a father.
After that she danced with Mr. Malone, Samuel Johnson, Phil, Oliver, and Dr. Knockham. When
she thought it might be time to rest, Aliana and Emma requested music for a step dance. Worrying
for a moment about her layered and gauzy wedding dress, Sarah realized that when Aliana chose
costumes, she was used to taking dance steps into account. But as they were dancing Sarah caught
sight of a ship sailing into the bay. Its main sail was square and golden; its outline that of a Chinese
junk. As the Irish tune ended, she went to the cliff to look down. Others came too, and they watched
the curious boat tie up at the dock.
Oliver and two other teeks had gone down to meet the strange craft. Just before they reached it a figure in a satiny white shirt and bow tie walked to the bow, raised an arm in a dramatic wave toward Sarah and called out, “I’ve come to dance at your wedding.” Sarah could barely piece together the words over the sound of surf, but something in the luxuriant stretch of body and arm made her quite sure the mariner was Tom. She glanced at Reggie, who happened to be standing near the Johnsons and asked, “Did you know Tom was coming?” They all shook their heads. She remembered her first impression of him as a Tommy Goth snake in Belize. She felt the reptilian threat, though the snake usually shot from tree branches above its victim, and Tom was currently far below her on the bay.

“You think it’s all right?” she asked.

“It’s your call,” Reggie answered.

Shaking her head, Sarah waved for them to come up.

By the time the new arrivals reached the wedding, music had resumed and people were trying not to stare. Sarah and Reggie went to greet Tom and the two strangers who accompanied him.

“You do show up in the most surprising places,” Reggie said as they shook hands.

“My life story would not be complete if I missed your special day.” Tom paused to give Sarah a quite familiar hug and kiss. “Sarah and Reggie, let me introduce Jan and Eric, my biographers.” Jan and Eric shifted a little uncomfortably at the introduction but shook hands and offered congratulations.

“So Tom, I’m sure you have some story to share,” Sarah prompted.

“Yes, but you must dance with me to find out.” With that he proffered his arm and Sarah went with him toward the music.

The dancing had calmed to a waltz, and Tom leaned in with suave attentiveness to nearly whisper in Sarah’s ear. “Remember those nice people from EU News? The ones who let Reggie borrow their plane and pilots to rescue you?”

“PAD traded them exclusive access to the island for that.” Sarah smiled as Reggie danced by with Emma.

Tom waited until they were out of earshot to say, “It’s true. But they’re news people. They’ve pieced together most of that rescue story, several of the plot lines that connect to PAD and Broadcast Day, as well as our little adventures in Belize and Cambodia.”

“Pieced together or were told?”

“The point I’m making is,” Tom paused but kept them moving and gave her waist a little squeeze, “They plan to make a TV miniseries of your life. They’re willing to pay you well for your help.”

“Do you imagine I’d want a movie made about my life? I’ve spent most of it trying to go unnoticed.”

“Times change, Sarah. Besides, they’re making the show either way. I’ve already sold them rights to my story, and much of it happens to coincide.”

“You brought reporters to my wedding!”

Tom smiled and braced her firmly through the next few steps of the dance. It was uncomfortable and unfair. Still Sarah felt nothing but amusement, despite all their dubious history.

“They didn’t bring cameras, and the whole thing will be fictionalized to protect people’s privacy. The EU is quite old-fashioned that way.”

“Like no one could figure it out.”

“You’re changing names anyway, aren’t you?”

“You always know too much.”

“Knowledge and charm get me quite far.”

The dance was ending, “I’ll need to talk to Reggie.”

“Naturally.” Tom bowed and kissed her hand.

As Sarah approached Reggie, Tom caught up Emma and danced her away.

“He had a business proposition. I think Phil should hear it too,” Sarah said to Reggie, and they went hand in hand to waylay Phil.

Sarah was surprised at how easily she could repeat each word of Tom’s proposal. He had a knack
for presentation. She was also surprised by Phil’s reaction.
“It’s a perfect opportunity!”
“For what?” asked Sarah.
“We’ll write up the contract to state the work is fictionalized but also retain some executive control. That way we might keep out the bits we least want shown and influence the slant given to the rest.”
“EU News is pretty reputable, doesn’t spin as predictably as the American press,” Reggie said.
“And we are the heroes of this story. I believe that. Don’t you? We just don’t want the first version told to be biased by our political enemies,” Phil flung out his hands as he spoke, then steadied the hors’oeuvres on his plate.
Sarah folded before his enthusiasm, but couldn’t find any in herself. “I don’t want political enemies. I just want to disappear.”
“I’ll do my best, Sarah. Let me handle the negotiations. Your story up to this point is going to come out eventually. Tom has certain rights to the parts that involve him. But if you and Reggie really want to start over anonymously, I can work toward that in the contract.”
“Okay, I’ll trust you to handle it,” Sarah said, “But remember we’ll be on our honeymoon.
“You’re only checking messages once a day,” Phil nodded with a paternal “I’ve got the message” sarcasm mostly aimed at Reggie.
Reggie crowed back like a cocky adolescent, “And I doubt we’ll have time to proofread a script,” as they were summoned across the yard to cut the cake.
By the time the sun grew orange on the horizon, Sarah was tired of the word “radiant” and the need to make small talk. She’d finally managed her way through the dinner buffet and sat down at a table to eat julienne vegetables and pink meatballs. Looking up she saw James furling and unfurling his fingers as he spoke with Reggie’s father. They were headed in her direction.
“The genetics for spotters seems quite simple, but that one gene has to confer some reproductive advantage—“
“Are you saying spotters exist just to have kids with movers or mind readers or what not?”
“It may have been a useful trait in its own right thousands of years ago.”
“What about now?” her father-in-law said. “I don’t need to spot a genetic sequence, but if a person could spot other traits, like good will and honesty, choose better business partners, avoid—Hello, Sarah. Sitting all alone?”
“Not anymore,” Sarah said as the two men joined her. “Please tell me you’re not discussing grandchildren?”
“I hadn’t thought of that. We could be grandparents, meeting each other during visits sometime,” Mr. Malone slapped a hand on James’s back.
James’s mouth widened in dismay and his fingers splayed out on his knee.
“Not too soon,” Sarah said.
James regained some composure, “We were mostly discussing Reggie’s abilities, and I think his father may be a spotter too.”
“I’m too old to be pressured into changing,” the senior Malone smiled.
“There’s so much we need to study, variations we may have overlooked,” James said.
Sarah’s mind turned over, finally escaping the buzz of wedding duties. “That reminds me, I need to talk to Doug. If you’ll excuse me?”
James nodded absent and her father-in-law raised only one eyebrow before saying, “Certainly.”
She soon found the Druid, standing alone to the side of the festivities.
“There’s something you’re not telling me.”
Doug steepled his fingers and gave a long nod, standing in shadowed profile to the setting sun. Without looking toward her he said, “You make a beautiful bride, Sarah.”
“Why am I wearing green?”
“Some answers aren’t simply told.”
“Something to do with O’Reeley?”
“You know enough to ask. Perhaps you’ll be a Druid someday.”
“Before or after I study genetics?”
“I’ll wait to see.” Doug smiled and walked away.

Sarah was still replaying the brief exchange in her head when Reggie found her and slipped an arm around her waist.
“Tired?” he asked.
“I could be done.”
“We can leave whenever you want. Our first honeymoon cottage awaits.”
“One last try,” she said, taking Reggie’s hand and leading him across the yard.
“Dr. Knockham,” she said.
“Please, call me Leonard.”
“Is there something I should know about the color green?”
Leonard smiled, holding a drink in one hand. Like the Druid, he’d been standing well off to one side of the action; so there was no one around to hear. “Like what?”
“Like why you choose it for your clothing and your home? Why Doug said I should be married in it?”
“Oh, did he? Curiouser and curiouser.”
The scientist stood quietly, the image of tight-lipped British affability. Then Reggie said, “Something to do with leprechauns?”
Knockham laughed from the bottom of his chest, then paused with a lopsided smile, “I guess you never know where legends come from.”
“From people who leave someone money but aren’t really dead?” Sarah pressed.
Knockham looked directly at her, eyes wide beneath lowered brows, “But Chris Martin couldn’t—So your other grandfather . . . This may be more than you should tell people.”
“He’s not my grandfather, and you spoke in favor of free information,” Sarah said, still wanting clear answers, but realizing what he’d implied, and flashing briefly on rumors about her mother’s parentage.
Leonard smiled easily, “Here, I’ll tell you this much for free, or in exchange for the amusing ideas you’ve started in my brain. Green is an affectation, not like the Druid’s white, more like a wink and a nod.”
“For the planners?”
“No,” he shook his head, “And that’s all I’ll say. These are the sort of questions that may answer themselves in time. For now, enjoy your wedding.” With the aforementioned wink and a nod, he sauntered off.

At first Sarah was annoyed, but gradually a smile crept up to her cheeks. She wondered what the odds were that she’d rescued someone like O’Reeley by chance. Could he be her grandfather, possibly driving out after finally hearing of her mother’s death? Did he choose cars without GPS by chance, and did he choose his name to sound like, “Oh, really?”
She laughed as she stood beside Reggie, on the cliff side of the clearing, and gazed down at the boat Tom had brought, now fiery in the lowering sun. “How’d you like to sail away into the sunset?” she asked Reggie.
“Haven’t we had enough adventures with transportation?”
“I’m sure we could handle that boat. Just to the edge of the bay. We’ll catch a cab from the big hotel out there. And Tom’s lackeys won’t mind, it’ll look even better in their TV show.”
“How could I refuse you anything? Are we sneaking down?” Sarah nodded.
“I’ll get the bags and meet you there.”

A few minutes later Sarah and Reggie waved goodbye to their guests from a Chinese junk silhouetted against the setting sun. If the waves helped them forward and the sail turned gracefully, no one wondered why.
The two of them sat together on a varnished wood bench. Sarah felt her veil like hair on her shoulders, only smoother and lighter. The dress dusted her arms like the most tentative touch, and the wind felt chill on her neckline but wakening on her arms.

“You’re doing the helicopter thing again, aren’t you?”

“Just experiencing the here and now. Want to join me?”

Reggie nodded.

Sarah wrapped him in an invisible cocoon, taking a few extra moments to let him feel each imaginary piece fall into place. Then she rolled the covering off slowly, from his head to his toes, letting him attend to her progress all the way down. His eyes met hers, first in trust, then in wonder. And together, barely touching, they enjoyed the feel of the boat on the water.

The End

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