Summary

Telling the story of Zoo from a different point of view. What if Mitch and Jamie were never part of the team, but just swept up in what was happening. Very much first season characters in regards their looks and basic personalities.
I pray you now, my soul to keep

Chapter Summary

Mitch takes on a new role, Jamie finds her luck has changed.

Authors Notes:
In this universe, no single female, whatever her nationality or race, can hold a job, find accommodation or get medical care unless she has a male relative or keeper to be responsible for her personally, financially, legally. Not as extreme as Handmaid's Tale, not as emancipated as New Zealand. A reaction to some of what is going on in places all around the world. This is just a story, not a political statement. Alternative Universe, people...chill.

Introducing the Characters:
Jamie Campbell is researching a company called Reiden Global, a subsidiary of GDJ International that owns the LA Telegraph where she works as a junior journalist. She loses her job because of her acrimonious investigation, and because she is dobbed in for writing a tell-all blog debunking Reiden, by her soon to be ex-boyfriend and keeper, Ethan, who is also her senior supervisor. She is pursuing Reiden Global because her mother, Nancy Armstrong, and twenty-six others died from anomalous cancers suspected to be caused by poisoned water and/or the side effect of pesticide spraying of products made by Reiden Global when Jamie was twelve. Senator Dixon Vaughan of Louisiana and his committee had taken on the case for the survivors of Fulsom, but that case is now stalled because Reiden is just too powerful. Jamie is now without a job, without funds, without a place to live and has run out of options. She also needs a new keeper as of yesterday.

Dr. Mitchell Morgan is a teacher/lecturer at UCLA. As a veterinary pathologist, he studies what makes animals sick, studying their environment and influences before they die to determine what is killing them or making them ill. He had formerly studied to be a medical practitioner but gave that up midstream when he found himself emotionally incapable of facing the relatives of people who died or were dying. He switched to becoming a Veterinarian, with a side doctorate in pathology.

Drowning his sorrows at the end of a long day dissecting a pair of lions that went haywire and killed three people, he literally trips over Jamie Campbell......

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Los Angeles, Autumn 2015
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“Hey, sorry, didn't see you there...” sucking a bourbon soaked finger, Mitch squinted into the darkened corner of the booth. “You okay? It's kinda dark back here.”
“I'm fine with the dark...please, go away.” The last word ended on a hiccup, the speaker apparently young and female, intriguing in itself. Mitch eased himself into the seat opposite and set his drink down.
“Same reason I usually choose this booth. I get to watch everyone else, and keeps me off the hopeful's radar.” He sat back, making himself appear as relaxed and non-threatening as possible. The girl in the corner has her head down, so he can't make out her features.
“So...how did you managed to get let in here without a Keeper?” When his question remained unanswered, he took a sip and tried again.
“Does that mean you’re a pro? ’Cos I could sure use one after today...”
The girl sat up, her hair catching the light from the bar. It gleamed red and gold and framed her face
in loose waves. “Fuck you, I'm not...one of them.”
Mitch didn't move or react, only took another sip. “No offense intended, I've known a few pro's in
my time, nice women who perform a service for guys like me.”
“Guy's like you?”
“Single, not keeping anyone, no attachments.”
He saw her tilt her head to the side, her face still in shadow with her back to the light.
“What's wrong with you? Don't you have enough money?” she asked.
Mitch smiled and waved his hand. “Money's not an issue, I like people, I just prefer when they're not
around.”
She appeared to nod her head. “Oh. You're one of those. What's your profession?” she asked
suddenly.
“Veterinary pathologist.”
“Scientist. I would not have picked you for one. More likely a history professor or something stuffy
like that.”
Mitch wasn't sure whether to laugh or be mortally insulted. “You think I'm stuffy?”
A slim shoulder lifted in a shrug. “You're sitting in a poorly lit booth, avoiding people and
drinking.” She leaned forward and sniffed. “Bourbon.”
He nodded, a wry smile twisting his lips. “I suppose when you put it like that...”
A commotion at the front of the premises drew his attention. Two section officers were at the bar
asking questions, those around them pulling out their identification cards. Mitch automatically
reached for his wallet, but then noticed that the girl had shrunk down again into the shadows. The
officers were making their way through the patrons, slim torches out to check the I.D's as they were
presented. Mitch didn't make any sudden moves to draw their attention, but it was a certainty that
they'd reach where he sat soon.
“Don't have an I.D?” he asked, keeping his voice low.
“Don't have anything...I.D went with the job. Lost that two days ago. I was using a friend's couch up
until this afternoon.”
“What about your keeper?” he asked casually, tipping the last of his bourbon down his throat.
“He went with the job too.” The thin voice was starting to sound panicky.
If she was caught without
any I.D and no keeper she'd be taken to the nearest state-sanctioned brothel or worse, the state-
operated workhouse - the equivalent of rubber stamped indenture. No trial, no appeal, no questions
asked.
Mitch placed the glass carefully down on the table top. The officers were only a single booth away.
“Then you have a problem.” The two men were now standing at the end of the table, looming dark
and menacing. Both were armed. One shone his torch into the corner opposite him, the bright light
illuminating a slight woman with red hair and an elfin face, eyes wide as they blinked in the beam of
the torch.
“Identification...please.” One of the officers said, tacking on the please in deference probably to
Mitch's tidy appearance and assured manner.
“Here you are. I hope all is in order?” Mitch handed over his ident-card, smiling thinly, his mind
racing, noting that the girl's eyes were greeny blue, her complexion pale but flawless.
“Miss?” The first officer asked, keeping his torch fixed on her.
Jamie couldn't speak. Her eyes darted to the man sitting opposite, his dark brown eyes regarding her
from behind his glasses. He raised an eyebrow at her as if mocking her inability to come up with
some explanation for her presence in the bar with no ident-card.
“I....I...” she started to stutter, both officers now turned in her direction, one with his hand on the
cuffs at his belt. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard.
“She's with me. I haven't had time to organize her paperwork yet, but I'd be happy to sign anything
you need. We were just celebrating finalizing the arrangement.”
The officers were now staring at him, as was the girl, her mouth hanging open.
“You're her keeper?” One of the men asked, pulling out a ticket pad from his pocket. “You should have left her where you found her until the agreement was authorized.”

Mitch shrugged. “I was keen to get her home. We just stopped for a drink.”

“Fill this in and sign it...please.” The officer handed over the pad and Mitch smoothly filled in the paperwork with his details and credentials. After he signed it with a flourish, he handed it back and the officer tore off the second page, a carbon copy which Mitch tucked into his breast pocket.

“I suggest you don't hang about, Sir. One more infringement and there'll be a fine attached.”

“Of course, we were about to go anyway. Goodnight, officers.” Mitch waited for the men to wend their way to the front of the bar and leave before leaning forward to shuffle out of the booth. A slender hand shot out of the shadows and lay atop his.

“Why?” she asked.

“No idea. Spur of the moment, if you like. I'm leaving now. If you don't want to end up with them, I suggest you come with me.”

He turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. His apartment wasn't particularly flash, but it had all he needed as a lecturing professor at UCLA. It was quiet, close to the campus and he had only himself to worry about. A glimpse of a young girl in a photo frame mocked his internal assessment, making him flinch and turn away.

“Here we are, home sweet home. Only the one bedroom, so it'll be the couch for you. I can vouch that it's comfortable, I've slept on it myself.” He rocked on his heels, hands stuffed into his jeans pockets, suddenly unsure as to whether he'd really made the right decision. The girl, no...woman was older than he originally thought, probably in her late twenties, possibly early thirties if he was unkind. Her eyes were darting everywhere, their color seemingly changing with her emotions. She was chewing her bottom lip, making it pink and plump from the abuse, small white teeth just visible behind. She was not very tall, was very slender and wearing a leather jacket, boots, tight jeans and a loose blouse. Over one shoulder she had a battered backpack.

“Coffee?” he asked, taking off his own jacket and throwing it over one of the easy chairs. The kitchen was little more than an annex off the living room, but he messed about in there for a few minutes to allow his guest to realize that he wasn't about to jump on her, that she was safe. Of course, there was the small matter of his announcing he was her keeper, a small fiction to put the officers off. Mind you, knowing how efficient the bureau was, they would likely check up once they filed their tickets for the night, to see if, in fact, he had finalized the paperwork as he'd said.

“How do you like your coffee?” he called out.

Getting no reply he looked out into the living room, seeing her peering at his diploma and other accreditation hanging on his walls.

“I said...” he started again, but she cut him off.

“Black, one sugar.” She glanced over her shoulder at him. “Er...thank you.”

By the time he emerged with a small tray holding two mugs and a plate of biscuits, she was perched on the edge of the other armchair, her elbows resting on her knees, hands clasped tightly together. He put the tray on the coffee table and sat down, after moving his jacket.

He indicated the biscuits.

“I wasn't sure if you were hungry or had something to eat earlier. We can order something in later if you like.”

He grabbed his own mug and sat back in the chair, crossing his legs at the knee. She sat and twisted her fingers together, the picture of awkwardness.

Mitch leaned forward again and put his drink down.

“Look, why don't we start by introducing ourselves. I'm Mitch Morgan, and you are.....?”

“Jamie Campbell.”

Mitch waited for her to say more, but when the seconds passed, he started again. “Alright, you know what I do because I told you, and you've inspected the artwork on the wall. What do you do, when you are employed, that is?”

She looked up and met his inquiring eyes behind their lenses. Something in his steady gaze must have reassured her because she suddenly sat back in the chair after scooping up the second mug. “I'm a journalist. I was working for the LA Telegraph, but my boss didn't like my politics or my blog and fired me.” Jamie took another swallow of coffee. “She explained that my dogged, paranoid view of
Reiden Global was in direct conflict with the owners of the paper – GDJ International, who also own Reiden Global. I was given an ultimatum – tow the party line and get rid of the blog or walk. I walked.”

Mitch picked up the plate of biscuits and offered one to her, she took two but didn’t eat them right away.

“Ballsey. What about your keeper?” he asked.

Jamie let out a derisive laugh, nearly bordering on a sob. “Ethan. He was my supervisor, but we were also lovers. He’d taken over from my Uncle as primary when I moved to the city, I was staying in the same apartment block and he was my ride to work. Then two years ago we slept together after a party and I thought...” she looked down at the biscuits in her hand as if wondering how they’d got there. “I thought it was going to be something more, but he betrayed me and I lost everything, the flat, my job, my keeper and most of my possessions. All I have is packed up in that bag.”

He didn’t make any comment, watching her dunk and consume the two biscuits and half her mug of coffee before speaking again.

“Look. I know you don’t know me from Adam, and for that matter, I’m taking a huge risk too, but I’m prepared to help you if you’ll let me.”

Jamie looked over at him, inspecting him closely for the first time. She saw a man in his forties, at a pinch late thirties, with brown eyes that seemed to instill confidence while also displaying a frightening intelligence. He dressed conservatively, was clean shaven with a full head of dark hair, neatly trimmed with square sideburns. His eyebrows were mobile and seemed to accessorize his expressions, his eyes crinkling at the corners when he smiled. He also had a dimple in his chin. He seemed mostly harmless, but then she'd only known him less than an hour. He also seemed to have a white knight complex which was sweet, and a lifesaver from her point of view. His apartment was typical of his profession, staid and a little boring, with no family pictures except for one that contained the image of a small girl with blond hair. No pets, no plants, no fishing or sports photos, a possibly socially awkward man wrapped up in his work. He wasn't bad looking, in an older guy sort of way, a bit of a dad-bod and obviously not athletic, but he was tall with nice hands and long legs.

“Finished?” he asked, her eyes darting up in surprise to meet his, one eyebrow raised above the frame of his glasses. “Now that introductions are out of the way, I'll get some stuff to make up the couch, the bathroom is through there if you want a shower. I have some lesson plans to get organized, so I'll be in the bedroom on the computer if you need extra towels....or something.”

Jamie tilted her head to one side, a smile playing around her lips.

“What?” Mitch asked, giving her a crooked smile in return.

“Nothing. A shower sounds like a fantastic idea. Is there a washing machine in there?”

“Er...no, sorry. Usually, just drop stuff off at the cleaners. There's a laundromat on the corner.”

She rolled her eyes. “Men...” she huffed, then got to her feet, depositing the mug on the tray before grabbing her backpack and heading for the bathroom, a swing to her hips. He kept watching until the door slid closed behind her, then he shook his head.

“Wow.”

He completed the paperwork and printed out the official receipt, his new status as Keeper Of Jamie Campbell confirmed, bought and paid for. She was now his responsibility in all ways that mattered. For most people, it was a mere formality at the culmination of a relationship, or part of a business tenure, career path or just an acknowledgment of a blood relationship. A transfer from one status to another. In this case, it was an impulse decision to save her from the fate of all woman unfortunate enough to fall foul of the city regulations. There was really no excuse for any woman to lose her ident-card, but Jamie seemed to have managed to get herself into a fine pickle. He didn't doubt she had a sharp intellect inside the pretty wrapping, but right now she needed time to decide her next move, time that he could provide along with the shelter of his name and possessions.

That done he decided to look up what she'd written as a journalist, bringing up several of her online articles. He read through them, impressed with her attention to detail and in-depth research. She was certainly biased towards bringing Reiden Global down, her motivation not clear, but her writing frequently skewered Reiden, despite having no appreciable effect in regards legal retribution against
the company. She was a good writer.

He heard the bathroom door open and looked up. Jamie appeared wrapped in one of his bath sheets, the towel tucked high on her chest and reaching down to below her knees, her feet bare and her hair still wet. She held a bundle of her clothes plus her pack, dropping them both beside the couch before sitting down. Her hair hung in long wet strands, the color a darker red and reaching well below her shoulders. A waft of warm, scented air floated into his bedroom through the open door and he sniffed appreciatively. She had used his own shampoo, something that made him smile. The smell suddenly got stronger and he looked up to find her standing in his doorway, leaning against the door jamb, arms folded over her chest.

“Do you have a laptop?” she asked. “Only I’d like to start looking for another job, you know?”

“Sure. You’ll be able to go outside tomorrow if you want to. Just keep this about you if anyone asks.” He held out the printed copy of his official receipt. She moved forward to take it, holding it like it was poisonous, her lips curling up into a sneer as if it smelled bad. He did his best to ignore her reaction.

“I’m usually gone by eight, so you can stay here if you want. I don't have a spare key, so if you do go out you'll have to remain out until I return at four. I'll get a key cut before I come home.”

“Got it. Out at eight, back by four, locked out until you get a spare key.”

“Yeah, that's pretty much it. I'll find my spare laptop for you to use.”

He watched her start to screw her face up to object, then seemingly thought better of it, her expression clearing. “I'm going to need some money....”

He got up from his desk and went to a wall mounted safe cheesily hidden behind a bland landscape picture. He shielded the combination from her, opened it and took out a bundle before shutting the door which automatically locked.

“This should keep you covered. When we're out together I'm expected to pay for everything, but I imagine you'll need some new clothes and maybe some other personal stuff, just keep that receipt handy in case you run into any difficulties.” He handed her the bound bundle of cash, her eyes going wide at the quantity of notes.

“You weren't kidding when you said money wasn't a problem for you.”

Mitch shrugged. “I'm not exactly high maintenance.”

“Maybe I won't ditch you as quickly as I planned to!”

He could tell she wished the words unsaid the second after she said them. Her eyes went impossibly wide and her mouth fell open.

“I'm so sorry...I...I didn't really mean that...” She looked terrified and with good reason, but he just shook his head and gave her a crooked smile.

“Look, this has all happened pretty fast and I'm still playing catch up, just like you. Let's just leave it that you needed help, I'm in a position to give it...no strings attached.”

“Not all of us think the same way as the government.” He looked across at the lone photo gracing his bookshelf. “I have a daughter, Clementine, she's ten now. I'd hope someone would do the same for her if she needed help.”

Jamie looked from him to the photo in the living room. “I'm guessing she takes after her mother?”

Mitch laughed. “Yeah. Managed to get something right. She's all Audra in looks. Smart little thing, too...gets that from me.”

“You're her keeper as well?”

“If she wants me to be, later on. Paperwork is all set up, the least I can do for her. She has a stepfather as well, so she's covered.”

“Lucky girl.” Jamie murmured, shifting from one foot to the other. “Um...I'll just get dressed and leave you to do...whatever it is you're doing.”

Mitch nodded, Jamie shutting the door behind her. He listened and heard her moving about the living room, soon it went quiet and he imagined she was getting dressed and drying her hair. Then he heard the kettle in the kitchen start to whistle. Judging it okay for him to leave the bedroom, he still knocked on the door and called out to announce he was coming out.
Jamie lifted up the jug to fill her mug, the steam enveloping her for a second. She could feel her hair starting to frizz and hastily put the kettle down. Mitch was an odd fish with his old-fashioned, gentlemanly ways, and taste for fine but blandly colored textiles. The towels had been sinfully fluffy but only came in one color – white, while the bathroom had been cleared of all clutter, even the drawers under the sink. She'd found a brand new toothbrush in a wrapper and used that, placing it in the unadorned mug on the shelf beside his. His furniture, while not new, was of decent quality, the cushions unremarkable but probably expensive, one definitely made of silk, according to the label. The kitchen was similarly equipped with expensive gadgets but perfectly plain flatware and cutlery. Not even a brightly colored pot holder to break the trend. It was all so masculine. The only real touch of color was from the spines of the books on his shelves and the glint of gold from the official stamps on his certificates and diplomas. He was a very well educated man. She was just surprised he hadn't taken to keeping another wife, or at least a girlfriend. She paused in stirring her drink.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” she asked, her back to the room.

“No.”

“Why not? You're not bad looking, and you're loaded, I'd think the women in your department would jump at the chance to land you.”

“The women in my department are all spoken for, and those that aren't are more focused on their careers than in dating untenured lecturers. For that matter, why aren't you married or spoken for? You're not bad looking, quite pretty really and you're obviously smart...you're of an age to find a permanent keeper.”

Jamie looked at him with narrowed eyes. “What do you know about my age?”

“Computer.” He stated simply. Very few people could afford to keep themselves off all the databases. As soon as you were born your information folder started to fill, the bald facts of your life accessible to anyone with an entry onto the internet. Your life, such as it was, good or bad, was an open book for anyone.

“Of course, and you just had to fill in the paperwork tonight.” That sneer was back in her voice, but again he ignored it. She'd obviously had a difficult few days, so she was bound to be looking to vent her anger at someone. He was just within reach.

“If I hadn't, it would have made things impossible for you. They could have come here and taken you away and I'd have no right to defend you.”

Angry green eyes glared at him. “Maybe I don't want you to defend me, maybe I don't need some damn man dictating the way my life is...maybe I don't want you!” she was shouting at the end, eyes swimming with defensive tears.

He stepped aside and indicated the apartment front door with is hand. “You're free to go. The paperwork can be revoked as easily as it was raised. Just give me the word and I'm no longer your keeper.”

His voice never rose a decibel above normal. Jamie stood rigid in his kitchen, her feet not moving, her teeth worrying her lip as she agonized over her decision. Eventually, the tension snapped and she slumped against the bench, her shoulders hunched and her face turned away from him.

“I'm sorry…” her whispered apology made him drop his arm and just stand there.

He had a feeling he'd just seen a little of the real Jamie Campbell, a woman at the end of her tether, unable to see clearly any hope for the future.

“I've left the laptop beside the couch with the password for the internet. The carry bag is there for it as well, in case you need to take it with you when you go out. There's also a memory stick and I have a printer in my bedroom if you need to use it tomorrow.”

He left her then, returning to his bedroom and shutting the door. It wasn't late, but he felt suddenly weary, the day longer than usual with his stint at the zoo and the lions. He stripped down to his boxers, then padded over to the wardrobe to hang up his clothes, catching sight of himself in the full-length mirror. He turned to look at himself, frowning critically at his body, the less than toned stomach and arms, the dark pelt of hair on his legs, arms and chest, the same color as his head hair. He knew he wasn't exactly handsome, but Audra had thought him rather sexy once, admittedly ten years ago, but hey, he'd take that as a positive. He wondered what Miss Jamie Campbell of the wide
greeny-blue eyes and elfin features thought of him...that's assuming she thought anything of him beyond her resentment at being tied to him, even in the short term.

He shut the wardrobe door with a little more force than was necessary.

On his way to work he kept replaying in his mind's eye how young and innocent his new ward had looked, asleep on his sofa. She hadn't stirred throughout his getting up, morning shower, or breakfast. He had stood over her, looking at her creamy complexion with its smattering of tiny freckles, inevitable with that hair, the curve of her lashes and brows, much darker than he'd expected. Her mouth was ajar and he felt a strong desire to kiss her awake, his body jerking back even as the thought passed through his brain. Woah. His creepy inspection over, he hustled himself out of the apartment and almost ran down the stairs to the ground floor. In the basement garage, he threw his briefcase onto the passenger seat and slid in, his breathing labored.

What the fuck was he thinking? Channeling his brain into the day ahead, he added a mobile phone to his list of purchases for the end of the day.

Jamie awoke to a silent apartment. She knew Mitch was gone just because it felt so empty. She couldn't exactly explain what she meant only that it was so. She’d slept surprisingly well, considering the worry that had been swirling in her brain until she dropped off mid-angst. Sitting with her bare feet wriggling into the pile of a plain, but probably hugely expensive shag-pile wool rug, she contemplated what she'd do for the rest of the day. Jamie had always been an early riser, getting a jump of the day often seeing her up before the sun. Today was not one of those days. Getting to her feet she shuffled into the kitchen and flipped the switch for the kettle. While that hissed into life she started to inspect all the cupboards, top and bottom for whatever passed for breakfast, given this was Mitch she was talking about.

She winced when she remembered what a bitch she'd been to him, and yet he hadn't berated her or sworn back at her, he'd been instead a complete sweetheart. It would seem she had totally lucked out with this guy. Maybe her luck, in general, was finally changing as well. The last cupboard she opened revealed a selection of breakfast options and she did a fist pump to celebrate.

Her hunger appeased and a hot coffee at her elbow, she fired up the laptop and logged into her email. She needed to update her account information for everyone she regularly paid, plus her bank. She felt a twinge of guilt at dumping her financial burdens on Mitch, but he had jumped in to fight the dragon...

Mitch had a call from his banker mid-morning to verify that he was the legal keeper of one Jamie Campbell who hadn't been slow to transfer her accounts to his. She didn't owe a great deal, but enough to make her vulnerable and for him to need to transfer a sum to clear the arrears and pay off the balances. That done he set up an automatic payment to an account in her name and arranged for a debit card to be sent.

At least she hadn't rejected everything about him.

He returned home to the sound of the stereo cranked up high and the sight of Jamie jumping about in what he supposed passed for dancing these days. The music was his, but the dancing was all hers, arms pumping the air while her feet carried her around the room, her eyes closed as she swirled, long red hair swinging out and about her.

He put his briefcase down and dumped his backpack, along with his jacket behind the armchair, Jamie still oblivious to his presence. He sat down and started to loosen his tie, grinning at the spectacle she made, dancing madly about his living room. The music suddenly ended and so did she, her eyes popping open as she turned, a scream of surprise at seeing him, making him wince visibly.

“Oh, my God! How long have you been here? Why didn't you stop me?” she panted, flopping down in the chair opposite.

“You looked like you were having fun,” he retorted mildly, tossing his tie over the arm of his chair.
and toeing off his shoes. The stereo was still on and a slow number started to fill the apartment. Jamie had been staring at him then suddenly an impish grin lit up her face and she bounced back onto her feet.

“Dance with me!” she held out her hand, but he hesitated. Impatient, she leaned down and grabbed his hand, pulling him to his feet with a surprising strength in her slight frame. They stood for a moment looking at each other, then Mitch moved to shove the coffee table out of the way, along with his chair while Jamie did the same, leaving them a space. Then she moved towards him, her head now bowed, her hands held out. He took hold of her hand and pulled her close enough to rest his other hand on her waist, the heat of her body easily felt through the thin blouse she was wearing. Her hand was engulfed in his, her other resting gingerly on his shoulder as if already regretting her impulsiveness. They started to move to the beat, shifting from one foot to the other, a good twelve inches between them and as self-conscious as a pair of juniors at their first school dance. He was holding her lightly, staring down at her bent head, wondering what she'd been doing all day. She was staring at his stockinged feet and wondering if he felt as foolish as she did. Before she could make up her mind whether to apologize and break away, he pulled her closer, her head fitting neatly under his chin, her body slight but perfectly curved to fit against him. Jamie able to hear his heartbeat if she rested her head on his chest. Both were so caught up in the moment they didn't realize the music had ended until the next track blasted out of the speakers, completely destroying the mood. They separated quickly, stepping back to allow much-needed space between them.

Jamie glanced up and saw Mitch was frowning, thinking it a sign he was unhappy with things. She darted over to the stereo and turned down the volume, the sudden quiet highlighting how fast she was breathing, almost panting and why was it so damn hot all of a sudden?

Mitch ordered in and they sat either side of his small dining table set beside the window which looked out over the city, the road lined with trees just starting to turn into their autumn colors.

“I had a call from my bank...” Mitch started, only to be interrupted.

“I'm sorry if I owe too much, I'll pay you back when I get a job!” Mitch shook his head. “No need. I was just going to say there should be a debit-card coming in the mail in a day or so with your name on it. I've set up an account so you can pay for taxi's and anything else you need. It will also act as a temporary ident-card until your new one comes in a week or so.” He didn't look up from eating, so didn't see the moisture pooling in her eyes from his simple, unadorned kindness to her. In a few days, she'd be free to go where she wanted, protected by his name and the security of his status.

“Thank you,” she said, unable to voice anything more elaborate. He looked up then and smiled.

“You're welcome.”

They sat and watched the news channel together, one in each armchair, the flat screen on the wall showing them several top stories about animal attacks around the world, from Africa – lions and rhino attacking tourists, in Slovenia, six people killed by dogs. The list went on. All of the incidents inexplicable to animal experts and officialdom. Mitch seemed particularly engrossed in the reports, but Jamie soon got up to use the bathroom, sickened by the news and loss of life. When she reappeared the television was off and Mitch was watching her with those damn eyes that saw everything.

“You okay?” he asked, noting her paler than usual face and shadowed eyes. Jamie nodded and fixed a patently fake smile on her lips.

“Fine. Thank you.” She gestured to the now dark screen. “What do you make of all this?” Mitch shrugged. “I was thinking about how this correlates to what happened to the lions at the zoo.” “And does it?” she asked, settling back in her chair.

“I don't know. I was only brought in to see if there was a commonality that caused them to kill their
trainer and then target those men.”
“You mean like both of them having a tumor, or being sick or something.”
Mitch nodded. “Or something.”
“What were they being fed?”
Mitch raised an eyebrow. “I have no idea. Whatever it was, it wasn’t detrimental to their general health. Both animals were at the peak of fitness and optimal weight with no evidence of anything abnormal. Whatever caused them to go wild wasn’t in their food.”
“But you don’t know that...” Jamie pushed.
“What’s your point?”
“My mother died when I was twelve. She was one of twenty-six other people who were all diagnosed with cancer in a small rural community that was surrounded by crops sprayed with chemical fertilizers and pesticides supplied by Reiden Global.” Jamie paused, the memories flooding back and making the telling of them difficult. “When I was old enough to understand the implications, we, the survivors of Fulsom banded together to bring a case of unlawful death against Reiden. I was living with my Uncle by then. We campaigned, we wrote letters to every paper, did interviews with every television station, every radio station, to spread the news of what we were doing and for a short time, it was all everyone talked about. We weren’t the only town to be affected, there were others, small rural communities that were suffering as we were. We even managed to get the senator from Louisiana, Dixon Vaughan on board, adding some real legal muscle to our cause.”
Mitch watched as she fought to maintain her composure, the battle lost when a tear escaped and slid down her face.
Jamie dashed it away angrily.
She had already cried rivers over her failure, no more.
“What happened?” Mitch asked, judging her to be ready to carry on.
“We were blocked at every stage. For each of the suits we filed, they filed as many injunctions and countersuits. For every lawyer we scraped together enough money to employ, they brought out a dozen to argue against them. It became a stalemate with time passing and more people dropping off, either from illness, old age or sheer exhaustion in fighting against the corporation. And all the while Reiden carried on, spreading more of their chemicals into the air, the soil, our water.”
“But you carry on the fight subversively,” Mitch stated.
“I started a blog called Somewhat Broken and posted everything I’d found, all the dots that connected back to Reiden, all the incidents and the irrefutable proof that Reiden was behind what was happening.” She wiped at her face, giving a small laugh. “I have a couple of thousand subscribers who regular click on the articles I post, a few of them even comment.” She sniffed and drew in a deep breath. “I wouldn’t be surprised if an employee of Reiden was one of them.”
Mitch let a period of quiet grow, allowing Jamie to regain her equilibrium.
“Do you really have a genie tattoo?” he asked, one eyebrow raised and a twinkle in his eye.
Jamie laughed. “I do.” She twisted in her chair and undid the buttons on her blouse just enough to allow her to slip the sleeve off her left shoulder, presenting him with the small blue image inked on her shoulder blade. “See?”
Mitch leaned forward the better to see it, his hand reaching out automatically to allow him to touch the blue patch of skin with the pads of his fingers tracing the outline.
“Did it hurt?” he asked, having no tattoo's himself. He pulled back and Jamie shrugged her blouse back over it, doing up the buttons, color staining her cheeks.
“I don't remember. I got it when I turned eighteen. The movie Aladdin came out around when I was born, and Mum told me it was my favorite movie, so when it came to deciding on what I wanted...”
“You chose the genie.” Mitch finished for her. He glanced over at his daughter's photograph, then back to his house guest. He wondered what his daughter would want for a tattoo if she reached an age to choose.
“It's a great icebreaker. Whenever someone sees it they always ask about it,” Jamie explained. She felt better now she'd told him about her mother and her battle against Reiden. “So what do you think?”
“About?”
“About Reiden being responsible for this current outbreak of animal attacks!”
“Hey, I don't base any opinion on such flimsy evidence. Animals attack people all the time, all around the world, and not one of them will have any rational explanation, it just happens.”

Jamie stared at him, her lips pulled into a thin line at his paltry excuse. “Bullshit.”

Mitch raised his hands in a gesture of acceptance. “Maybe, but neither your body of evidence nor my examination of those lions make any case for accusing Reiden Global of a worldwide conspiracy to make the animals attack people. What would be the point? An animal revolution? A vegetarian uprising? I don’t see a smoking gun that pins all of what is going on, with anything Reiden is doing or producing.”

Jamie glared at him. “Fucking typical.” She jumped out of her chair and gave vent to a muted scream of frustration, her hands folded into tight fists before she stalked off into his bedroom and slammed the door.

Mitch looked after her, at the blank door, and felt a curl of admiration for her dogged persistence when everything else was ranged against her. He admired her. She might be, as her blog seemed to attest – somewhat broken – but that didn’t stop him applauding her passion for her cause. She was a very, very small David up against a monumental Goliath, but that didn’t slow her down one bit. And when she got up a head of steam her eyes sparkled and her chest heaved in the finest tradition of all the great game changers. If she could change things from the sheer force of will alone, she’d have won against Reiden without any opposition.

Unfortunately, she was a very, very small voice lost amongst a sea of much bigger, louder voices backed by a shit load of money and more lawyers than you could walk over.

And she was also holed up in his bedroom, probably seething. Did people still seeth? He pondered that as he washed up the dishes and straightened the kitchen back to its usual neatness. As Jamie showed no indication she was coming out of his room anytime soon, he went and used the bathroom, brushing his teeth and using the toilet, changing out of his jeans and business shirt, leaving him in his boxers and undershirt. Several bits of feminine underthings hung from the shower rail and he mentally added finding a drying rack for her to use. Thinking about the list reminded him that he hadn't given her the phone he'd bought. It was already loaded with his contact details, confirming him as her keeper if she lost her ident-card again, and other information that protected her as well as telling him where she was at any given moment. Tracking, these days, was a standard feature, supplemented by those that could afford an implant as well. Implants were usually only considered if the relationship was deemed to be permanent, like with a biological child. Clementine's implant details were logged into all his technology, and he'd also added Audra's when Justin insisted she have one. If Jamie and he became a thing...

His thoughts stopped there, his brain stalling as he pondered why he'd remotely consider committing himself to a complete stranger on a couple of days acquaintance, even one with great big eyes and flaming hair.

Jamie eased the bedroom door open and stared out into the darkened lounge. Guilt washed over her when she saw that Mitch was stretched out on the sofa, an arm flung over his eyes, his glasses on the coffee table beside him. He seemed to be deeply asleep and she felt a twinge of annoyance that he slept untroubled by all that she'd told him. Padding into the kitchen she got herself a glass of water and returned to the bedroom, shutting the door quietly behind her. Getting back into his bed, she pulled the covers up and thought about all they'd discussed. She really shouldn't blame Mitch for not jumping blindly into her personal crusade. Her evidence was largely circumstantial, all of it easy enough to explain away if you really put your mind to it. It was just so unfair. She's been so horrible to her mother, ashamed of her baldness, the constant fatigue making her mother stay in bed so much and the endless trips to the county hospital. Despite the irrational logic of her thoughts, she still blamed herself for hastening her mother's illness, of not being more understanding and helpful. Never mind that she'd been a child at the time, with hindsight she could see there was a host of things she could have done to make her mother's life more comfortable, her passing less devastating. Sunk in her morose thoughts she turned her face into the pillows and wept, the release of emotion a culmination of recent events and old hurts.
Mitch hadn’t been asleep, just resting his eyes. When the bedroom door closed again, he wondered why he hadn’t asked to have his bed back. The couch wasn’t uncomfortable, but his bed was better. Rolling on to his side he closed his eyes in a concerted effort to sleep, only to hear something that banished all thought of sleeping completely. She was crying. Pushing back the covers he put on his glasses and padded to his bedroom door to listen. Yup, she was crying, sobbing her heart out, probably soaking his boringly plain cotton pillowcases while she was at it. He listened for a few moment then stepped away from the door. He should allow her some privacy, after all. Going back to the couch he sat on it, arguing with himself about whether to pretend he hadn’t heard anything, or do something else. A loud thump from the bedroom decided matters for him. Getting to his feet again he walked to the door and opened it.

Jamie was horrified when she knocked over the bedside table lamp, the heavy marble base hitting the rug with a thump. Scrambling out of bed she reached down to pick it up, only something had broken and it came apart in her hands. She stood there, the lamp in pieces in her hands and tears still coursing down her face. Then the door opened. Mitch stood in the doorway in a t-shirt and boxers, hair ruffled and concern in his eyes.

“I'm sorry...it broke.” Jamie held out the bedside lamp to him. Mitch stepped forward into the room and took the broken bits from her hands. “Sit down. I'll just get rid of this.” He unplugged the unfortunate lamp and dumped it all into the waste bin in the corner. Jamie was sitting on the side of the bed and stared at him blindly. Sure, Mitch was a guy, and guys usually don't have a clue what to do with weeping women, but he also had a heart and couldn't just leave someone so obviously in pain and hurting. He approached the bed and sat down beside her, an inch between them.

“Want to talk about it?” he asked, resting his hands in plain few on his thighs. Jamie shook her head, starting to feel embarrassed about her crying.

“I'm sorry I took your bed. I'll go sleep on the couch...” she made to get up but his hand wrapped around her wrist and held her in place.

“No need. I'm perfectly fine out there. Is it about your mother?” he probed, letting go of her wrist.

“Partly. I was just so horrible to her at the end. I haven't really spoken to anyone about her in so long, it brought up all these wretched memories of that time. I wish I could go back and change things, be nicer.”

“You were a kid, empathy isn't a skill you master until later in life. Your mother would have understood.”

“Doesn't make me feel any less guilty.” She stared at her hands. “But thank you.”

“You're welcome.” He got to his feet and started to walk away. “I probably won't see you tomorrow morning, so have a good day and I'll see you around four. Have a think about what you want to do on Saturday, I'm free all day to take you anywhere you want to go.” He turned before shutting the door. Jamie was where he'd left her, sitting a little less woebegone on the side of the bed.

“Good night, Jamie Campbell.”

“Good night, Mitch. Thank you.”

Jamie stared through the bars of the cage, a little disconcerted that the creature inside chose to stare right back at her, despite it being a very small monkey. Her choice of a day trip had been to visit the zoo. Of all the touristy things she hadn’t done in the time she’d been in LA, one was to visit the City of Angels Zoo. Mitch, being a regular visitor because of his frequent work requests, gained entry for them through the main administration, bypassing the queues of tourists and families waiting at the entrance.

“It's probably hoping you have a piece of fruit hidden somewhere. Don't get too close, they like to fling poop at anyone they don't like,” Mitch warned her, giving the monkeys a wide berth. The African Mammal exhibit was still closed, but the rest of the zoo seemed to be going about its business unmindful of the recent deaths. Despite being late in the year it was shaping up to be a sunny, hot day, Jamie glad she opted for shorts and a t-shirt, new purchases she'd made only
yesterday. They were passing one of the larger paddocks with a mixture of African herbivores grazing - zebras, antelopes, giraffes and even some warthogs formed a varied herd of animals, some pulling at hay nets set at different levels for varying heights. Mitch and Jamie were on the high walk that allowed you to feed the giraffe at certain times, so they had a good overview of the paddock as a whole. They paused to lean on the wooden rail and watch, the zebra's setting up a noisy series of brays devolving into their characteristic honking like donkeys. Soon all the animals had stopped what they were doing and making some sort of noise, then just as abruptly the noise stopped. All the people on the upper walk started to talk among themselves at the strange behavior, the animals below suddenly starting to move together until they formed one large herd, milling around in a loose circle, raising a dust.

“What the hell are they doing?” Jamie asked. “That's not normal, is it?”

Like all the others around them, they kept on watching, wondering what the animals would do next. As if hearing a silent signal the animals all turned in one direction and charged in a stampede towards one of the paddock gates. In a mass of thundering hooves, they broke through the fence like it was made of celery sticks, not chainlink and metal posts, a couple of the leading animals killed in the process and trampled underfoot.

A collective gasp went up from the watching crowd, then screams when it was realized that the animal stampede was now heading up the slope towards the viewing platform.

“Mitch?”

“We have to get out of their way!” He grabbed her hand and started to run, his height giving him some advantage over the people all running and screaming around them. The sound of the animals racing towards them was loud above the sound of panicked humanity, Mitch yanking Jamie over to one side and pushing her to climb a substantial tree beside the path.

“Get as high as you can, above the height of the giraffes!” he ordered, climbing up behind her. Others were starting to copy them, several young men and a couple of women clambering up through the branches to get out of the way. Mitch kept pushing Jamie to get higher, despite the other people stopping lower down.

The stampede was starting to pass below them, the smell of the combined musk of the herd almost overpowering amongst the dust and grit thrown up. The tree was shaking from the force of all those hooves drumming on the ground, Jamie pressing herself to the trunk while Mitch braced himself on a couple of branches, close enough to grab her if she was jolted loose and fell. A scream drew their attention to the people below them. Unbelievable the usually doe-eyed giraffes where reaching up to snap at any limb they could reach, catching the leg of one man and literally dragging him off the branch and flinging him to the ground. There a zebra waited to trample the poor man as soon as he hit the dirt.

Jamie turned her face away, scraping it on the rough bark, the screams of the others now climbing to get away ringing in her ears. Mitch stared down grimly as the usually gentle giraffes stretched as far as they could to reach them, only giving up when it was clear they couldn't. They moved on, seemingly scanning all the trees for anyone they could reach and dispose of. The distant sound of gunfire meant that security was on site and attempting to divert the animals away from the people. He didn't think they'd be very successful.

“Have they gone?” Jamie asked, turning her head back but not looking down. He held her gaze and nodded.

“For the time being, but I suggest we stay up here until we get an all clear.”

Jamie nodded and clung more tightly to the branches. In the end, they were up in the trees for an hour before staff on a four-by-four arrived and told them it was safe to come down. A body bag was bought for the trampled man's remains. Mitch helped Jamie down the last few feet because she was trembling with delayed shock and fear that the animals would return. Once on the ground, they were picked up by a zoo safari shuttle to be taken to an assembly area, there to give their account of what happened. Jamie clutched at Mitch's arm as they entered the packed area, the staff directing them to one corner where a police officer was taking witness accounts. Someone came around handing out bottles of water and Mitch snagged two, handing one to Jamie.
“Drink,” he ordered gently, taking the cap off for her. Their turn came to give an account and they did so after confirming their identities and relationship. Near the end, a zoo staff member came up and tapped Mitch on the shoulder.

“Dr. Morgan? We could sure use your help.”

Mitch nodded, not surprised at the request. “We done here?” he asked the officer. The man nodded. “You were lucky you had the sense to climb up high. Most of the casualties were from folk that didn't do that. How did you know?” the officer asked. Mitch shrugged. “Just a hunch.”

Jamie sat in the anteroom and fidgeted. It had been hours since Mitch had left her sitting alone. He had been dragged into doing necropsies on the animals shot only hours before in an effort to defuse the stampede killing visitors at the zoo. Her stomach rumbled and she scowled down at herself.

At that moment the swing door open and Mitch appeared, shrugging himself into his jacket.

“We can go now. I'm starved, are you hungry? I know I'm starved so you must be too...I know this restaurant...” He gabbled as he walked down the corridor, Jamie almost running to keep up with his long stride.

“Mitch! Wait...what happened in there, what did you find out?”

“Not right now. I'll tell you over dinner.”

The restaurant was half empty, the lighting muted despite the early hour. It was still just about light outside, but inside it was like it was the middle of the night. To her surprise, its specialty was vegetarian dishes, Mitch throwing out the excuse that he couldn't face anything that bled on his plate right now.

Soon their table was awash with different dishes of a variety of combinations, some with sauces, others raw, or only tossed with something tasty and light. Jamie dove in, her hunger almost palpable.

They didn't talk until they'd satisfied their immediate appetite, then while they picked at what remained, Jame repeated her question from earlier.

“What did you find out?”

Mitch sighed and pushed some greens around his plate. “Not anything that could account for such a thing happening like that. The animals were all healthy, a couple of the females were pregnant, none of those killed had any ailments or tumors in the brain, no evidence of any contributing factor anywhere. Only one strange anomaly seemed to exist in all the animals, those that were shot and those that still live.” He paused, turning to stare off into space.

Jamie waited but her impatience won out.

“What? Mitch, what did you see?”

He turned back to face her, his brow wrinkling as he told her. “Their eyes, all of them were showing an abnormality, a broken pupil. In humans, the condition is known as Iris Coloboma, a rare disorder where the pupil is misshapen often likened to a keyhole. In animals, it is harder to spot because very often there is no white, and the eyes are often a dark brown, like in horses or giraffes. Not all animal eyes have round pupils either, they are more often horizontal ovals or vertical slits, like cats eyes, although they revert to round when the iris expands in low light. What I'm trying to say is that all the animals I examined had at least one eye with an anomalous shaped pupil, a keyhole iris.”

“Were they blind?” Jamie asked. Mitch shook his head.

“No. The disorder in humans doesn't affect the ability of the eye to function, and the animals I examined showed no evidence of blindness or any other visual abnormalities.”

“What do you think caused it, and why did they stampede and do those horrible things?”

“I don't know. I have no idea how it is caused, except in humans it's usually a genetic disorder, not a spontaneous condition. I'd have to consult with other zoologists to see if this has happened before with these symptoms.”

Silence fell between them. Mitch had withdrawn into himself to consider all the possibilities, while Jamie just wanted to go back to the apartment and bolt the door.

“Can we go home, please?” she eventually asked. Mitch nodded and indicated to the waiter to bring
Back in the apartment, Mitch went immediately onto his computer to bring up any research into the unusual behavior of the animals coupled with the strange eye anomaly. Jamie felt unsettled and drifted into the bedroom to watch Mitch work, eventually falling asleep on the covers, curled up into a ball. Mitch was focused on the screen and almost leapt out of his skin when Jamie screamed behind him.

“Fuck!” he swore, turning his chair around to stare at the women on his bed. Jamie sat with her knees drawn up, her eyes wide open and staring around the room looking for something. As if suddenly realizing how late it was, he rubbed his eyes behind his glasses and shut down his computer, prepared to spend another night on the couch.

“Do you want me to get you anything?” he asked, her eyes turning to meet his.

“No, no I'll be fine. Just a bad dream, silly really. Won't happen again,” she rattled off, her eyes leaving his to roam around the room.

“I'll leave the light on then if you're okay with that?”

Jamie nodded. “Thanks.”

Mitch shut the door behind him, at a loss how to help her. Today events would probably give anyone who was there bad dreams for months.
The next day was Sunday, Jamie emerging from the bedroom looking bleary-eyed and not at all rested. Mitch had gone to a local bakery and brought buttery croissants to have with a soft Brie, as well as other tasty morsels to make up a late brunch. Jamie accepted a plate full of a mixture of sweet and savory, not feeling the least bit hungry until she bit into the fresh, flaky pastry.

“Oh, my God this is delicious,” she exclaimed around chewing. Mitch looked smug and turned to look out the window. In the street below there seemed to be fewer pedestrians than usual, as well as a dearth of cars, even by Sunday's standards. Frowning he got up from the table and snagged the remote to turn on the big screen.

“It's already on a news channel and instantly started to blare out the latest Breaking News alert.

"....we are warning residents all along the eastern shore, from Pacific Palisades south to Venice Beach and inland encompassing the suburbs of Brentwood Heights, Bel Air and around the UCLA to stay inside and close your windows. There are reports coming in about flocks of birds and swarms of insects that appear to be causing problems for anyone caught out in the open.....”

Jamie stared at the screen, her eyes wide. Swallowing her mouthful she turned back to face Mitch.

“That's us, isn't it?”

Mitch nodded, standing up to pull the window shut before checking all the windows in the apartment. He was just securing the one in the bedroom when he paused, seeing a dark, swirling mass over the rooftops.

He watched it for a few moments, marveling at the patterns the birds were making in the sky, then realized it was coming closer. Shutting the window tight he returned to the lounge and sat down at the table. Lifting his mug, he took a mouthful and swallowed.

“We're fine, I've checked all the windows, everything's tight,” he told her, reaching for and picking off a small bunch of green grapes from one of the plates. Jamie eyed him but took his words at face value and returned to her meal.

The first blackbird zipped passed the window, quickly followed by others, the flock arriving like a black cloud, the noise of the wings and chirping clearly audible through the glass. Jamie leaned forward to watch the unusual event, then leaped back when a bird crashed into the glass with enough force to crack it.

The sky seemed completely filled with feathers and beaks, more birds hitting the windows as if to batter their way through.

Both Mitch and Jamie were on their feet, backing away from the panes of glass.

“Mitch?”

Another bird hit the window hard enough to make the initial cracks start to spread in a web of lines.

“Mitch!!” Jamie's voice had a hint of hysteria in it, Mitch finally reacting by grabbing her hand and pulling her behind him into the bathroom and slamming the door. The window in the bathroom was small and of patterned glass, meaning the birds wouldn't be able to see them inside. The sound of breaking glass outside was suddenly loud, the squawking and fluttering now obviously on the other side of the door. Mitch stared in horrid fascination as shadows moved frenetically across the strip of daylight under the door. It was like the building was surrounded by a hurricane of beating wings, the sound like nothing he'd ever heard before.

Jamie was perched on the closed toilet lid, her knees drawn up and her hands over her ears, eyes screwed shut.

Mitch would have liked to have done the same, but instead reached for the towels draped over the
rails and started to stuff them into the gap under the door, blocking off any chance of anything coming through there. The news report was still going on, the announcer's voice adding to the cacophony of noise inside the apartment. With the door blocked off, he looked around for any other way insects could enter the room. He closed off the sink and shower plugs and shoved socks, from the laundry basket, up the taps to block them off. The last point of egress was the vent used to clear the room of steam up in the ceiling. He climbed onto the sink and could just reach the vent, stuffing more dirty clothing in as far as he could reach.

Panting, he jumped back onto the bathroom floor and listened. The rushing of wings and squawking had gone from outside the door, but another sound was building.

“What the fuck is that?” he asked himself, a quick glance over at Jamie showing her to have dropped her hands, her gaze looking up at the ceiling as the sound of buzzing grew louder and louder with each second.

The swarm didn't leave for another half hour, one or two insects managing to push their way through the towels only to be squashed by Mitch. They weren't bees, but hornets, able to sting repeatedly and not die. They were also much bigger than bees or the common wasps, almost an inch and half long with powerful wings. Both Mitch and Jamie kept a wary eye on the vent in the ceiling, as well as all the other ways of getting into the bathroom, but in the end, only the door showed any evidence of insects trying to get to them. Mitch was at a loss to explain the inexplicable behavior of either the birds or the insects, no possible scenario other than a B-grade movie plot or a science fiction novel could explain what had just happened.

A further half hour after the last noise was heard beyond the door, Mitch cautiously cracked it open. When it appeared all clear, he opened it further to allow them to leave. The room was a mess and scattered with several dead birds as well as a smattering of insect bodies. The lounge window was a write-off, the food on the table scattered on the floor along with the crockery and condiments.

“Whoa.” Jamie sighed, picking her way through the debris. Outside, they could hear the constant wail of police, fire, and ambulance first responders careening around the suburbs.

Peering carefully out the window, Mitch looked down and gasped. Several people, possibly from his building, were laying on the road not moving, apparently victims of either the birds or the Hornets.

“What are they dead?” Jamie's voice was right at his elbow but when he turned she wasn't looking down at the road, but up at him.

“I don't know, hard to tell from this distance...”

Jamie looked alarmed. “I meant the things on the floor...what were you talking about?”

Mitch realized his mistake just as she stepped forward and looked down, letting out a gasp of horror at the bodies below.

“Oh, my God, those poor people.”

Mitch drew her away from the window with an arm around her shoulders. “Look. We won't be able to stay here, so go pack your things and we'll find a hotel.” He spoke calmly and confidently, not giving in to his own fears for their safety. While he left Jamie to sort her stuff out, he went into the bedroom, stepping around the dead creatures, and fired up his computer. There was stuff he needed to download before he abandoned everything. If things continued like this, it was unlikely he'd be coming back to his apartment anytime soon, if ever. While his hard drive worked on downloading stuff to a portable terabyte hard drive, he mentally sorted through his belonging, discarding those that were impractical to take, and judging the rest on the space he had. He was just putting the last of the individual pen drives into a waterproof ziplock bag when Jamie appeared in the bedroom doorway.

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Yeah. Take my certificates out of their frames, and the picture of Clem. They should all roll up and fit in this document tube.” He held out the plastic tube and she took it with a nod.

In the end, he took two backpacks, split the contents of the safe between him and Jamie, and left the apartment, locking the door more out of habit than anything else. He also posted a note on the door...
to advertise that it was empty of occupants before they took the stairs down to the parking garage. Other occupants of the apartment block had similar ideas, joining them on the stairs in a mass exodus from the building. Jamie followed as closely behind Mitch as she could, his frequent look backs to check on her wellbeing dispelling some of the fear. In the garage, they piled their gear on the back seat of the Ford Focus and got in. Jamie had carried the laptop case along with her own pack and another with stuff she considered important, mostly along the lines of whatever could be used in a medical emergency as well as clean water. They had to queue up to get out of the parking garage behind all the other people of a similar mind.

“Where are we going to go?” Jamie asked.

“I was originally thinking we could just book into a local hotel, but I'm now thinking we should try and get out of LA altogether.”

“What about your job? The University?”

“If this is what I think it is, nobody is going to be worrying about anyone turning up for work.” They inched forward, the entrance to the garage up ahead.

“What do you think this is?” Jamie asked, sounding pissed that she had to ask.

“I have no proof, only conjecture and what's been happening this last week...”

“Mitch!” Jamie's hiss of frustration made him smile. At least she wasn't afraid anymore.

“I think for starters that things are going to get worse before they get better, if at all.” He glanced over at her. “I think that our world is about to change in ways we can't start to imagine.”

“You're scaring me,” Jamie said softly.

“Sorry, but this is pretty scary stuff, and this is going to sound ridiculously overdramatic...I think the fauna of planet Earth are starting to take it back.”

They had reached the head of the queue and drove out into the street, the cars in front going in all directions. Mitch chose to go right, heading north and out of the area around the University. Jamie held her peace, giving Mitch the ability to concentrating on wending his way through the streets blocked with panicked people, desperate drivers and first responders on their way to call outs. Some side roads were blocked off for other reasons, police directing traffic at intersections. When Jamie glanced down one blocked off street, it was to see smoke billowing out of an apartment building and shrouding the firemen working to put the blaze out. She remained silent until Mitch had them on the San Diego freeway, the traffic moving steadily if not speedily.

“Is there anywhere safe?” she asked at last.

“Relative term,” Mitch retorted. “My daughter is three thousand miles away on the other side of the continent. I'm thinking of getting on a flight to Boston. Maybe it will be safer there, maybe this is just an anomaly here, not there.”

Jamie stared at him, wondering for a moment if he was joking.

“Dammit. You're right, of course.” They were stopped now, hemmed in on all sides by vehicles. To save fuel he switched the engine off. Nothing was moving, some people getting out of their cars to try and see what the hold up was. Mitch leaned his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes. Jamie turned on the radio to see what the latest news had to say.

“....residents are asked to stay off the roads and stay in their houses. The Emergency Management Department is liaising with the Governor's office to start evacuations from the worst affected suburbs...” the messages went on with updates about roads that were blocked by accidents, the San Diego Freeway being one of them. A death toll had been started with a conservative initial estimate of only twenty people dying from being attacked by the birds or stung by the Hornets. It made for grim listening. When it started to repeat she switched it off. It was getting stuffy in the car so she wound the window down, hearing voices from all the different cars and vehicles around them. Some, like her, had their radios on, listening for anything that could explain what was happening. Others were sitting or standing on their car rooves to see as far ahead as possible. They were stranded on a
stretch of freeway just past Sunset Boulevard turn off with the hills of Bel Air on their right, and the Getty on their left, although all they could see were scrub-covered slopes next to the southbound lanes. On their side was a continuous brick wall, shielding the residents on the other side in their leafy suburbs from the dust and noise of the millions of cars passing every day. It also meant there was nowhere to go. Traffic traveling into LA was thin and moving fast, but with a concrete barrier in the way, no one could even make a u-turn and go back the way they'd come. It was a stalemate.

Jamie passed Mitch the water bottle and he took a mouthful before passing it back. They had been stuck in the traffic jam for over an hour and people were starting to get impatient. Several cars had elected members to trek further ahead and report back with news. The radio was just repeating the same message without pause, all the channels doing the same. There was cell phone reception and Mitch had already made a call to Boston to see how things were there. So far, there hadn't been any reports of anything, which put his mind at rest temporarily. He'd instructed his ex-wife to not take chances and go out only to stock up on food and water until whatever was happening stopped. Whether she listened was another matter. He also got to speak to his daughter briefly, since his communication with her lately had been non-existent it was strained at best. Jamie tried not to listen in but they were stuck in a car, for fuck's sake, and she wasn't keen to step outside to preserve his privacy.

When he hung up she didn't say anything, just stared out the front windscreen and pretended to be invisible. After a few moments, Mitch cleared his throat and looked over at her.

“I guess you heard, they haven't had anything happen in Boston, that they know of.”

“That's good news,” Jamie responded. “Are you still wanting to go there?”

Mitch shook his head. “No point. Clem has her mum and Justin – he's a pretty decent guy. She hardly needs her spare dad there as well.”

Jamie stared at his profile, noting the cynical twist to his mouth and the frown between his brows.

“Want to tell me what happened? We're not going anywhere, and I'm a good listener.”

He turned his head to look at her, only meeting her eyes for a moment before looking away.

“Not exactly best-seller material...”

“Tell me,” Jamie prompted.

He let out a deep sigh and tilted his head back again. “Clem was two when I finally left. Audra and I had been together for a couple of years and then she fell pregnant. We got married right away, but I was still studying in those days, so money was tight and we fought. After Clem was born we tried to make it work, for her sake, and it was good for awhile.” He paused, resting his elbow on the side window and covering his eyes with his hand.

“Anyway, it didn't last and I left. Audra met Justin six months later and they were married before Clem's third birthday.” He lowered his hand. “Then, three years ago, when she was seven she started to get sick. It wasn't too bad at first, she got a little clumsy but then she started to have seizures. Lots of kids with her syndrome lose their eyesight or get different personalities, not my Clem. She's just dying.”

“Oh, Mitch,” Jamie whispered, appalled.

“Clem didn't know me, I'd been gone since before she could remember and I'd stayed away to give Audra and Clem a chance to have a happy family with Justin. When she got sick I started beating down the doors of every research hospital in the country, gathering everything I could find out about Glazier's Syndrome. There were tests and more tests until Audra called a halt to it all. Too many doctors, too many needles and all I was doing was robbing Clem of whatever life she was gonna have left.” He paused again, overcome for a moment with anger at his failure to save his child. “She's on medication to help with the symptoms, and I got her a companion dog, Henry, who senses when a seizure is about to happen, giving her some warning.”

“When did you last see her?”

Mitch rubbed his forehead. “I've been pretty much out of the picture for the last three years.” He confessed, his voice subdued.

Jamie felt a great deal of sympathy for his situation, and it went some way to explaining his single status and his tendency towards being a loner. Guilt was an unforgiving emotion, like regret.
“How long does she have?” Jamie asked softly. Mitch shook his head. “Unless a miracle cure is found, she won't make it much past her teens.”

Jamie watched through the windscreen as Mitch joined a couple of other men standing against the brick wall, an improvised urinal as time continued to bleed away. Some of those first sent to find out what the holdup was had returned, the news spreading through the cars. A commuter plane had been brought down by birds and made an emergency crash landing directly on the freeway. Nobody was going anywhere for some considerable time yet.

“Shit.” Mitch thumped the steering wheel when Jamie related the latest news after he returned. “We can't stay here.”

“Why not?” Jamie asked.

“Because it could be days before they complete a scene examination, then clear the road enough for traffic to start flowing again. If the birds or the insects come back, where do we shelter then?”

“In our cars,” Jamie stated what she thought was obvious.

Mitch shook his head. “Cars are full of vents, holes, and gaps. I don't want to be in one when a swarm hits and die a death of a thousand Hornet stings.”

Jamie stared at him for a moment. “What if we're caught out there and the swarm hits, or the birds?”

Mitch looked over at her. “I just know I don't want this car to be my coffin. If you want to stay here, I'll leave you the keys.”

Jamie shook her head. “Oh no. Where you go, I go.”

They did a quick reassessment of their packs but ended up not discarding a thing. Mitch left the keys in the ignition so that when the traffic finally started to move, anyone could drive the car to the side of the road to get it out of the way. Then they started to walk.

Others seemed to have come to the same decision, the thin line of people walking forward, a few to start with, then others soon joined them with whatever supplies they’d brought with them, a steady stream of people on both sides of the freeway, by the concrete barrier and alongside the brick wall, trekking out of LA.

A half hour of steady walking brought them within eyesight of the downed plane, bringing home just how pointless it was to still be sitting in their car and why their decision had been the right one. The plane was skewed across the freeway covering all the lanes, its undercarriage sheered off on impact leaving the plane to skid along on its nose. Inflatable escape slides were deployed on both sides indicating that passengers and crew had survived, but the sheer scale of the accident made Mitch's suggestion it would take days all the more believable.

Once they were passed the downed airplane, the freeway was clear as far as the eye could see, apart from the expected collection of official vehicles – police, fire and crash investigators. Jamie was hunkered down beside the concrete barrier, taking a rest while Mitch went over to one of the police officers to see what provision was available to transport those people wanting to leave LA. Several other men had gone with him and the people left behind were endlessly discussing what their next move could be.

Jamie got up when she saw Mitch returning, his expression optimistic.

“They're organizing buses to shuttle people as far a Ventura Boulevard. We'll be able to hire another car from there,” he told her, impulsively giving her a quick hug, letting her go before she'd managed to gather her wits and push him away.

The buses duly arrived and packed them in for the short drive north to the Ventura Boulevard off-ramp where the passengers was let out in front of the Cheesecake Factory at the Galleria. Everyone then dispersed into the shopping center or along the footpath. Mitch and Jamie headed west under the overpass to find the nearest rental car agency. It was surreal to be trudging along with backpacks and a grim determination while all around the traffic and people carried on as if nothing unusual had happened - there wasn't a plane crashed on the freeway, people hadn't died from bird and hornet.
attacks and animals hadn't stampeded at the Zoo.

They finally arrived at a small rental agency next to a Rover dealership. The counter staff were understandably surprised to hear what had been happening further south but happily signed over one of their hire cars when Mitch produced his platinum Visa card, despite his less than immaculate appearance and ad hoc luggage.

Once more mobile, Mitch used the GPS to find the quickest route back onto the freeway and heading north. They’d made a brief detour through a drive through, Jamie hopping out while Mitch waited, for her to use the bathroom, then they were back on the road and joining the steady stream of evacuee’s leaving LA.

It was getting on dark when they arrived in the Santa Clarita area, Mitch stopping at the Best Western Valencia as the streetlights came on. After the long day, they didn’t quibble about taking a twin bed single, Jamie disappearing into the bathroom before Mitch had carried his packs up to the room on the first floor. Soon she was done with the shower and he was able to soak under the warm water, enjoying washing away the dust and sweat and letting the hard spray massage his back and legs. After a shave and change of clothes, he emerged a new man.

Jamie was sitting on one of the twin beds, about to take a pair of scissors to her long hair.

“Woah! Hang on, what are you doing?” he exclaimed, Jamie pausing before taking the first cut.

“I would have thought that was obvious. Do I need your permission to cut my own hair?”

“No, of course not...I just...sorry. Pretend I didn't say anything.” He turned away to start rifling through his own bags. Jamie watched him for a moment, dropping the scissors down into her lap.

“Do you like my hair long?” she asked, not in a coy way, but just matter of fact.

Mitch kept his back to her and cleared his throat. “I do. It makes you look...younger.”

Jamie looked at him suspiciously. “How much younger?”

Mitch turned around, frowning as he tried to discern the context of her question. “What do you mean - 'how much younger’?”

“I mean, do you mean younger as in very much younger, because that's your kink?”

Mitch looked thoroughly confused. “What?”

“Well, you're not gay...”

“Obviously!”

“...and you never remarried, or have a girlfriend, but you've used pro's before – did they look young too?”

Mitch gaped at her. “I think you just asked me if I like young girls - if I'm a pervert!?” He spat the last word and stood, hands on hips, looking pissed.

Jamie shrugged. “Just checking. As you said yourself, I don't know you from Adam, and there has to be some reason why you haven't pursued a long-term relationship before now.”

Mitch glared at her. “I would have thought my story about Clementine would give you reason enough for my single state.” He went to turn away, then turned back. “And for your information, I have had a girlfriend since I divorced Audra.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow at the vehemence of his retort. “Where is she now, then?”

Mitch stopped moving, then turned and sat down heavily on the side of the bed, facing her.

“You won't leave this alone until you've squirreled out every last grubby morsel.”

Jamie shook her head, not bothering to verbally reply to what was essentially a rhetorical question. “Hopefully this will satisfy your intense interest in my past sex life. I had a girlfriend, I was her keeper for over a year. We were happy, or so I thought. Allison met my father, Max, at some faculty event and liked him better. They got married and now she's my stepmother...”

“Oh, my God. Your father stole your girlfriend?” Mitch visibly flinched at her less than tactful summation of what had been a painful incident in his life.

“Yes. Now can we dispose of any suggestion that I fancy long hair because I have a hankering for young girls?”
“Sorry.” Jamie offered, still marveling at the pain Mitch must have endured over his father and his girlfriend. “So I guess you don't have much of a relationship with your father either?”

“Nope. Burnt that bridge without any hesitation or regret.” He got up and moved the packs off his bed, depositing his shaving gear on the bedside table alongside his glasses case. “If you have no further questions about my private life, I'd like to get some rest.” He lay on the bed, on top of the covers and took his glasses off, putting them in the case before rolling on to his side away from her. He was still wearing his jeans and t-shirt.

Jamie fiddled with the ends of her hair, pondering what he'd told her. Whoever his girlfriend was, she must have decided the father had more to offer in the long run over the son. Or maybe the girlfriend thought the father would leave her nicely situated when he finally departed. Either way, they had both hurt Mitch in ways that were affecting his life still. And yet he'd still found it in his heart to rescue her. It was a paradox.

It started with her simply muttering in her sleep, the room dark except for the light behind the curtains from outside. He tried to settle but she started to speak more loudly, the words still indistinguishable but the fear in them clearly expressed. Jamie was having a nightmare. He shut his eyes and tried to block it out, but a short scream had him out of the bed and across to her, where she was now pushed up against the headboard, her hands and arms flailing to get at something only she could see. Her eyes were tight shut but she was panting and groaning, batting at something around her.

“Jamie? Wake up… you're having a nightmare!” He tried to capture one of her hands but his touch had the opposite effect. She screamed and kicked out, connecting with his stomach and knocking the wind out of him. He grunted and pulled back, a flailing hand catching him across the face with a fair amount of force. Determined to wake her, he grabbed her wrists and used his body to subdue her legs, Jamie writhing and twisting beneath him, still apparently asleep and in the throws of her night terrors.

“Get them off me!” she cried out, clearly and loudly. Mitch struggled to hold her.

“Jamie, for God's sake, wake up!” the struggling body suddenly stilled, Jamie's eyes opening wide, the whites visible around the irises.

“Get them off me, please, they're going to kill me!” Her plea was hissed through gritted teeth.

“There's nothing on you, Jamie you were dreaming. Wake up!”

She tried to free her hands but Mitch held them pinned to the pillows, his body keeping her from moving more than was needed for breathing.

“I'm going to let go now, so don't move until I'm sitting up… okay?” Mitch moved slowly and carefully, sitting up on the bed and letting go of her wrists. Jamie instantly pulled her legs up to her body and wrapped her arms around her chest.

“Have they gone?” she asked, her eyes still huge in her pale face.

“You were dreaming. They were never here,” he told her. “Try to sleep, it's early yet.” Getting to his feet he padded to the bathroom and shut the door.

Jamie sat pressed up hard against the head of the bed, her brain assessing that the swarm she'd been fighting in her dream was insubstantial now she was awake. The flushing of the toilet and tap running reinforced the fact that there were no insects trying to kill her with their stings. Mitch switched off the light before leaving the bathroom, moving over to his bed and sitting down. He took off his jeans and pulled back the covers to climb in, making no comment to Jamie.

She waited until she heard the faintest of snores from Mitch, then unwound herself and got off her bed to go to the bathroom, not putting the light on until she had shut the door behind her. She stared at her reflection, noting the circles under her eyes and how drawn she looked.

“Attractive,” she said to her reflection, poking her tongue out for good measure. When she was done she switched the light out and opened the door, listening. Again that soft snore indicated that Mitch was still fast asleep, the pale orange light from outside showing the hump of his body under the covers. She wasn't tired now but didn't want to wake him so she padded over to the window and pulled the blinds apart to look out. It had rained and the carpark looked slick and shiny under the
security lights, their car's color washed out to a uniform gray, looking like all the others parked outside the motel units. A walkway ran the length of the upper level and she quietly opened the door and stepped out, leaving the door ajar. The air was cool and damp and she breathed it in deeply, ignoring the cold concrete under her feet. She stood for a moment leaning on the metal rail, just looking about at the other rooms on either side and down to side wings, so it was like a square 'U'. Some lights were still on and she wondered what the people were doing up so late. She saw something move out of the corner of her eye and turned her head. Small, dark bodies were starting to emerge from the shadows cast by the other wing of the building, running across the wet asphalt in a steady stream, claws making a skittering sound that sent shudder down her body. She opened her mouth to scream, but only a croak came out, the army of rats not pausing when they reached the other side, but wriggling under the doors of the ground floor units. Then lights came on and the screaming started. Jamie drew in a breath to scream herself, but a hand came around her face and clamped over her mouth, preventing any sound escaping. “Get dressed and your gear packed as quickly as you can. We have to get out of here.” Mitch pulled her back into the room, just as doors opened along the walkway and other guests poured out to investigate the screams coming from the bottom hotel rooms.

They were packed and ready to go before the first rat started up the stairs to the second level. By then everyone was in full panic mode, yelling and running, some going back into their rooms to simply barricade themselves in. Mitch and Jamie climbed out of the back of their unit and hurried down the fire escape to the ground. Lights were on in nearly all the rooms now, providing enough to guide them to the alleyway between the buildings. Mitch paused and checked it before guiding Jamie down it to the carpark. The sound of gunfire made them both duck for a moment, then they ran to their car, bent over, and dived in when Mitch unlocked it. Others were jumping from the balcony onto the cars below to avoid the rats now racing along the upper levels. Doors were being flung open and people were running out screaming, with rats hanging from their clothes and hair, Jamie sobbing in horror when one woman appeared and collapsed on the ground near their car, her face covered in blood, more rats piling on top of her as she writhed. Mitch gunned the motor and reversed out of their space, spinning the car around and heading out of the carpark at top speed. They careened out of the forecourt and onto the main road, several other cars following who had also managed to escape in time.

Mitch clutched the steering wheel and concentrated on the road. He was still shaking in the aftermath of their narrow escape. If Jamie hadn't stayed awake, if he hadn't got up to see how she was, if they'd been still in their beds, the rats would have found them too. The specimens he'd seen in the carpark were easily a foot in body length and another foot of tail to add on. Add to that the sheer numbers, probably in their thousands, certainly in their hundreds, there was little defense except to escape and run. He glanced over at Jamie, who hadn't moved since she'd done up her seatbelt and curled up against the door. If she was having nightmares about the birds and insects, now she had the rats to add to her night terrors.

The rental car had a full tank of gas and he was not stopping until they were a long way away from LA.

Daylight found them in the middle of nowhere at a Texaco gas station on the Paso Robles Highway stoically named Blackwells Corner. It had gas and it had groceries and fuck all else in the middle of nothing. For their purposes it was perfect. They pulled into the parking lot, in the shade of the barn-like building and drew an easy breath for the first time since the rats. Jamie had slept some of the ways, surprisingly, the lull of the engine noise and soft music Mitch had on helping to keep the dreams at bay. Now it was early morning and trucks that had stopped overnight were leaving and other's pulling in for breakfast. “Can I get you anything?” she asked, undoing her seatbelt and opening the door. Mitch looked exhausted, rubbing his eyes behind his glasses.
“Coffee...just coffee. Better make it black...”

After chatting with the girl behind the counter and picking up the day's newspapers, she returned with the coffee to find Mitch fast asleep, his seat pushed back and lowered to give his legs more room. Jamie carefully closed the door and put the coffees in the holders between their seats, then unfolded the paper and prepared to catch up on the news.

She returned to the store twice more, once to use the bathroom, the other to get some pastries for their lunch. She'd seen the sandwich truck arrive and wanted to get in early. After four hours kip Mitch awoke with a jerk when Jamie shut her door with a snick.

“Wha...Where? How long was I out?” he asked, looking around, squinting at the bright sunlight and licking his dry lips.

“Here.” Jamie held out a bottle of water and he took it, chugging it down gratefully. He sat up and adjusted his seat back to upright, taking off his glasses to dry wash his face before putting them back on again. Jamie handed him a paper plate with a selection of sandwiches. Mitch placed the plate on his dashboard and immediately stuffed one in his mouth, chewing enthusiastically.

“Hmmm, these are good,” he commented after devouring the second one. Jamie watched him eat with some satisfaction.

“Your idea to get out of the city was a good one,” she said. “According to several of the reports around the world, the animal attacks have been largely concentrated on populated areas, cities and major towns. And it is literally all around the world, from London to Australia, from Budapest to Bangkok.” She lifted up the paper and read some of the articles about the places that had been hit so far. As she read, Mitch polished off the last of the sandwich and took another swig from the water bottle.

“Good to know we're not alone, but is there anything in there that suggests what is causing this?” he asked.

She turned a couple of pages and folded the page behind to isolate the one article.

“There's an organization called the DGSE, under the umbrella of the French government that has an International team working on the problem, they’re calling it a mutation, the most common symptom is a 'defiant pupil'. Do you think that's like your keyhole thing in the eye?”

“Defiant pupil,” Mitch repeated. “Could be. What is this team supposedly doing? Does it say?” Jamie read further into the article. “Not really, only that they are trying to determine if the attacks are linked or being caused by something or someone.”

Mitch let out a short laugh. “So they don't know any more than we do. Do they say who is part of this team?”

“It only mentions one team member, and that's because he had a famous father, apparently. They give his name as Jackson Oz...”

“Never heard of him,” Mitch interjected.

“...son of Robert Oz, noted scientist?”

“Discredited crackpot more like,” Mitch muttered.

“You knew him?”

“Know of him. He was a professor at Harvard but was ultimately fired from there because of his insane ideas about animal evolution. I seem to remember that he was the first to expound upon this theory regarding the ‘defiant pupil’. He seemed to think that the animals were able to communicate over great distances and between species, that depredations by humanity would cause them to one day access these forgotten memories, that the mutations would manifest and they'd take over the world. An animal revolution. After he left Harvard he dropped out of sight. His theories were published but largely ignored or discredited by the scientific community. I thought he was dead...” Jamie looked at the article again. “I'd say he wasn't so crackpot after all if his son is now heading up a team to tackle the problem.”

“Good luck to them.”

Jamie looked at him over the edge of the paper. “Aren't you a little bit interested? I mean, come on,
who wouldn't like to have the kudos of saving the world from an animal Apocolypse?" Mitch looked back at her. “You want to go save the world? I'll write you a note...” Jamie turned back to the paper and ignored him.

Mitch made the next trip to the store, using the facilities there and buying some fresh fruit to supplement their supplies. He looked longingly at the bottles of bourbon behind the counter but ignored them. He needed to keep his wits about him if he was to keep himself, and now Jamie safe from the chaos building around them. Instead, he looked at the small selection of guns on display. He didn't own one, never had and if life hadn't been irrevocably altered probably never would have, but things were different now. The older guy behind the counter was helpful and informative, taking Mitch to the backroom where there was a small, soundproof gun range, instructing him on the rudiments of gun handling, shooting, and maintenance. His patience was rewarded by Mitch buying two handguns and a shit load of ammunition after filling out the required paperwork and having his identity confirmed and a license issued. When your life is fully documented and free to be accessed by anyone with an interest to look, it was easy to sift the felons from the citizens. It wasn't worth losing your license, or your business by peddling illegal goods to ineligible customers.

Returning to the car Mitch packed one of the guns in his pack and the other in the glove compartment of the car, ignoring Jamie's raised eyebrows.

“Do you know how to shoot that thing?” she asked.

“Do you?” he retorted. “We'll both get some practice in later, for now, it's just a precaution.” He pulled out his other purchase, a comprehensive map book of the united states.

“A little light reading?” Jamie teased.

“We need to come up with a plan. We're out of LA now but I have no idea where to go from here.” “We could still head across country to Boston. There seem to be fewer reports of attacks on the east coast.”

“And I could visit Clem at the same time? Not very subtle, are you?” Mitch retorted. “Mitch, you should at least see your daughter, honestly. Who knows if this thing happening with the animals is going to settle down or get worse. Either way, when was the last time you took a vacation, Professor?”

Mitch looked over at her, his mouth open as if he was going to speak, then he shut it. “Actually, never, at least not in the last three years.”

“There you go!” Jamie enthused. “Think of this as a vacation, only without planes. If you don't want to drive all the way there, what about a train? That could be a comfortable option.” Mitch chewed his lip, considering her suggestion. “That's not such a bad idea.” “I'll find us the nearest train station,” said Jamie, pulling out her new phone and bringing up Google. “Ah, slight problem with that. There's no direct Amtrak to the east except through either back to Los Angeles or north to Sacramento. And even then, it's a three day trip across country.” “And by car?”

“Actually, if we go non-stop, it's about two days tops. But that's no stopping for overnights or anything.” “That's a lot of country to cover.” “Three thousand miles, give or take.” “How about another suggestion. We find somewhere the animals and insects don't like and we vacation there until this all blows over,” Mitch suggested. “Sounds great, if such a place exists and your funds last the distance.”

“You really are fixated on my financial situation. Look, I might not look much like Rockefeller, and I certainly don't have access to those sorts of funds, but I am able to take care of us both for some considerable time, so worry less about my wallet, and worry more about where we're going to go.” “So Boston is off the table?” Jamie asked. “For the time being. Have they had any reports of animal attacks in Canada?” Jamie did a quick search. “Nope. Not so far. That's not to say...” Mitch cut her off. “I know, I know...but for now, that hasn't been affected?”
“Not a one.”
“So, if what is affecting the rest of the world could be some sort of airborne virus for which the effectiveness is reduced in low temperatures, just going by that information...”
“Pretty slim, if you ask me...” Jamie muttered. Mitch ignored her.
“It could just be a case of going somewhere cold enough that it doesn't affect the local animal and insect population.”
“Shame the opposite can't be true, I could go a vacation in the Carribean or somewhere exotic like Chile, I hear it's nice there.”
“Without dissecting and testing, either could be true. We don't know.”
“So we throw a dart and go where it lands?”
Mitch was flipping through the map book, looking for a particular area. “Maybe we just need to go somewhere there aren't a lot of animals.”

In the end, they decided to carry on to Paso Robles itself and make a decision there. Jamie was thrilled to find out it was a premium winemaking valley with a number of world-class wineries to choose from.

“Now this could be a vacation, sipping wine among the grapes, how about it?”
Mitch returned her grin with one of his own. “Does nothing get you down?”
“Not if there's a glass with something nice in it at the end of the day.”

With that in mind, they chose the second winery that offered accommodation as well as a wine tour. It was a family run business, quiet and small, but no less popular for that. They were late for the first tour and decided to check in and take the afternoon tour instead. The host was jovial and generous, the room offered airy and fresh, looking out over the vineyards while shaded from the sun. Jamie leaned on the window ledge and breathed in the air, which was sweet and redolent of grapes.

“Boy, I could get used to this.”
Mitch entered with their bags, dumping them on the floor and joining her at the window.

“Nice.” Was his only comment. He turned away, Jamie following, only now noticing the one flaw in their current plan.

“There's only one bed.”
“Um....yeah. It's a big bed. Is this going to be a problem?” Mitch asked, already claiming the left-hand side with his shaving kit and other stuff being put in the drawer of the bedside table.
Jamie raised a nonchalant shoulder. “Not for me.”

“Then that's settled. If you don't need the bathroom, I could do with a shower.” Mitch snagged a couple of the fluffy towels at the end of the bed and waited for her to make a comment.

“Go ahead, I think I'll go explore.”

“Don't go too far...” Mitch started to say, then bit off the rest. He opted for something more neutral instead. “Have fun.”
Jamie gave him a funny look.

“I will.”

Their host, Bob, was happy to let her wander around the main room and out onto the patio. Here the smell of the earth and growing things was a tangible presence, the view of rolling vineyards impressive. She could see people working along the rows, harvesting the fruit. She was presented by Bob with a glass of their award-winning Rose, Jamie savoring the crisp, sweet flavor, a perfect compliment to the place itself. It seemed impossible to believe that anything bad could happen in such an idyllic place, but it was only last night when they'd escaped the horror of the rats, so anything was possible.

Mitch emerged from the bathroom, towel slung low on his hips, his clothes in his other hand. They were going to have to find a laundromat soon or his limited wardrobe was going to run out of clean everything. Laying out an outfit from what was left in his pack, he went to the window to stare out at the greenery laid out in row upon row, following the contours of the land precisely. The slight breeze blew over his damp skin and he shivered at the sensation, not because he was cold, but because it felt
nice, reminding him how long it had been since he'd last been naked and felt the sun on his back, or been swimming nude in a river. He'd become accustomed to sleeping in his skin for some time now, his usual attire for school so buttoned down it sometimes suffocated him. Since the arrival of his new acquisition, boxers and t-shirts had taken over to preserve his dignity and her blushes. Never mind that he wasn't going to touch her, it was the implication that naked male skin equated to sexual interest, which wasn't the case this time, but he wasn't about to argue the point. Plus now they would have to share a bed, so to preserve the status quo, he'd have to endure covering up more so than not. You know what they say about best intentions!

Bob arrived at Jamie's elbow to advise that the afternoon tour would be starting in half an hour if she wanted to inform her partner? He was too polite to assume anything, so didn't immediately use the word 'keeper' until their relationship was clarified. Sinking the last of the lovely pink wine, she walked down the corridor and threw open the door of their room, not really thinking it through, that maybe Mitch wasn't quite done with getting dressed. In point of fact, he hadn't even started, only getting as far as discarding his towel before reaching for his boxers. This left him completely exposed when Jamie burst back into the room. They both froze. Jamie stood with her mouth open, sweeping her eyes up and down his body as if she'd never seen a naked male before. The faint rustle of the towel hitting the carpet only just beat the sound of the door to the room shutting more than a little firmly behind her. Jamie backed up a step, her shoulders hitting the wood paneling while her eyes never left off devouring the sight before her. Mitch, after remaining motionless for a few seconds, regained his savoir-faire and bent down to retrieve the towel, but instead of wrapping it once more around his waist, he simply tossed it onto the bed, his hands then gravitating to his hips in a typical male stance, completely uncaring of his naked state. Jamie seemed to be transfixed, so he casually reached for his underclothes and proceeded to dress, in what he supposed was really a reverse striptease, if he thought about it at all. Jamie eventually came out of her surprised state and watched the show with her face as pink as a peony. When he was fully dressed, he continued to ignore her and picked up the towel to return it to the bathroom. Only when he was out of sight did she move, and then only to find a chair to sit down on. Jamie wouldn't consider herself a prude, or a virgin for that matter. She knew what a naked man looked like, although Ethan would never have let himself be seen like that, and he was a smooth and hairless as a snake compared to Mitch, who was not exactly hirsute, but had enough dark hair in interesting places to make him intriguing and beyond her experience to date. He was also different in other areas to Ethan, apparently. Ethan had been only her second sexual partner in her life, so she had little to base a comparison, but it would seem that her previous two partners still had some growing up to do.

Mitch returned to the room and noted that Jamie hadn't moved from the chair she'd sunk into after she got over her initial shock. She wasn't a child and had admitted herself she'd been in a relationship with her supervisor for a year, so why the affectation of shy virginity when faced with a naked man. Now she sat staring out of the window as if the view was fascinating. “Did you want to see me about something?” he asked, bundling up his dirty clothes into a bag. Jamie turned her head back to look at him, a blush staining her cheeks as if still picturing him naked. She cleared her throat and swallowed. “Bob told me to tell you the afternoon winery tour is about to start if you're still interested.” She was proud of how even and unemotional her voice sounded, almost bored. “I'm ready to go when you are,” Mitch responded, tucking his wallet into his jacket along with the slim folder of essential papers he never left behind. Jamie got to her feet and skirted around him to get to the door, Mitch smiling at her behavior. It would seem that Miss Jamie Campbell wasn't so unaffected as she liked to pretend.

The tour was interesting and told them all these ever needed to know about the process of growing, processing and ending up with a wine at the end of it all. Bob was an excellent tour guide, had a
passion for his craft and a great sense of humor. It helped to ease the tension between his guests, the group made up of a couple of casuals as well as the newcomers to the B&B. When it was all over Mitch and Jamie retired to the comfortable lounge and leafed through some of the advertising pamphlets scattered on the coffee table.

“Where do you want to go this evening?” Mitch asked, sitting back in the single armchair. Jamie leaned forward and shuffled the pieces of paper around then picked on.

“Here.”

It was all so normal, as far removed from the horrors of the past few days as possible. It was like they were truly on vacation, the restaurant small but full of characters with the dining room dressed with Italian posters, greenery and little touches of Italy to reinforce its specialty – gourmet pizza. Candles glowed warmly and the lighting was soft and intimate. It would have made a perfect setting for a first date, Mitch thought. Instead, he was sitting opposite a woman who seemed to be made up of a whole heap of confusing conundrums. She's had tragedy in her life, but still maintained a thinly disguised hope for the future. She was angry at Reiden, rightly so, but seemed to still keep a part of herself apart, trusting him with a flattering openness when she should have been bitter and cold with the betrayals she had to endure so far. As a journalist she could have become inured to the ills of the world, instead, she showed a deep vulnerability and heartfelt empathy for the people caught up in deaths around the world. She had an inner strength but still wore her heart on her sleeve. Jamie stared at her dinner partner and wondered when he was going to tell her to shut up. She'd been holding forth on various amusing interviews she had to do, situations that had started off with a serious intent, but ended up more humorous than real newsworthy. He had laughed in all the right places, his dark eyes luminous behind his glasses, always fixed flattering on her face, his comment never a put down, seemingly in tune with her sense of the ridiculous. The restaurant wasn't full, but there were enough people to take the edge of intimacy off the evening so that they just enjoyed a really good meal with a light-hearted back and forth between them. By the end of the main course, she was completely relaxed and felt none of the tension that had presaged their meal.

“Ready to go?” he asked, jerking her out of her thoughts.

“Yeah.”

He paid the bill and they left the cozy place, his hand settling at the base of her spine, guiding her without pushing or force. He didn't go quite so far as to open her car door for her, but she felt a well of warmth inside her that was all to do with the lovely meal and the present company.

Back at the winery, they were greeted by Bob who offered a small supper before they retired. Mitch thanked him but refused the offer, Jamie agreeing that she was too full of pizza to fit in another morsel. Together they made their way to the suite and Mitch opened the door. At the sight of the single, enormous bed Jamie felt all the tension of before settling over her. When she turned to face Mitch, he was already heading out the door with a bag in his hands.

“Where are you going?”

“I have something to ask Bob. I'll give you time to do whatever you need to before I get back.” Then he was gone, the door closing behind him. Jamie frowned at the door for a moment, then shrugged, it would give her a chance to see to her own needs and be settled in bed before Mitch got back. With that in mind, she set about it, changing out of her clothes, taking her underwear into the bathroom to wash and hang up before brushing her teeth and getting into bed. The mattress was certainly very wide and she felt a little less tense when it became apparent that it could easily sleep four in the bed and no-one would be touching. A bit more relaxed she plugged in the laptop and brought up some of the news pages she had bookmarked, keen to see if there were any updates about the attacks in L.A. and around the world. She was especially keen to see if there was anything new about the team working to find a cure for the animals. When Mitch returned she was still scrolling through the latest news updates.

“Anything interesting?” he asked.
“A ton of stuff, but mostly repeating itself. There does seem to be a whisper of something called the Noah objective, can't seem to pin it down, just a few conspiracy forums have anything at all, but supposedly it's a backup plan if the team looking for a cure aren't able to produce one.”

Mitch kicked off his shoes and sat on the bed to take off his socks.

“Noah Objective?”

“Yeah. Must still be in the planning stage if the conspiracy nuts are the only ones on to it.” Jamie closed down the pages and shut the laptop, placing it on the bedside table.

Mitch took that to be the end of that conversation, all the former ease between them gone. Sighing to himself internally, he switched off the overhead light, leaving only the one lamp on his side of the bed. Jamie had already scooted down and had the covers pulled up to her shoulders, the picture of someone dedicated to getting a good nights rest.

When he came out of the bathroom, the room was quiet, only the top of Jamie's head visible as he made his way about the darkened room. Sitting on the side of the bed he took off his glasses and turned the lamp off, plunging the room into total darkness. Pushing the covers back he slid his legs down the bed and lay back against the pillows. Jamie was so far over to her side she must be teetering on the edge and he might as well have been in his own bed, the gulf between them adequate without needing to place any physical barrier between them. He glanced over to where she lay, her back to him, her breathing steady and unvarying but not deep enough to indicate she was asleep. It had been a few years since he'd slept with someone else in his bed, his memory of a warm body snuggled up against him a distant and faint impression. He didn't include the sexual encounters with pros, they were brief and for only one purpose, there was nothing about intimacy in those transactions, it was purely physical, a biological imperative with no emotions involved. He reminded himself that this was the same situation. He had saved her, she accepted his saving her, that was the sum total of their relationship.

Sighing quietly, he turned his back on his companion and shut his eyes. Sleep, when it finally came, was a welcome relief from his unsettling thoughts.
Mitch decides to find the cause, Jamie has a private interrogation.

They spent three days at the winery, managing to live together in harmony, the night time their only point of contention. Jamie had to admit that sleeping with someone in the bed again was a nice feeling, her sleep undisturbed by night terrors while Mitch was nearby. She had been concerned that in her sleep she might gravitate to his warmth, but that hadn't proved to be the case, her relief in waking up in pretty much the same state she'd fallen asleep, had been bordering on jubilant. Mitch was a nice guy, but they were still virtually strangers, thrown together under extreme circumstances, never the best basis for any sort of relationship.

Mitch was at war with himself. On one hand, he was pleased that Jamie seemed to be sleeping better, no more nightmares to disturb her rest or his. On the other he was disappointed she hadn't naturally sought him out in her sleep, the thought of her hair spread over his chest and her lithe body pressed up against him consuming more and more of his waking thoughts, let alone when he was laying there listening to her breath.

News had started to come in about world leaders sending scientific representatives to a symposium to discuss the current animal crisis. Several options were to be laid before the governing committee and groups with opposing points of view were also slated to be there, animal rights activists were planning rallies while military security was beefed up to prevent and protect against any incidents with mutated animals. It was expected that at some point a member of the team currently searching the world for a cure would be presenting what they had concluded to date, plus their findings. In truth, he would have liked to attend something so radical, but it was being held in Washington, D.C and that might as well have been on another continent. Not that he could have produced the necessary credentials to be considered. If a biological solution wasn't found, then it was down to pure military attrition of man against the animals, something that just boggled belief. He imagined that many countries around the world would be holding similar discussion groups of both scientists and governing officials to talk about managing the crisis, but that all ate into the time he felt they didn't have. Something needed doing now, not months down the track. If animal attacks continued to plague the cities then people were going to flee to the rural areas which were ill-equipped to cope with a mass migration so suddenly. This wasn't urban drift, this was countrywide, no - worldwide panic. People were dying and the best he could do was run away. Disgust at himself made him short-tempered and uncommunicative, Jamie not understanding the reason behind his change in mood.

“We're going back to L.A.” He announced on the fourth day. “You need to pack your stuff, I want to be on the road after breakfast.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why are we going back to L.A? I thought we left because it was dangerous, now you want to go back?”

“I don't have to explain every little decision I make. We're going back and that's it.”

“Well, I don't want to. I like it here, and I want to stay.”

“You can't. I'm your keeper, remember? Where I go, you go, so go pack your stuff.”

“No. We don't have anywhere to live, your apartment is wrecked, where would we stay?”
“I'll worry about that when I get there. Now move your bony butt and get your gear packed.” Jamie stared at him, her expression a mixture of outrage and confusion. He hardened his heart and ignored her, throwing his own belonging into the pack with little care for how they would look when they came out.

“You're fucking crazy!” Jamie shouted at him, pushing her stuff into her pack, then stomping off to the bathroom to clear that of her bits and pieces.

Within half an hour they were on the road and heading back the way they'd come.

The closer they got to Los Angeles the heavier the traffic got on the other side of the freeway. Their side, heading into the city, was fairly light, but the other side was jam-packed with people fleeing their neighborhoods and suburbs. The local radio was broadcasting notices of where attacks were taking place or had done in the past few days, the events seeming to make a very precise pattern of movement of birds and insects across the vast coastal plain that L.A occupied. Jamie had a large map that she was marking, circling those areas that had already been hit, including the latest. Some area's had cobbled together a sort of militia to shoot any birds, which predictably missed entirely the large flocks that were actually doing the damage. Reports were coming in that insects other than Hornets were joining in to evict the human population, along with a variety of birds not limited to just blackbirds. All along the coast and beach fronts seagulls and pelicans were driving people away from the shoreline, sometimes in such large flocks, they were able to foul entire streets with their guano and render complete neighborhoods uninhabitable. The entire city was under an aerial siege. While the birds kept all air traffic grounded and the population fleeing, the insects started their own campaign against human occupations. Apartment blocks in the more run-down areas started to battle an invasion of cockroaches, the walls and floors alive with insects, the roaches swarming into the kitchens and fouling everything they came into contact with. They quickly became a health hazard and whole buildings were evacuated, the rate of infestation meaning that the length of a street, with several blocks, was emptied in days. If it wasn't known to be impossible, people started to say the roaches were organized, had a purpose and seemed to be deliberately controlled by someone. Pest controllers were run off their feet, unable to cope with enough chemicals to make a dent in the current crisis. All anyone could do was flee.

Into this chaotic situation, Mitch drove them back to his apartment. It was like driving into a war zone, people with no access to wheeled transport, trudged with bundles of their belongings along the sidewalk to designated shelters or simply as far as they could get from their abandoned homes. More and more shops were being boarded up as their occupiers gave up trying to run their business and got out, like their customers. Some streets had police tape and barriers across to prevent access, the areas labeled hazardous due to insect or animal infestation. Usually, a sign on the barrier signaled which animal or insect had taken over, the variety of each expanding. It might have sounded insane to expound upon the animals somehow being manipulated to do what they did, but it wasn't crazy to the people who experienced it first hand. Mice and rats in unbelievable numbers swarmed into warehouses and storage facilities, destroying or befouling stockpiled dry goods and raw materials. One by one small industries, then larger industries in food production and distribution had to shut down due to loss of stock and staff. The city overall was being shut down and its population driven beyond its boundaries, and it wasn't just happening in Los Angeles.

The bodies on the street had been removed from in front of the building, which Jamie was glad to note. They didn't go down to the parking garage but left the hire car at the kerb. Nothing moved in the street, no vehicles, no people and no evidence of animal or insect activity. They had done their damage and moved on. Mitch let them into the building, the front doors still intact, and up the stairs to the first floor. Evidence of people's flight was everywhere, in the little things dropped in haste to the larger bags and items left behind in their rush to leave. The dead bodies of blackbirds littered the stairs and the landing, little more than skeletal remains now, but it was a depressing sight. From the stairwell access, they picked their way through the scattered debris until they reached his apartment.
door, the note he’d left still stuck to the panel. Tearing that off, he unlocked the door and walked in.

Everything was just as they’d left it, the gaping, broken window and the floor littered with the bodies of birds and hornets alike. Jamie looked around and dropped her gear heavily onto the floor with a bang.

“Well, doesn't this look cozy?”

Mitch shot her a look and stomped further inside, carrying his pack to the bedroom. He appeared soon after.

“Let's get this tidied up.”

They spent the rest of the day clearing up the apartment, sweeping up the debris and dead bodies, wiping down all the surfaces and making a temporary cover for the window. By late afternoon they had taken out a bag of trash and the place was livable again. Water and power were still on, which was an added bonus, but they had no food in the house.

“I'll go and see what's available locally. Lock the door behind me and don't let anyone in until I get back.” Mitch ordered, putting one of the guns in his jacket pocket. “I won't be gone long.”

“You could be gone hours, it won't matter to me!” Jamie retorted, still angry at him. “Take all the time in the world.”

Mitch gritted his teeth and glared at her, opened his mouth to speak then thought better of it. Swinging away he marched out of the apartment, the door slamming shut behind him. Jamie stood for a moment in the suddenly silent room and fought back the prickle of tears behind her eyes.

Two hours later and he was back, struggling with the bags in his hand while he unlocked the door. It was getting on for the evening and the light was fading. He carried the bags to the kitchen, surprised that Jamie wasn't there to greet him, even if it was as frosty as their parting. He had more stuff to bring in, but first switched some lights on and went to find her. In an apartment this small that didn't take long. He stood in the bedroom doorway and looked at the woman curled up in his bed.

He didn't know if he had made the right decision to return to the city, he just knew he had to do something more than just run away. That he made the decision for her as well gave him a twinge of guilt, but he'd rather have her here with him than lost somewhere among the refugees fleeing the crisis. Having looked his fill, he went and sat on her side of the bed and called her name.

“Jamie?”

She stirred, rolling on to her back and opening her eyes. She blinked up at him, still waking, then smiled, forgetting their previous enmity for the moment.

“You came back.”

Mitch smiled. “Of course I came back. I need some help getting stuff up here.”

“Stuff?” she repeated back at him.

“Yeah, stuff. Come on, I need a hand.”

He stood up and she rubbed at her eyes before swinging her legs off the side of the bed and sitting up, yawning. He reached a hand and she took it, using him to counterbalance her standing up. It brought them into close contact and Jamie stared up at him, blinking in surprise.

Mitch seemed similarly caught, the pair of them not moving until Jamie broke eye contact and Mitch abruptly turned away to leave the room.

The window was now secured with heavy sheet plastic and duct tape, letting in light but keeping out the weather. Now full dark, Mitch pulled the heavy curtains over the makeshift window and padded back to the table.

Jamie was clearing up in the kitchen, their meal simple and easy to prepare. In addition to the food itself, he had purchase rodent and insect proof containers for anything not already in a tin, to protect from any potential predation. The chores done, Jamie came out and sat down at the table, folding her arms on the tabletop.

“So, what now?” she asked.

Mitch had the laptop open in front of him. “Now I try to find out why all this is happening.”

“They already have a team doing that,” Jamie pointed out. “What makes you think you can do
Mitch ignored the anger behind the question and just addressed the face value. “Because I can’t simply just sit back and wait things out. This is a worldwide problem, and it is insane to think that a single group of people could figure this all out.”

“And you think you can? On your own?”

“I can at least re-examine the lion case, compare it with a more recent sample from a currently mutated animal and see if that yields some results.”

“You’re serious!” Jamie sounded surprised. Mitch felt a wry smile creep over his face. “You’d be surprised. I’m even thinking there may be some validity about your claims about Reiden Global.”

She looked at him, both eyebrows raised. “You think there is a connection?”

“I think there is something connecting what is happening to the animals and causing this mutation, or defiant pupil. This is not something that could happen without a causative vector to start it. If we can find the origin of the mutation, maybe we can pin down the cause, the substance that started the change.”

“Like something in the food source, or in the food chain?”

“Sure. Maybe there is something in what you suggested about the cattle being fed to the lions, the meat being tainted with something produced by Reiden. I’m not saying it is, just that it’s a possibility. I’d have to do tests quite different from the ones I did before to find it.”

“When do we start?”

Mitch looked over the table at her. “We?”

“You are not going to leave me here to be bored out of my skull. I’m coming with you. I can help!”

“Fine. But in the lab you obey the rules, my rules, do you understand?”

Jamie nodded, lifting a finger to make a cross over her left breast.

“Okay. Something else I’d like you to consider.” He paused, drawing in a breath before plunging on. “You’ve been sleeping so much better these last few days, no nightmares or other disturbances. I’d like to keep that the case. I’d like us to continue to share the bed.”

Jamie blinked. “Oh. Well..um.” She looked around the room, her cheeks pink. “Er...okay.”

She lay on her side, covers wrapped around her, facing out into the bedroom, her back to Mitch. She was very conscious that the bed was not as wide as the one at the winery, that the other body in the bed was a lot closer, so close she could feel the heat he gave off. She shifted imperceptibly closer to the edge of the mattress, clutching at the covers to prevent her falling off entirely.

She heard a deep sigh from the other side of the bed and froze, Mitch turning over to face away from her, freeing up a little more space in the empty center of the mattress. She relaxed and let herself sink into the pillows, telling herself that nothing was going to happen, that Mitch wasn’t about to ravish her in her sleep, that she was more than able to fend him off, not like...

She slammed the door shut on that experience in her mind and clutched at the covers more tightly.

Mitch stared into the darkness and tried to sleep, his hyper-awareness of the warm body only a few inches away from his own making him unable to relax and stop thinking. Unfortunately for him, his body was celebrating that he had a woman in his bed again after such a long drought, the uncomfortable stiffness in his shorts a constant reminder of how long it was since his last sexual encounter. Mind you, if Jamie didn’t ease up on the tension she was sure to snap like a twig before long. He had half a mind just to get up and go sleep on the couch, but that wasn’t a good way to get someone used to you. He couldn’t quite figure out why she was so tense unless her former lover had been overly demanding, expecting her to perform in payment for his keeping her. That wasn’t an unusual scenario in many cases, an abuse of power that hadn’t been entirely stamped out. Of course, not having ever been in a position of being kept himself he had little basis for comparison to judge what could tip a situation over from being equal to being unequal and placing the loser in the hands of someone who liked to exercise his power. His ex-wife had easily been transferred from his guardianship to her new husbands, never once being put into a position where her status was
compromised or put under threat. And he would never do the same to the woman currently under his care. He had never forced himself on a woman in his life and wasn't about to start now. Didn't much help with the current situation, but maybe there was someway he could convey that to Jamie so she would relax and not fear him so much. His brain wouldn't let up and proposed an alternative reason. Maybe it wasn't him that she feared, but what took place in bed. He didn't know how many partners she'd had, although it would be relatively easy to find out, it couldn't have been more than a couple. From her father to her uncle, from her uncle to the newspaper guy, with possibly a boyfriend somewhere in her teens. Maybe her fear stemmed from something unofficial, something that wasn't on her record because she never reported it or no one found out about it. That gave him pause. Sexual crimes hadn't been completely eradicated, only vastly reduced. With women either being under state responsibility or within the care of a keeper, there was little or no chance a woman was left without protection of some sort. Which brought him back to an abuse of position, something that could take place, but the man risked being stripped of his status if the offense was reported and proved. Sleep dragged at him and he closed his eyes, his brain finally letting him sink into oblivion.

There was only a skeleton staff at the UCLA when he approached the administration block to see the Dean of Life Science, Hubert Schuster. If he was to be given free rein to research the current animal problem, he'd need Hubert on board.

“I'm sorry, but most of the faculty were ordered to go home, as were the students.” He was told by the administration manager.

“Who is still around, anyone?”

The woman did a quick check on her computer, having already verified his identity. “Dr. Michael Forest logged in today, at the school of medicine. He might be able to help?”

Mitch nodded. “Thank you. Can you call him and tell him I'm coming to see him.”

“Sure.” The woman dialed the extension, all the while casting sideways glances at Jamie standing behind Mitch and looking around the room with interest. Mitch drummed his fingers on the bench while he waited, listening to the manager talk briefly to whoever was at the end of the phone.

“I've passed the message to his secretary, so they'll be expecting you. Here's a passkey for you to access the doors. Everything is locked down, so without this, you won't get in or out. Don't lose it.”

Jamie jogged along after Mitch down another long corridor. The university was shut down tighter than a prison, with all the fire doors closed and locked and every other door the same. Without the passkey, they wouldn't have got very far. At length, they reached where they needed to be, part of the administration block where Dr. Forest said he'd be waiting for them. Ahead was an open space and a man stood next to a waist-high bench where normally someone dispensed directions and information but was now empty. The man walked forward, his hand out.

“Dr. Morgan?”

“Mitch.” They shook hands.

Dr. Forest cast Jamie a dismissive glance before addressing Mitch. “Janet made it sound urgent. Most of the staff are on leave, same with the student body. I'm not sure what it is I can do.”

“I'm hoping to be able to take over one of your research labs to investigate the causative effects of the current animal crisis,” Mitch stated baldly. Dr. Forest blinked at him.

“I see. And what exactly is your sphere of interest?”

“I'm a veterinary pathologist. I was called in by the LA Zoo to examine the two lions that presaged this current escalation. I'm hoping to find out, with further testing, what caused them and the latest animal attacks.”

“Doesn't the government already have a team somewhere doing this?” he asked.

“So I've heard through the newspapers, but I think I have a unique insight into what may have triggered this mutation, but I need a properly equipped lab to do that.”

Dr. Forest chewed over his proposal for a few seconds then nodded. “I can't see that it will do any harm. I've checked into your credentials and you seem to have what is needed to do the research you propose. I'll approve it, given the unusual circumstances. Did you have a particular research lab in
mind?"
"No, just a very well equipped one to do genetic breakdowns, extensive bloodwork and able to accommodate several animal cadavers," Mitch replied.
"You'll need easy access, so I recommend the path and lab suite in the Geffen building. I'll phone through to security to get you in."

Jamie stared around the long room that was to be home while Mitch worked. On every bench, shelf and surface scientific equipment jostled for attention and space. Machinery both familiar and too weird to figure out was grouped at the end of benches awaiting being called into action. Tall windows flooded the room with light, while adjustable blinds could equally shut out all light if needs be. Mitch was talking to someone on his mobile, probably to organize the lion cadavers from the zoo, along with any other animals that had since shown symptoms of the defiant pupil, along with those that hadn't displayed any such traits. Using his already highly regarded reputation with the zoo staff, the bodies and live specimens were already on their way, everyone keen to find out what was affecting the animal and insect population.

An hour later and the room, previously so quiet and empty, was now filled with animals, both dead and alive, the two separated by the length of the room to avoid upsetting the live animals more than necessary. A member of the zoo staff would remain to oversee the health of the living specimens and act as an aid to Dr. Morgan. Jamie was definitely feeling like a fifth wheel. A security guard had been posted outside the lab to escort anyone inside to anywhere outside the nominated laboratory, whether it be to the nearest toilets or the commissary. Acting as a goffer landed squarely in Jamie's lap, the zookeeper sending her out for coffee, which she at once resented, but was also grateful to for giving her something to do. With the bulk of the security guard walking behind her, Jamie headed for that blocks communal food hall. Some staff were in there scattered among the tables, along with the minimum of kitchen staff behind the counters to provide reduced food service, but also an endless supply of hot coffee.

Hours turned into days, that turned into a week. By the time a full seven days had passed, Mitch was surrounded by a small team of mixed discipline scientists working to narrow down or discover the cause of the physical mutations within the animals they had to work with. Jamie had been back to the flat several times, but Mitch had stayed behind, caught up in his enthusiasm and reluctant to leave any of his tests for any length of time. Jamie would bring in a selection of newspapers, both local and overseas to track the animal attacks happening and escalating everywhere. A huge wall map was spread over a table brought in for the purpose, and pins were stuck in the thick paper and cork backing, colour coded for the type of animals, numbered for easy reference to the facts – how many animals attacked, how many people killed, urban-rural–metro, all information that added to the general knowledge of everyone involved.

Mitch had one researcher looking up everything known about Robert Oz's theories about animal communication. Mitch was also developing a hypothesis along similar lines, the pattern of animal attacks and their systematic movements on bodies of population was too uniform to ignore. There had to be some way the animals were organizing and coordinating even, possibly, with interspecies and long distance communication across continents, certainly across countries and short distances.

It had been decided early on that until they had concrete results, that nothing about what they were doing would be made public through the media or to government departments at this time. When they had something to share that could substantially advance and maybe effect a cure, then news of their endeavors would be shouted for everyone to hear. But, despite the small group involved, news did leak out and three weeks after Mitch had requested the use of a lab, Jamie arrived at the building via his car to find it ringed by armed troops and lots of black, window tinted, four-wheel drives. She was summarily apprehended, shoved into a car, driven somewhere and taken, blindfolded, to an interview room where she had to wait, alone.
Eventually, a dark-suited man entered the room with a thick folder under his arm. He stared at her appraisingly then pulled out the chair opposite her and sat down.

“Why are you holding me here? I haven’t done anything wrong..” she started, not keen to be seen as weak in front of such blatant intimidation.

“We are well aware of that, Miss Campbell. We just need to clarify some details and then you'll be free to go.”

Jamie sat back in her chair. “What details?”

The man looked up and smiled, thinly. “Let’s just go over the facts as we know them. You were recently employed by the LA Telegraph as a...junior reporter?” He paused, but Jamie remained mute.

He continued. “You also, only recently, met up with Doctor Mitchell Morgan and he has taken on the role of your keeper?”

Jamie simply stared at the man. The nicely suited man continued. “Was that a deliberate ploy on your part to snare a wealthy keeper?”

“What the fuck? No. It wasn’t a deliberate ploy. I never met or knew about Mitch until that night we met.”

“And yet he instantly put himself forward to be your keeper, for a woman he'd never met before?" Jamie shrugged. “He wanted to help me.”

The man arched an eyebrow in disbelief. “He just wanted to help a known agitator against Reiden global, an anarchic anonymous blogger who would like nothing better than blow up the Reiden and wipe if off the corporate map? Please. Of course, you planned it, meeting up with Mitch Morgan in the hopes that what? He’d believe your lies about Reiden global and maybe help you bring it down?”

Jamie leapt to her feet and banged her fist on the table top. “They are not lies!”

The man remained unperturbed. “Jamie Campbell, the girl with the genie tattoo. Is Dr. Morgan aware of your activism against Reiden Global? Is he helping you in your campaign to bring the company to book for crimes it never committed?”

Jamie bristled. “Reiden Global is responsible for the poisoning and deaths of over a hundred people, my mother included. If I had the sort of resources they do, they would have been brought down years ago.” She sat back down, confused as to whether they were going after her, or Mitch. “But this is all ancient history, what are you really here about? What do you want?”

The man ignored her question and flipped ahead in the folder in front of him. “Why did you decide to come back to LA? You were safely situated in Paso Robles. Why come back?”

Jamie looked at him open-mouthed for a second, then snapped her lips together. With insolent grace, she flipped him the bird, then crossed her arms over her chest.

The man regarded her stance and militant expression and sighed, closing the folder in front of him. “You harm only yourself with your refusal to co-operate.”

Jamie just raised her eyebrows at him as if to say ‘fuck you’.

He got up, knocked on the door, which was opened for him, and left.

Mitch paced the floor and fumed. The men in black had invaded the laboratory just after his team had turned up. Without any warning they simply burst through the doors, waving badges and guns around as if they were busting a meth lab, shouting and surrounding the group of scientists and aides, treating them like terrorists. Eventually, things calmed down and Mitch was taken to one side by the man in charge, an agent of the FBI who questioned him about what the group was doing, and what they had achieved so far. Mitch answered what he could and hedged about any outcomes or results they’d concluded in their time at the lab. Once the general misunderstanding about their purpose and goals were explained to the agent's satisfaction the heavily armed military was stood down and left, leaving only the FBI agents behind.

“So, Doctor Morgan, what can you tell me about Miss Campbell?”

The switch in topics threw him for a moment and he blinked at the agent. “What business is that of yours?”

“We understand you are her keeper, is that not correct?”
“I am. What are you getting at?”
“We are curious, Dr. Morgan, as to why you would suddenly take on a complete stranger, give her your protection on knowing her for only a few minutes?”
“How do you know I only knew her for a few minutes? Am I under surveillance?”
“Not you, Dr. Morgan. Are you aware that Miss Campbell has been waging a campaign against Reiden Global for a number of years?”
“Yes.”
“Are you also aware she runs an anonymous blog digging up dirt and slandering Reiden with every word she writes?”
“I am aware of it, she told me about it. She has a legitimate grievance regarding deaths in her hometown and in the surrounding area.”
“So you believe her?”
Mitch shrugged. “Why would she lie about something like that?”
The agent smiled thinly. “We think she set you up, arranged the meeting with you at that bar, on purpose.”
Mitch gave a short laugh. “That would be a neat trick, given I hadn't decided myself to go there until the last minute.”
“We believe Miss Campbell will use her association with you to further her agenda against Reiden Global. Has she tried to make contact with anyone you know? Or used her position to get you to influence any of your contacts or work colleagues to her cause?”
Mitch gave him a skewed look. “This is crazy. The girl had nothing when I met her. If I hadn't stepped in she would have been carted away by the police by now.”
“How convenient. Did she say something or offer herself to convince you to do that?”
“No! Why the witch hunt? She's done nothing to warrant this level of interest from anyone, least of all the government.”
The man sat back in his chair and assumed a blank expression. “Those are all the questions we have for you at this time. Thank you for your co-operation, Dr. Morgan. You'll be hearing from us again, please don't leave town.”
Mitch remained seated and watched the man signal to his other agents, all of them leaving the room without a backward glance, the people left behind murmuring among themselves at the unusual turn of events. When the door shut behind them he got to his feet and checked his phone for any messages from Jamie. His car was parked where it usually was, so she'd come to the lab, but where was she? He called her phone, then the apartment, but got no answer to his text or messages. Seriously worried, he queried his team, asking if anyone had been questioned about Jamie. All replied they hadn't, only questioned about what they were doing in the lab and with him. Jamie should have been at the lab by now, which suggested she'd already been waylaid by the agents and taken somewhere to be questioned. Mitch also started to wonder why the agents had been so interested in Reiden Global, leading him to suspect that maybe they weren't really from the FBI at all, the badge presented for his inspection whisked away before he got too close a look. If it swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, is it, in fact, a duck?
Jamie rested her head on her arm, cushioning her from the hard surface of the metal table. It had been hours since the man in a suit had questioned her, and at least an hour since she'd had to bang on the door and ask to be taken to a toilet. The short trip had revealed nothing that could aid her, the corridor devoid of features, as was the single toilet she was taken to. No windows, no ventilation shaft big enough for her to squeeze into, no escape. Having taken care of business, and gulped down several handfuls of water from the tap, she felt more comfortable but no less knowledgeable about where she was being held. She dozed and wondered what Mitch was doing, did he know she'd been taken? Would he care enough to worry about her? Would he think this a blessing in disguise? A way to relieve himself of the burden of being her keeper? Was she now destined for a brothel or to become a slave to someone or something? Her brain buzzed with any and all suggestions, none of them comforting or giving her hope. That word was inextricably represented by just one person –
Mitch couldn't concentrate, his brain unable to settle or absorb any of the information the various tests were trying to convey. At length, he called it a day and sent everyone home. He packed up his stuff, did the backups he did every day, secured them in his backpack and switched off the lights. He said goodnight to the security guard permanently posted outside the lab and trudged off to the carpark. The apartment was dark when he got home, no lights visible from the outside of the building and nothing on when he reached his own door. Torches had become standard equipment with the rolling blackouts now inflicted on the remaining population. Not trusting the lifts, he trudged up the stairs, noting absently that he no longer puffed as hard as he used to, the situation having a plus side after all. Unlocking the door, he stepped inside and dropping his pack on the floor. It took him a moment to switch on all the lights, but he soon noticed that some things were not where they were supposed to be. Someone, most probably many someone's had systematically searched the apartment, for what? He had no idea. The bedroom was similarly rifled, the drawers, when he opened them, showing the contents moved about and in disarray. It was like coming home to find you've been burgled but nothing was missing. It made his skin crawl. If they'd bothered to go to the trouble to search, it was likely they had also bugged the apartment with listening and watching devices. With that in mind, he went about his business, as usual, making no particular change to his routine, but also not unpacking the backup hard drives, or giving a hint that he had all the information to date stored in those same drives. If he wanted to, he could walk out of the apartment and just disappear, but that would mean abandoning Jamie, which he simply couldn't do. She was being held somewhere so he hoped she'd be released and returned to him soon. There was little else that he could do but wait.

She had no idea how long they kept her in that room, only that when they finally came for her, it wasn't to release her, only to bundle her out of the room and into a car after putting a suffocating, blinding bag over her head so she had no idea where she was or who she was with. After a long car ride, she was once more manhandled out of the vehicle, something shoved into her hand and the bag whipped off her head. The car immediately roared away, giving her no time to get the numberplate or see who was in it. Pushing her hair out of her face, she stared at her hand where a phone had been placed. She quickly dialed a number and listened to it ring.

Mitch heard his cell phone ringing and spent a few precious seconds fumbling for it. There was no caller ID but he answered it anyway.

“Who is this?” he asked, worry making his voice harsh.
“Mitch?” a faint, quavering voice echoed down the line.
“Jamie? Where are you? Are you safe?” He hated that quiver in her voice, it meant she was scared and vulnerable, maybe even hurt.
“Um...I'm not exactly sure where I am, they just dumped me out of a car...Mitch?”
“Look around, can you see anything, any signage, road sign, shop names?”
“Er...yes, yes I...there's a road sign. I'm on the corner of....um...Santa Fe and Florence Avenue.”
“Don't move, I'll be there to pick you up as soon as I can.”
He grabbed his jacket and keys and slammed out of the apartment, taking the stairs two at a time despite the uncertain torchlight.

Jamie stared at the phone in her hand, not recognizing it. She suspected that her's was being picked apart for all her contacts and past text messages. Given she'd only had it a little while, there was nothing for them to find. A sudden noise made her stuff the phone into her coat pocket and look around. She had been let out in a carpark belonging to a restaurant, the place probably quite popular in normal times, but now it was boarded up and abandoned. Very little traffic was passing on the main road and she felt exposed just standing on the footpath. Across from her was a gas station, doing what little business there was to be had, the forecourt brightly lit, but when she searched her pockets, she didn't have her wallet with her, taken when she was patted down on arrival at the
interrogation place. If she loitered in the gas station it was a good bet the owner would phone the police to report her, and with no identification she was vulnerable. Instead, she stayed in the restaurant carpark and sat on the ground, making herself and inconspicuous as possible and waited for Mitch to appear.

He cursed out loud when he pulled into the carpark and couldn't immediately see her. His brain supplied any number of scenarios where she'd been picked up by someone, or the police and been taken somewhere and abused. He stopped the car and got out. “Jamie!” he shouted, hoping that he wasn't too late.

A figure, little more than a shadow, rose up from the ground and started to run towards him. “Mitch?”

He rounded the car and jogged towards her, the two of them colliding solidly, arms wrapped tight around the other, Jamie finally giving in to her fright and worry and sobbing her heart out. Mitch simply hung on to her, not willing to let her go for a minute. Eventually, Jamie started to calm down, her anxiety turning to embarrassment for appearing too needy.

“I'm...sorry,” she hiccuped, letting him go reluctantly.

Mitch loosened his arms to allow her to stand away a little and mop herself up. He forebore to comment about her disheveled appearance and simply put an arm about her shoulders to guide her to the car, handing her into the passenger side before getting behind the wheel himself. The drive back to his apartment was uneventful, Jamie unusually quiet and withdrawn, Mitch sending glances over at her as if checking that she was really there and not a figment of his imagination.

He held back from questioning what had happened to her until they were back in the apartment and he’d made her a hot drink. With that in her hand, his own beside his chair, he ventured to ask about her day.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

Jamie tucked her hair behind her ear and took a sip of her drink before speaking. “I was nearly at the lab when I saw it was surrounded by soldiers with guns and lots of black cars. They didn't ask me who I was, they just blindfolded me and took me somewhere to ask me questions. I lost my wallet, keys and my phone...well, your phone. After they asked me some stuff they left me alone for hours, no food, nothing to drink, and one bathroom break. Then they came and got me, stuck a bag over my head, tossed me in a car and dumped me where you found me.”

Mitch regarded her downbent head and felt an overwhelming desire to find that FBI agent and beat his face into a bloody mess. “They questioned me, as well,” Mitch told her, Jamie looking up. “They seemed to think you had engineered the meeting at the bar, enticed me to become your keeper and were going to use me to advance your campaign against Reiden Global.”

Jamie sat up. “Mitch, I never...I didn't....” she stopped when he held up his hand to cut her off. “I know all that. They seemed to think I was some gullible fuddy-duddy easily fooled by a pretty face...”

Jamie had an odd expression on her face. “What?” he asked.

“You think I'm pretty?”

Mitch blinked at her. “Pretty? You're bloody gorgeous..” He blushed hotly at his gauche words. “And anyway, you told me from the start about what had happened. I didn't have to become your keeper, but I'm glad I did. I don't know why the authorities are coming down on you so hard, I can only assume that you are getting under the skin of somebody at Reiden and they want to shut you up.”

Jamie looked thoughtful. “I didn't know anyone with influence before, it was just me against them. Maybe they think that if I get you onboard, you'll have some real impact, maybe even find a link that proves that Reiden and their products are behind all this, proof they can't just blow off as hysterical rantings of a revenge-filled female reporter.”

Mitch met her gaze. “You could be right. Either way, we're free of them now, so let's think about something to eat instead.”

Jamie gave him a strange look. “Mitch?”
“How about I whip something up, we should still have enough for me to work with.”
She didn't question his sudden change of topic, too weary to care, the promise of food winning out
over more dissecting of the day’s events.

After the meal and clean up they both opted to go to bed, Jamie glad to have a shower and change
into something clean. Mitch was already in bed when she entered the bedroom, his attention all on
the book in his hand. Jamie walked around the bed and got into her side, switching off the lamp and
wriggling down under the covers. Mitch soon did the same, taking off his glasses and putting them
on top of the book before switching off the light, plunging the room into darkness.

Jamie was just starting to drop off to sleep when Mitch moved, reaching across the bed to wrap his
arm around her waist and drag her to the center of the bed. She let out a squeak of surprise, but a soft
'shhh' in her ear made her refrain from speaking. She had gone rigid with fright and wondered if this
was when Mitch showed his real colors, but instead of doing anything further, he just moved until
they were comfortably spooned, then he started to talk in a whisper.

“The apartment was broken into earlier today and I think the rooms are bugged with microphones
and possibly cameras. I don't want them to know we know, so I'm using this opportunity to talk to
you about it. To anyone watching or listening it will look perfectly natural for us to be like this.”
Jamie drew in a slow breath and forced herself to relax. “Then you're not about to...” She felt his arm
tense around her middle.

“For God's sake, what have I done to make you think I'm going to rape you, huh?!”
“T've sorry, it's just, well...you haven't really done anything before now...”
“And I won't!” he hissed back. “Now we've got that off the agenda, can we talk about what we're
going to do now.”
Jamie nodded, then realized he wouldn't be able to see it and opened her mouth to whisper her
agreement, but Mitch had not only seen the movement but felt it, his mouth a fingers width from
kissing the crown of her head.

“Oh, so do we run or do we stay and play this out? I have the hard drive backups in my pack, so
we don't have to return, we could take off and disappear.”
Jamie was having a hard time concentrating on his words. His hand was spread over her ribs, the
thumb almost brushing the underside of her breast, and it was moving, sweeping slowly back and
forth over the soft fabric of her t-shirt. Combine that with the feeling of being surrounded by a warm
male body, his breath tickling the crown of her head, and she felt like snuggling in deeper and
pushing her bottom back into the cradle of his hips.

When she didn’t immediately reply, Mitch pressed his hand against her ribs. “So, what do you
think?”

“Well, that clarifies things. Look, I don't want you to have to go through that again. I don't think my
heart could take it,” He whispered, this time acting on impulse and kissing the fragrant hair under his
nose.
Jamie froze again. “Mitch?”

“It's just a tiny kiss, Jamie. A platonic sign of affection, that's all. I was worried about you.” He
smiled to himself in the darkness.

“I think whether we stay or go depends on where you are with your research,” she finally replied.
“Good answer,” he retorted. “But not one I can expand upon in a whispered conversation in the
dark. I'm too distracted.”

“What's distracting you?” Jamie asked, sounding genuinely puzzled. Mitch chuckled into his pillow.
“I think we're both too tired to solve this right now. Sweet dreams, Jamie.” He rolled onto his back,
withdrawing his arm, then rolled again onto his side so that his back was towards her. Jamie stayed
where she was, frozen in place, her body tingling from having him wrapped around her.

“Goodnight, Mitch,” she whispered into the dark.
Morning found them still undecided, a hurried conversation under the cover of the shower running hardly resolved anything apart from the need to do something. The only decision that both agreed upon was for Jamie to stick to Mitch's side and not find herself on her own under any circumstances. They also, surreptitiously, packed their backpacks with essentials and bare necessities, carrying them down to the car so they were set for a quick getaway if the situation warranted one.

All the researchers and scientists were back at the lab despite the upset of the previous day. Mitch had the backup hard drives with him but left them in his pack for the time being. If any significant progress was made that day, he'd make another copy. Jamie was seated near to where Mitch usually worked, the ever-present security guard cheerfully finding her a comfortable armchair from one of the common rooms for her to use. Mitch sent her an encouraging smile before turning his attention to the results of one of the tests set up the night before. Once he was engrossed with all the sciency stuff, Jamie opened her laptop and started to review her own website and the content, looking at it from a new perspective. By the time the team broke for lunch, she had collated a file on Reiden that was different to her usual research. This one contained brand names, product lists, suppliers and distributors in the US and around the world, narrowing down several items that seemed to coincide with the early animal attack reports. She then started to compile where Reiden Global had offices, in what countries, in what cities or towns they were based. Also part of that was a list of personnel at each office from their websites, sorting out who was what at which branch of the company.

When they broke for lunch Jamie presented her findings to Mitch over a sandwich.
“I first went back to see when the earliest report came in about animal attacks. I discounted those that occurred on farms or isolated dog attacks on children and concentrated on those committed in more unlikely places. It turns out that there was a rash of animals attacks more than five years ago in several places around the world. After that, the attacks varied between animals doing the attacking to the number of people attacked. Since two years ago the trend is that the type of animal involved in these attacks has become more exotic, less domestic and the number of casualties higher with each year that passed.”

Mitch took a sip of his drink. “How does that tie in with Reiden?”

“That's the thing. I thought I'd find more domestic attacks as Reiden products cover the entire range of animal feeds from bird seed to sheep pellets. But the more recent attacks, certainly the predominant animals involved, have been from the wild populations, where the animals have often invaded an urban or metro area and carried out their attacks, which makes no logical sense.”

Mitch finished his mouthful of sandwich, brows drawn together in thought. “Maybe logic is the way to look at this. Maybe something was used, or created that escaped into the wild environment and caused the mutation more readily in animals not regularly exposed to Reiden products. Think about it, a kitten is raised in a household that uses a range of Reiden products from detergents to fly spray, the kitty litter to cat food. The animal, over time, would become possibly inured to the effects of whatever is in them, whereas a wild animal, exposed as an adult and for the first time, could have a radically different reaction to it.”

“It?”

Mitch waved a hand around. “Whatever is in all these products you've listed that Reiden and GDJ International have a hand in creating and distributing, it is having a global effect on undomesticated animals, as well as domesticated ones.”

Jamie sipped at her drip. “But how or what could have such far-reaching effects? I understand the theory about cats and dogs, they are exposed all the time. But there was a story just recently about bats flying all the way down to Antarctica, apparently, they caused a couple of scientists there to freeze to death, as incredulous as that sounds.”

Mitch looked surprised. “How did they do that?”

“Bear in mind this wasn't an actual news source that supplied the details, more a leaked report by the people who found the pair. They said there was evidence of dead bats around the solar panels that supplied power to the station, and another dead bat found inside. But here's the thing, the dead
animals only numbered about a handful, the number needed to cover the panels would have had to have been in the hundreds. Where did they go? Why didn't they all die from the cold?” Jamie gave him a look as if to say 'explain that', then sucked noisily on her straw.

Mitch frowned down at his empty plate, chewing over what she'd said. “I think the question is, why would they do that? Why sacrifice themselves for the sake of killing two scientists that weren't doing any harm? What were the scientists researching?”

Jamie pulled out her tablet and brought up her notes. “Atmospheric anomalies. Plus the flight path of birds affected by changing air currents. The report did mention that the pair had several cages in the stations that had been recently occupied by birds.”

“What happened to the birds?” Mitch asked.

Jamie shrugged. “They were gone when the rescuers arrived.”

Mitch chewed his lip for a second. “So, if we take the facts on face value, the bats flew down, presumably from South America, to rescue birds being held by the scientists at the station, sacrificing themselves in the process. Where was the station, exactly?” Jamie searched her notes. “There are several bases around the South Shetland Islands, in that general area of the Antarctic Peninsular.” Jamie turned the screen and pointed to where the dead scientist had been. “It's pretty close to the bottom of South America. Six hundred miles to be more precise. Can bats fly that far?”

Mitch snorted. “Depends on the bat, and the weather, and the winds. The Drake Passage is one of the roughest stretched of water to navigate.”

Jamie looked up from her notes. “The dead bats they found at the station and by the solar panels were spectral bats.”

“It's not beyond the realms of possibility that bats could cover the distance. I read once that a Mexican bat could cover the distance of up to two hundred and fifty miles in a single night plus they are capable of flying as high as ten thousand feet, and reach speeds up to sixty miles per hour.”

Jamie looked at him. “That's some serious trivia you have going on there, Professor.”

Mitch grinned. “Trivia I have aplenty. So, based on that, it is not completely unbelievable that the report you dug up is true.”

“But why would they do that just to rescue a handful of birds? That seems completely mad to me.” He shrugged. “To understand that, you'd have to find out why birds, in general, are important to the animals worldwide.”

Jamie sat back in her chair. “This is so much more complicated than I ever imagined.”

Mitch leaned forward and rested his folded arms on the table top. “I wonder how the other team is doing in their search for a cure?”
Time to Relocate

Chapter Summary

Mitch needs a new car and Jamie goes for a walk on the beach

That afternoon they were evacuated from the lab because of the threat of an animal attack. There had been reports that a large number of animals had escaped the Los Angeles Zoo, whether through their own offices or with help from radicals, it wasn't clear. What was clear was that anyone caught out in the open having a potential close encounter with one of the escaped animals was not going to have a happy outcome for anyone. Some dedicated zookeepers, including the ones working with Mitch, had already left and were attempting to round up and dart the big cats, but it was proving difficult now that the animals seemed to be able to communicate, working together in mixed herds and causing panic on the streets. Mitch and Jamie found out first hand just how frightening coming face to face with such a herd could be.

They had been warned that several animals had been sighted heading towards the hills, north of the UCLA. TV and Radio were warning anyone out and about to get off the streets and get inside. They were nearly home when one of the herds mentioned in despatches appeared in front of them. In fact, they almost ran into the rump of a huge rhinoceros standing at the back of a large crowd of animals made up of mainly hoofed mammals, but including great apes as well as big cats. Mitch slammed on the brakes, stopping a few feet from the rear of the animals.

“Fuck!” he instantly slammed the car into reverse and started weaving backward the way they'd already come. Jamie was keeping a watch out the front windscreen while Mitch tried to navigate their reverse course, cursing volubly.

“Mitch!”

“Yeah. What?”

“We need to go faster...NOW!” Jamie's scream was followed by a loud bang as something impacted the front of the car. Mitch whipped his head around and gaped at the animals almost surrounding the vehicle, headed by a very angry rhinoceros currently trying to rip the front of the car away with its blunted horn.

Mitch slammed his foot back on the accelerator and the car started to gather speed, backward again, this time he turned the wheel to reverse them into an alleyway, the back of the car quickly wedging into the narrow space. As they stared out the front windscreen, the rhino appeared again and butted the car, forcing it further into the alley. Most of the animals behind it were now streaming past, looking for other prey to intimidate. A huge mountain gorilla jumped on the back of the rhino and landed on the bonnet of the car, raising its arms to crash down on the windscreen, cracking it badly. Jamie screamed and covered her head, the gorilla roaring at them and jumping onto the roof, where it used its weight to dent the metal in several areas with well-placed blows.

“We have to get out of here,” Mitch shouted over the noise of the banging above their heads, and the continuing bashing of their front of the car by the enraged rhinoceros.

They climbed into the backseat, the great ape leaving off its attempt to squash the car and leaping over the bonnet to follow the herd down the street. However the rhino was not similarly moved, it continued its one-rhino campaign to demolish the offending vehicle and its puny human occupants.

Mitch broke the back window and cleared away most of the glass to allow them to exit the car and escape, now the gorilla was gone. They took their packs and anything they could salvage and climbed out, keeping low so the rhino wouldn't notice them. Mitch grabbed Jamie's hand and they
ran as fast as they could to the end of the alley, taking care to check the road on the other side of the block before running in the direction of the apartment still several blocks further along. They could hear in the distance the roaring, neighing, screaming herd and ran as fast and as long as they could. When they finally reached the side street that led to the front of their building, the herd was turning the corner in the far distance, Jamie sobbing as she tried to catch her breath.

“They'll catch us!” she cried out, Mitch dragging her down the side street, feet pounding on the pavement.

“Just a bit further...” Mitch gasped, legs and lungs burning with the effort to move faster, Jamie dragging on his arm. He pulled them into a back access road, racing past the dumpsters to reach the fire escape that serviced their building. In the narrow passageway, the sound of the rampaging herd was muted, but he wasn't deceived. If they weren't out of sight in the next few minutes, they would be caught and he didn't fancy their chances against any of the great apes or big cats. A fire escape was just another climbing frame for them.

He jumped for the drop-down ladder and it screeched on its way down. He lifted Jamie up and pushed her to start climbing. She clambered as fast as she could, stopping on the first landing to wait for Mitch and catch her breath. The distant braying of zebras sounded really close, Mitch not hesitating to break the first window they came to, to enter the apartment beyond. Mitch cast a glance back only to duck inside when he saw the black hulk of the gorilla standing at the end of the narrow service road, its head up sniffing the air.

They dodged through the empty apartment to the front door and wrenched it open, slamming it shut behind them then running for the stairs. On tired legs and with aching lungs they pounded up the stairs to the next floor and along to his apartment. He fumbled with the keys for a moment, Jamie clutching at his shoulder and shooting wide-eyed looks behind them. When the lock gave they all but fell into the apartment and slammed the door behind them. Mitch didn't relax even then, he bundled Jamie into the bathroom and shut that door too, placing them in the safest place in the flat. They both collapsed on the floor, chests heaving as they drew in much-needed air, legs shaky with the long, adrenaline-fueled run, hearts beating a wild tattoo.

Mitch shrugged off his pack and sat back against the wall, his lungs still screaming as he panted. Jamie got up onto all fours and crawled over to where he sat, dropping her backpack and sitting beside him in a slump, her head on his shoulder. Her hair was matted with sweat and her body shaking as she drew in each labored breath.

“Are...we...safe...now?” she asked, voice barely above a whisper. Mitch turned his head and pressed a soft kiss to her damp head.

“I don't know....I hope so.”

“Out of sight....out...of mind?” Jamie suggested, her eyes still closed as she tried to gather herself. “Something like that,” Mitch agreed, drawing his knees up and resting his arms on them. They sat there for a long time, their hearts slowing and breathing finally coming under control. It took longer for the fear to leave and the muscles to stop aching, but at length, Mitch got up to switch the light on as it was growing dark outside. Jamie lay on her side using her pack as a pillow, her legs drawn up against her body as she dozed. Careful not to wake her, Mitch opened the bathroom door and listened intently for any indication that there were any animals outside or inside the apartment building. When everything remained quiet he padded over to the temporary window and pulled the curtains to stop any light escaping. Then he switched on just the side lights, keeping things low key and went into the kitchen to find something to drink. He had just put a tray on the coffee table with something for them both when Jamie appeared in the doorway of the bathroom, rubbing her eyes and stretching. She glanced over at the pulled curtains for a moment, then sat down in her usual armchair, accepting one of the mugs from Mitch.

“Thank you, I'm starving!” Jamie announced.

“Reckon we burned up a week's worth of calories with that run,” Mitch added. They sipped at the hot soup and munched the toast he'd made to go with it. A sudden noise from beyond the window made them both freeze and listen hard, but when nothing else happened they
relaxed back into the chairs, exchanging a rueful look.
“Guess it's going to be that sort of night,” said Jamie, draining her mug.
“I think what you said before is true. They only attack if they actually see someone or something. I
don't think they're purposely seeking out people to attack, it's purely opportunistic behavior.”
Jamie let out a small giggle. “Your poor car. I don't think you'll get your deposit back on that now.”
Mitch grinned back at her. “The accident report would make interesting reading. Cause of damage –
enraged rhinoceros and angry mountain gorilla.”
They both laughed softly at that. Mitch got up to turn on the television to see if there was anything
new in the daily reports. The number of channels available had shrunk with only a few showing
anything other than regular news updates. The latest featured information about the escaped zoo
animals, many of whom were now roaming the hills north of Brentwood and surrounding districts.
The death toll was rising every day, the latest animal killings lessened because there were simply not
the number of people still roaming the streets anymore.
“Not a good time to visit any of the state parks,” Jamie quipped.
“I guess you could say that prime real estate has become prime habitat.” Mitch levered himself out of
the chair. “I'm going to take a shower.”

Later, after checking that everything was locked up, including the bedroom door, Mitch climbed into
bed. Jamie was already there, laying on her back instead of her side, watching him as he sat down on
the side and removed his glasses. When he was under the covers, she turned to face him.
“Do we have to go to the lab tomorrow?”
Mitch let out a deep sigh. “Until I can organize some sort of transport, we aren't going anywhere
tomorrow.”
“I guess we could hole up here for a little while.”
Mitch let out a grunt. “Not that long. We have food for about three days, max.”
“Oh.”
He turned his head to look at her, even though the room was pitch black. “Look, try not to worry.
I'm sure we'll sort something out tomorrow. I could always get in touch with the FBI guy and get
him to arrange a military escort if needed.”
“You can go with them, but I won't. I'd rather take my chances with the animals.” Her fierce whisper
made him smile. She sounded like an angry kitten, spitting at shadows.
“I was only joking. Did you notice there was nothing about the Team having any success so far with
a cure for this mutation, or whatever it is,” he asked.
Jamie took a moment to answer. “It must be rather daunting thinking the world is depending on you
to find the answer to something nobody can understand or identify. I wouldn't really want to be in
their shoes.”
“If they find a cure, they'll be hailed as heroes and probably given the Nobel prize.”
“Is that jealousy, Dr. Morgan?”
“No. Like you said, expecting one small group of people to find a cure for something so worldwide
is asking a fucking lot of anybody.”
“Hmmm.”
They lay in the darkness listening to each other breath.
“Do you think there is anywhere to run to, anywhere truly safe?” Jamie asked softly.
“I don't know,” he answered honestly. “We've grown so accustomed to being able to control animals
and insects, either by removing their habitat so they move further away from us or by killing them
with sprays and insecticide. We've become inured to seeing animals penned up and staying that way,
not trying to escape their fate, not attempting to change their ultimate outcome, just accepting that
man has dominion over everything they do. Now, something has changed that dynamic. Something
has altered the balance of power between animals and mankind.” Mitch paused to draw breath, then
carried on with his explanation. “In his most basic form, a human being is part of the food chain, not
the apex predator that he likes to think he is. The only things that make a man an apex predator is
weapons - the ability to use them and make them. Without weapons, we are just meat on legs, same
as a zebra or gazelle or rabbits.” He paused for a long moment then spoke in a quiet, gruff voice.

“Great apes, especially chimpanzee’s are the true apex predators. They can organize and coordinate a hunt. In enough numbers, they can drive off or kill any of the big cats, even tigers. They are strong, intelligent and can make tools. It is only the fact that man outnumbers them and can use weapons against them, that tips the balance. A chimp is far better equipped than a man to fight and kill. They are faster, stronger and have wicked canines to rip and tear. They only lack the will to do so.”

Jamie let a silence grow between them as his views sunk in. “So, if I understand you, you’re saying that but for a quirk of evolution where man learned how to make weapons, this would be the Planet of the Apes instead?”

Mitch chuckled. “Huh! Never suspected you were such a geek.”

Jamie smiled to herself in the darkness. “Goodnight, Mitch.”

He listened to her turn over under the covers. “Nite, Jamie.” He lay against the pillows and let his thoughts rumble about his brain. It would be awhile before sleep claimed him.

The next morning found them fossicking around in the parking basement looking for a new ride. There wasn't much to choose from. Most of the tenants in the building had left that first day after the bird and hornet attack. The rest left in the days afterward. All that was left was one badly dented and scraped Lexus, vintage two thousand and two model, one classic car up on axle stands, so small only Jamie would have fitted inside, and something hidden in a dark corner under a car cover. As luck would have it, when they pulled off the cover, a treasure was revealed. A brand new shiny black four-by-four.

“Woah. This'll do nicely!” Jamie ran her hand over the heavy chrome radiator grill. “Who does it belong to?”

“My neighbor,” Mitch replied looking at the parking designation plate on the wall. “Mrs. Brickel, she's ninety if she's a day. I can't see this being her car, at least not with her driving it.”

Jamie shrugged. “Maybe she's just looking after it for someone. Rego says it's a Ford Expedition, two thousand and eight.” She peered through the side window. “Automatic. Has GPS and leather seats. Sweet. Think she might sell it to us?”

Mitch shrugged. “That's if she's left contact details in her flat, otherwise...I guess we're stealing it.”

Jamie pulled back from the window and chewed her lip. “Would she let us have it if she knew the situation?”

“I have no idea. That would depend on why she has it in the first place.”

Mitch pulled the rest of the cover off and tossed it to one side. “Anyway, unless you know how to break into a car without breaking a window, we're going to need a key.”

They spent a minute or two checking the tires and under the wheel rims for a key case or spare key, but found nothing.

“Now we’ll have to go see Mrs. Brickel,” said Jamie, dusting off her hands.

Mitch stood outside his neighbor's door and chewed his lip. He's assumed that the old lady had been evacuated around the time everyone had left, but that was based on no real evidence.

“Maybe you should wait outside,” Mitch suggested. Jamie gave him a funny look. “You think she might still be in there? Dead?”

“It's possible. I never thought to check when we came back.”

“We need that key, Mitch.”

“Fine. Stand back.” He employed a crowbar and the door locks gave easily, the door popping open. Immediately they drew back, covering their noses. “Guess she didn't evacuate after all.”

They both went back to his apartment for something to put over their face before returning to the neighbor's place. Looking like bandits, they entered the apartment and looked around. The remains of the old lady were still in the armchair she’d died in. Jamie ducked into the kitchen, while Mitch took on the bedroom and living room. The faint but persistent buzz of flies was ever present, the stained carpet around the corpse alive with movement. Jamie soon joined him in the bedroom and they systematically went through all the drawers, finding the keys in an envelope with the name
'David' on the front, along with the ownership and insurance papers, and registration. Beating a hasty retreat, they firmly shut the door behind them and returned to Mitch's apartment. Their mood of celebration was now muted with the discovery of Mrs. Brickal. As quickly as possible they gathered together their possession and what food was left and hurried down the stairs to the basement.

Piling everything into the shiny black Ford they got in and Mitch tried the ignition. After two attempts the car roared into life. Mitch tooled the car around the garage to the exit and glided up the exit ramp to the road above. Looking left and right he noted the complete absence of any movement, animal or human and glanced over at Jamie.

“Do we stay or do we go?”

“Go!” She answered instantly.

Mitch turned the steering wheel and they were soon making their way down the empty boulevards and along deserted roads to reach the nearest route to escape from LA.

Jamie wound the window down to drink in the sea air as they rolled along the Pacific Coast highway, once more heading north. There was still traffic on the roads in both directions, but nothing as heavy as the previous weeks after the bird attacks. Now they could cruise at a decent speed, the engine purring its approval, eating up the miles while enjoying the scenery. Their first stop would be Santa Barbara, only an hour and a half away, there to top up on whatever was available. Mitch still had his cash reserves as well as credit cards for whatever they needed and they didn't want to have to stop again until they reached Monterey, another four hours further on. Mitch wore his gun openly against his thigh to dissuade anyone who thought him an easy mark. Jamie stayed behind in the truck and kept her weapon visible on the dashboard, ready to fire a warning shot if anyone looked like disputing their right to the truck.

As they traveled along the coast, the human evacuees were evident in the number of tents set up along the beachfront, the camper vans and caravans parked up in carparks beside the highway, forming tent cities to accommodate those fleeing Los Angeles.

Their ultimate destination was San Fransisco, along the way making contact with a colleague of Mitch, one who he hoped would give them access to another lab to work out of. Their choices of refuge were becoming limited as the attacks on people became more concentrated and widespread. There hadn't been many reports out of San Fran, according to the incident map Jamie had been keeping, so they hoped it would allow them a breathing space, and give Mitch a chance to keep on working to find a cure.

The coastal highway left the beachfront at Gaviota and started to climb into the hills. A rest stop before the Gaviota tunnel was packed with people and vehicles, but thankfully the short, northbound tunnel was unblocked giving them a clear run to the pass. They were now on the El Camino Real, passing through rocky cuts and steep hills. Shortly after, they drove through Las Cruces without slowing, still heading north now on the Cabrillo Highway towards Monterey. The countryside around them since they'd left off hugging the coast, was deceptively peaceful, the craggy, rock-strewn cuttings giving way to rolling green hills with hardly any evidence of man or beast other than the road rising and falling, weaving and bending through the pastoral scenery. At Lompoc, they turned left to head back towards the coast and drove through the center of town, the traffic heavier but not logjammed. There was little evidence of any panic over animal attacks, the shops all open and pedestrians still walking the footpaths. For the time being, it looked as if Lompoc was still open for business. As they reached the outskirts of the city, the houses gave way to crop fields, some green and growing, others freshly plowed or fallow. It was like driving through a bubble where nothing bad had happened, regardless of the terrible news coming in from around the world. The highway skirted the Vandenberg AFB and headed inland again, winding its way among the hills and valleys, bypassing Santa Maria and heading northwest to Oceana and finally back to the sea. The return to the coast was brief before the road headed once more inland to bypass the Montana de Ora state
park. It would take them close to the Cal Poly state university, where his friend was supposed to be teaching.

Jamie sat in the Expedition and watched the faculty and visitor cars go in and out of the carpark in front of the main Administration block. Mitch had been gone for half an hour, looking up that friend of his who supposedly worked or lectured on one of the courses. Again, it struck her that no one seemed to be worried about walking around in the open. Did no one watch the television, or listen to the radio? She looked up and around at the numerous trees and palms planted all around the campus. It made for a pleasant, shady place to be, but also a great roost for possibly thousands of birds and insects. The noise made by the birds fluttering, twittering and crashing around in the apartment was one she wouldn't forget as long as she lived. Here, in the pale sunshine, it was as if it had been a dream, or rather a nightmare. A tall figure in a black leather jacket and snug jeans was striding towards her and she sat up straight, recognizing Mitch. He was still wearing his gun cowboy style, in a holster strapped to his thigh for all the world like a gunslinger, garnering him some curious looks from students walking along the footpaths. With his sunglasses, dark hair and obvious haste, it was a wonder the campus security weren't jumping all over him.

Mitch approached the truck and tugged off his jacket, tossing it in first before climbing into the driver's seat.

“Any success finding your friend?” Jamie asked. Mitch sat for a moment with his hands resting on the steering wheel.

“Some. I spoke to him on the phone and we're going to be staying at his place while we're in San Francisco. He transferred to Cal State East Bay two years ago. Jim Cassady is his name, we go way back. We both started out studying to become doctors, but both decided to change our course in our second year. He went into genetics, I went into veterinary science and pathology.”

“What are you hoping he'll do for you?’”

Mitch looked over at her. “Get me into a lab where I can study what samples I have and try and pinpoint what connects them.” He put on his seatbelt and started the engine. “Despite appearances, people are pretty jumpy around here from the reports that have been coming out of Los Angeles.”

“No bird attacks?’”

“Not yet,” he reported. “But there have been incidents on the beachfront with people being rushed by sea lions or mobbed by seagulls. No deaths, but still frightening.”

They drove away from the campus and headed back to the coast. They still had nearly three hours traveling ahead of them to reach Monterey and daylight was burning.

They rejoined the Cabrillo highway at Morro Bay and apart from a couple of deviations inland to skirt state parks, hugged the coastline all the way north to Carmel. There they stopped at the first motel near the beach that had a vacancy. In this case, the La Playa. Mitch was exhausted from driving all day but was not so tired not to keep his wits about him, asking at the reception about any reports of unusual animal, bird or insect behavior. The woman at the counter was interested enough to hear about a watered-down version of what was happening in LA and shared a few incidents that had the locals watching the skies and wary of getting too close to wildlife in the area. They were also warned not to go in the sea for whatever reason. Several sea-kayakers had been attacked by the huge Elephant seals that cruised the waters, and one incident had involved a pod of usually friendly dolphins being anything but, capsizing a boat and causing mayhem among the survivors. Mitch took all the information on board, along with the key, and thanked her, before climbing the stairs to their first-floor room. After the incident with the rats, there was no way they going to sleep on the ground floor.

Mitch was passed out on one of the beds, shirtless, after taking a quick shower when they first arrived. Jamie wasn't tired and paced the small room restlessly. She longed to go out and walk down to the seafront and draw buckets loads of salty air into her lungs, but circumstances reminded her of just what a bad idea that really could be. Being cooped up in the truck for the entire day, she felt an
urgent need to stretch her legs, the muted distant boom of the waves a sirens call, promising a limitless horizon and room to move. She cast another look at her roommate and chewed on her lip. It wasn't quite dark yet, the sun a few degrees yet off setting. Unable to bear the confines of the motel room a moment longer, she snatched up the spare room key and grabbed her jacket before leaving.

The motel was only three streets from the beachfront, an easy walk down the hill, allowing her to stretch her legs and take in the leafy, tree-lined narrow lanes with their quaint houses and flower-filled gardens. The beach, when she arrived scant minutes later, lived up to all her expectations. White sand stretching away to left and right, and in front of her the sea, the sun just starting to head towards the horizon in a blaze of decadent color. A few people were walking the beach, but not as many as she suspected would normally flock to the picturesque seafront. Mindful of the warning about seals and birds, Jamie kept a weather eye on anything that moved, but soon the lull of the waves drew her down to the water's edge. A stiff breeze blew the smell of seaweed to her, and she tilted her head up to inhale deeply.

"Not safe to be out after dark around here," a male voice informed her. Spinning on her heel, Jamie went into a defensive crouch, her hand moving to the gun on her hip. "Woah. Sorry, I thought you might be a tourist, dressed as you are."

Jamie looked at the man in his forties, ordinary looking and holding his hands up in surrender. "Sorry. We've come from LA. It's been a rough trip," she explained, standing normally but taking a step back. The man lowered his hands and gave her a tentative smile. He looked around. "We?"

"My keeper is just a bit further up the beach, waiting for me in the car. I just..." she indicated the sea. "It looked so inviting and we've been cooped up for hours."

"We do get some spectacular sunsets around here." He indicated the sky behind her. Jamie turned and gasped in wonder. The sky was a sheet of color with the sun at its center sinking slowly and inexorably into the sea in the distance. When the sun finally disappeared Jamie turned to go. The man tramped beside her as she returned up the beach, the sand crunching under her boots.

"Best not to be outside after it gets dark, we've been having a problem with dogs roaming, and for some reason, all the cats have gone missing. They come back eventually, but every single one disappears for hours on end, sometimes the whole night. It's a mystery."

Jamie waved him off and watched as he walked towards one of the beachside houses and disappeared inside behind a substantial fence, then she started the walk back to the hotel up the hill. Lights were coming on in most of the houses, but several were dark, curtains drawn with no sign of life. The distant sound of a dog barking made her pick up her pace, almost jogging the last few meters to reach the motel, happy to shut the tall metal gates behind her before seeking their room on the first floor. She was careful to be quiet when she entered the room, wincing when the door lock made a loud clunk when she relocked it, but Mitch didn't appear to stir, having turned on his side, still fast asleep, unaware of her absence.

Now she was tired, the walk, fresh air and anxiety combined to make her welcome the soft mattress on her bed, sleep rushing over her before she'd hardly pulled the covers up over her shoulders.

Mitch raised his head a fraction, his tense body relaxing as he acknowledged that she was back and safe. He'd been furious when he'd first awoken to find her gone, but apart from searching the streets for her, there was little he could do but wait for her to return. It was the worst thirty minutes of his life, but he'd feigned sleep until she'd snuggled under the covers, then opened his eyes and looked over at her. It remained to be seen if she would tell him about her adventure. He'd just have to trust that she would. Still tired himself, he yawned and quickly settled back to snooze a few more hours away, his hand finding the gun snugged under his pillow, touching it for reassurance.

Mitch was up and dressed when Jamie awoke. She glanced at the clock, surprised to find she'd slept for several hours. She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and sat up, lifting her arms to stretch. Something wonderfully savory was scenting the air. Her stomach rumbled. Mitch pulled the food
containers out of the bag and set them on the small table, the wonderful smell coming from them made her mouth water.

“This all smells marvelous. What is it?” she asked, sitting down and surveying the table. The options weren’t many, but all looked and smelled divine.

“Um… onion tarts, mac'n'cheese and a couple of salads.” He handed her a small plate and a fork.

“Dig in.”

They ate their meal in companionable silence, both savoring the tempting morsels he’d garnered from somewhere called Grasings which had been highly recommended by the receptionist of their motel when asked.

“Apparently they don't usually do takeaways, but they also are not getting the numbers through the doors with everyone scared to go out at night, so they’ve relaxed their rules and now do a roaring trade in take-out,” Mitch informed her before reaching into the bag for a couple of small containers.

“Dessert!” he put one of them in front of her with a flourish.

When everything was cleared away, they sat side by side on the overstuffed sofa and switched the TV on to see what was happening in the world. The news, as had become the pattern of late, started off with warnings about unsafe areas due to creature attacks or insect infestations. Few of the escaped animals had been captured, but several more people had foolishly lost their lives venturing out after dark. Many of those killed were identified as looters, taking advantage of abandoned homes. There was little sympathy given by the reporters, using those instances to warn others off doing the same thing. Around the world the news was grim with evidence that insects were starting to disrupt manufacturing, ants developing unusual abilities to generate electricity with one devastating explosion in France attributed to them. Elsewhere were reports of animals in large groups systematically trampling over crops, destroying food and generally terrifying anyone who got in their way. There was talk about considering a special military force to take on some of these large herds with a view to dispersing them, or more likely wipe them out. Similar rhetoric was being used to find a solution to the insects plaguing people and driving them out of their homes. Talks were in session to start aerial spraying to combat and eradicate the problem, but that was being argued against by anyone who was against further pollution of the environment and the fact that as many beneficial insects would be killed as the pest they were after. Again and again, the argument was raised to just kill any animal that showed the defiant pupil, whether wild or domesticated. In practical terms, it was largely a non-starter but as more people died, Mitch could see that the option would soon become very attractive. The name of a potential solution – the Noah Objective – was getting more and more air-time, a worrying trend for anyone who understood the implications of what they proposed. The complete annihilation of the animal and insect population around the world, on land or in water, then a repopulation with untainted stock. Mitch cut off the reporter in mid-speech by hitting the mute button.

“Could they do that?” Jamie asked. Mitch snorted.

“They could try, but it's madness anyway. We live in is an ecosystem where everything, regardless of what is it, animal, insect, plant or bacteria, has a role in keeping our planet alive. Just because mankind has fucked things up royally, doesn't detract from the fact that if you kill off all living things, then you kill off us as well. Plants need animals, animals need plants, same applies to insects and everything that lives either above ground, below ground or in the water – fresh or salt. It's already been proven that if you wipe out one species, another will fill the gap, so even if they kill off ninety percent of the species, and that's being optimistic, what is left will repopulate at a faster rate to fill the void and take advantage of the extra resources now the competition is gone. And another thing, who is volunteering to clean up all the dead animals, domestic and wild that will be everywhere? If they kill off the insects that usually feed on the decaying matter, can you imagine how long it will take to dispose of all the bodies?” Mitch drew a breath, then continued with his lecture. “To truly understand the scale of what they are proposing you have to understand that in an average house, sitting in a medium sized garden, on top of the soil and using ordinary building materials, we live among a huge micro-ecology of insects alone. It is suggested that the average
American house is home to over one hundred species – not individual insects, but species of different insects in varying quantities depending on conditions. And that’s a conservative estimate. Then factor in what lives in the garden surrounding that home, even if it's just grass and dirt, then add to that the pets and birds, rodents and other creatures and their accompanying parasites that inhabit the surrounding environment, and you get the idea that we, the human beings, are a very small part of the overall picture.”

“So you’re saying that the Noah objective is doomed before it's even left the ground.”

“No only doomed but could be seen as an unconscionable slaughter of species that will never be able to be resurrected and a total destruction of the natural ecosystem of our planet. If they doom the animals, they doom us as well, no question.”

“So what’s the answer?”

“The same that it's always been – find the cause and create a cure. Anything else means the death of the planet and the end of humanity.”

Jamie gave a small chuckle. “A bit overly dramatic, Professor. Surely there must be others that understand the situation the way you do?”

Mitch laughed, but there was little humor in the sound. “There have been plenty of opportunities for mankind to do the ‘right thing’ when it comes to battling pollution or protecting the environment and by default the planet, but they have all been subverted by those that have the political power and the money to do the exact opposite, because doing the right thing is not profitable or won’t provide the returns they want for the effort expended.”

“Ouch. That's a pretty cynical worldview.”

Mitch shrugged. “You don't have to go far to find climate-change deniers, they occupy the highest political positions in the country.”

“Even if that is true,” said Jamie. “There will still be people, scientists, powerful people that believe the same thing you do, that a cure is the only answer.”

“Maybe. But unless they have the military behind them, the person pulling the trigger or financing the research is the one making the final decision.”

They sat staring at the images scrolling across the screen, the talking heads and scenes of rioting, looting and general human carnage and misery across the globe. At length, Mitch turned the TV off and went to pull out a crossword puzzle book to work on. Doing the simple word puzzles allowed him to distract himself and give his brain a rest, something he found necessary when he had a particularly difficult problem to solve, or the science would simply not fall into a pattern he recognized. Jamie sat at the table and opened the laptop to see what she could find out about the Noah Objective and the people supporting it. As she scrolled down pages and flipped between tabs she found a website with a free music archive of old classics, the room soon filled with muted renditions of seventies and eighties tunes. Mitch raised his head and smiled at the picture she made, nodding her head in time with the music while her fingers danced speedily over the keyboard, typing in search parameters, her face drawn into lines of concentration as she worked.

“Mitch?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know a General Andrew Davies?”

“Why do you ask?” he hedged, his brain already working on the problem.

“He's apparently heading up the para-military group that is supporting the Noah objective plan.”

Mitch put his book down in his lap. “I used to know a pseudoscientist called Davies. I say pseudo because he never had an original idea, always leeching off and taking the credit for other's work.”

“Well it looks like he's the brains behind the idea, but Reiden is providing the resources supporting him.”

“You mean Reiden have come up with this supposed cure that will kill all the fauna of planet Earth, and Davies is their front man,” Mitch clarified.

“Yeah, pretty much. He's coordinating with various countries to use their airspace to disperse the gas that is supposed to effect this global slaughter. I might just see if any of my more nefarious contacts
know any more about him and this plan.”
“Keep me posted,” Mitch grunted, returning to his brain teaser.
Jamie spent the next hour visiting websites, blogs and forums, ferreting out bits of information,
adding two and two and getting five, building up a picture of the people involved and around the
whole Noah objective, including those that supported as well as those that objected. At length, she
closed the laptop down and rubbed her eyes. Mitch looked up from the latest of several crosswords
he’d completed that evening.
“Done for the night?” he asked. Jamie nodded.
“I’ve asked a few questions and will check for answers tomorrow, but it seems there is a definite
body of influential people pushing back against this plan. They are holding a meeting with various
leading scientific minds as well as world movers and shakers later this month in DC.”
Mitch leaned his head back on the pillows behind him. “What I wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall
at that meeting.”
“Do you think you are anywhere close to the cause or a cure?” she asked. Mitch shook his head.
“I’ve barely scratched the surface. I’m also missing a major component of the puzzle. I’m close to
narrowing it down, but I need more time in the lab, and more specimens to study.” He shut the book
he’d been working through and placed it, along with his glasses beside the bed. “If we want to get on
the road early tomorrow, we’d better call it a night.”
Jamie nodded in agreement, watching him disappear into the tiny bathroom and shut the door.
Minutes later he was back out and told her it was “all yours.”

Dawn was just lighting the skyline when Jamie awoke suddenly. She lay in her bed, still on the cusp
of sleep, and listened to Mitch breathing deeply in the other bed, then she heard what had jolted her
out of her dream. Dogs were barking up a storm somewhere nearby. The animals were not making
noise just for the sake of it either. She was surprised to detect a sort of pattern in the noises, one dog
barking three or four times, then silence until another dog in a different direction and distance started
to bark, again only for a few times, then another after that, and another after that. It was like they
were talking to each other, making a statement then listening to answer from different dogs to the
question asked. It was both disconcerting and fascinating at the same time. She glanced over to
Mitch’s bed and wasn’t that surprised to see him propped up on his elbow, bed hair sticking up every
which way, his expression indicating his attention was all on the barking coming from outside.
“You hearing this?” Jamie whispered, turning her head back to face the window.
“I’m hearing it,” Mitch replied, his smartphone in his hand recording the sounds as further evidence
to support his theory about the animals communicating over distance. Obviously, it was already
documented that dogs barked to each other, but this pattern of barking was far outside the normal
way the animals interacted and he wanted to capture it. After several minutes he ended the recording
and sat up in bed, the covers falling down to his waist revealing his shirtless state.
In her own bed, Jamie let herself watch him, noting the tousled hair, glasses slightly askew, the skin
on his arms and chest lightly covered in dark hair that matched his brows and head hair. As he
worked the phone the sinews and tendons in his arm moved in synchronicity with his fingers. Yes,
he was older than she usually dated, but that did little to detract from his overall appeal. She
wondered, idly, if he was attracted to her. Sure, he’d kissed her head a couple of times, gave her that
hug in the carpark - that had certainly been a high point – been solicitous when she was afraid, had
worried about her when she’d been taken, but did that all mean he was attracted to her? He certainly
hadn’t taken advantage of opportunities where other men would have surely jumped at the chance.
When he’d spooned up against her that night, his hand spread over her midsection, it could have
become something more, but he’d left her alone. Certainly, he hadn’t indicated in any way that he
was adverse to female company, even freely talking about hiring a pro, his past girlfriend and his ex-
wife a case in point. So, maybe he wasn’t attracted to her. It was a sad thought that maybe she was
simply not his type. He could prefer blondes or brunettes over redheads with freckles, maybe he
liked big-busted woman over a meager handful, worse he could like leggy bombshells, not average
height skinnies. When she considered all the possibilities, she found herself thoroughly depressed.
and wondering why she'd allowed herself to go anywhere near the subject of attraction. Oh yes, it was because he was half naked in her presence and not showing one iota of interest. All his fault.

Completely out of sorts, Jamie threw back her covers and got out of bed. Snatching up a handful of clothes, she muttered something about taking a shower and stomped off into the bathroom, the door shutting more forcefully behind her than she intended.

Mitch paused what he was doing and glanced up, watching his roommate stalk across the room to the bathroom with an angry expression marring her pretty face. He barely heard her grumbled explanation before the bathroom door was slammed behind her. Shaking his head, he returned to what he was doing and finished off the text message before turning it off and preparing to face the day himself.

By the time Jamie exited the now steam-filled bathroom, Mitch was fully dressed and sitting at the table, two mugs of something hot beside him, one obviously for her. The hot shower had managed to smooth over some of her rough edges and she sat down beside him in a much better frame of mind than she'd gone into the bathroom with.

“So what's the plan?” she asked, sipping her coffee.

“Meet up with Jim. Get a lab, find the cause, make the cure.”

“Piece of cake,” Jamie quipped, Mitch turning his gaze to meet hers. For a moment she basked in his warm, friendly stare, her own gaze roaming over his features, noting the half-smile quirking the corner of his mouth, the usually hidden dimple showing in one cheek, the crinkles at the corner of his eyes and the one brow that persisted in rising above his glasses in a silent query.

Mitch had been making a similar inventory, noting the swirl of colors in her iris' hinting at blue in some lights, greeny hazel in others, the fine hairs of her brows arching delicately above her eyes, matching the long lashes framing the lids. His appreciative gaze took in the smattering of pale freckles that dotted the bridge of her nose, the creaminess of her skin and the deep rose of her slightly pursed lips, the last making him wish he could kiss her to see if she tasted as good as she looked.

“Yeah, something like that. I just need to take a shave while you pack and we can be on our way.” Without thinking, Jamie reached out and ran the back of her fingers down his cheek to feel the faint rasp of whiskers against her skin.

“Or you could let it grow a bit, Professor. Live a little.” A flush of color at her boldness stained her cheeks. Mitch grinned at her.

“I don't think you're a stuffed shirt, anything but!”

Mitch gazed at her, his head slightly tilted as it wondering if she truly meant what she said. Before he lost his nerve, he leaned forward until they were an inch apart, Jamie's eyes opening wide but her body not moving away from him, in fact, she leaned a little closer, the gap narrowing.

“It's just a kiss,” Mitch whispered.

“Oh, yes please...” Jamie whispered back, her eyes sliding shut at the gap disappeared and his warm lips pressed against hers. Those same lips slid across hers as he slanted his head to better fit with her's, her hand gravitating back to his face, the other finding its way into his hair as the kiss went from tentative to exploratory, Jamie drawing in a breath which in turn parted her lips and granted him entry, his own hand cupping her head to tilt it just right for him to deepen the pressure. As a first kiss, it was sweet and teasing, Mitch licking his own lips when he pulled back, his curiosity satisfied for the time being. If anything, she tasted better than he'd expected. Jamie blinked at him, her lips shiny, her eyes wide and trusting. He couldn't resist and swooped in for another taste, drawing her further forward until she was nearly sitting in his lap, her hands braced against his shoulders to keep her balance. He kept the kiss short, not wanting to ramp up the tension between them when they needed to get going. Instead, he nibbled at her lips, daring her tongue to play a little while, before drawing back, his hands cradling her face gently between them. She looked a little dazed and adorably flushed, her breath leaving her lips in short panting puffs.

Jamie pulled back and sat down in her chair. “That was nice...”
Mitch bit back the immediate desire to tell her he could do better, but they really needed to get on the road. “We'll call it an introduction. Now get packed, we need to leave.” He got up from the table and went to pack up his stuff in the bathroom, running a hand over his chin before deciding to leave it for another day. When he returned to the room, the bathroom cleared, he found her packed and ready to go. The dogs outside had finally stopped barking.

The drive to Hayward would take a little over two hours, depending on traffic, and given the city hadn't been under attack to the same degree as LA, they expected that business would be as usual and traffic the same. His friend Jim had a house near his job in Hayward Highland and they would head there first. Jamie watched the ocean slide by, once they were clear of Carmel and Monterey, the sun casting sparkles off the water as the waves broke on the yellow sand. The highway wound back and forth between the coastal sand dunes then dipped inland for a stretch, the traffic building the further north they drove. At Castroville they split from the main highway to follow the Cabrillo, the more scenic route that followed the coast, it was longer that way, but Mitch figured it would be less traveled by those escaping LA. Soon they were driving past huge flat fields under a blue-bowl sky, the contrast of dirt brown with azure very striking. They stopped briefly at Moss, at a roadside fruit market and gathered a selection of items to munch on for breakfast, the stall holder not surprised to have such early customers.

“Been doin’ a roaring trade by opening early,” the man told them, showing a gap in his teeth when he smiled at them. At Moss Landing they gassed up the truck, not wanting to stop again before they reached Jim's place in Hayward. The miles sped by as they passed Santa Cruz and headed inland for San Jose, the traffic becoming heavier with each town they drove through. Mitch commented darkly that if this was any indication, it would take hours to get to Hayward once they hit the main freeway and the city traffic.

“Then don't go by that route. We're practically in San Francisco as it is, why not take a detour. There's more than one bridge, isn't there?” Jamie suggested.

Mitch pulled over to the side of the highway and consulted one of the map books he'd accumulated at each gas station stop.

“If we turn north at Cambrian Park we can scoot up the two-eighty Foothills freeway until we reach the San Mateo bridge which will dump us right in Hayward.” Jamie indicated the route on the map.

Mitch nodded.

“As good a plan as any.”

For several miles, the highway continued to wind uphill and down-dale through evergreen forests with no hold-ups, and only the occasional breakdown to slow the flow of vehicles streaming towards the city. As they got closer, despite the map telling them they were passing through numerous suburbs, there was little to see from the road, the dense greenery, or sometimes a brick wall, effectively screening off the people and their shops and houses, from the never-ending vehicles rushing to their destinations. As they drove deeper into the suburbs the two-lane became a four-lane to accommodate the extra traffic, the city still tantalizingly hidden behind heavily planted embankments and high concrete walls. Only when the road rose to climb a hill did a glimpse of the sprawling city center appear between the trees like a shining white sentinel calling the faithful home. The transition from greenery bordered freeway, to being surrounded by buildings and houses was literally done in the blink of an eye, the approach to the San Mateo bridge dropping the freeway into the center of business for as far as the eye could see. Negotiating one of the convoluted flyovers, traffic seemed to be traveling in all directions at once, whichever window you looked out of, on several layers. As a feat of roading engineering, it was impressive. All too soon they were leaving the corporate buildings and shopping malls behind them to start the trip over the San Mateo bridge, the expanse of water stretching away on both sides of the freeway. About a third of the way across they could see the bridge continuing into the mists of the distance, the impression that they were floating above the water reinforced by the lack of any visible destination. It was a sight to behold. As they crossed over the halfway mark, the opposite shore started to appear from the haze, the roadway now close to the water, making Mitch wonder what it was like to travel the bridge in rough weather. Soon
enough they were back on dry land, surrounded by light industrial building and salt ponds. With Jamie map reading they negotiated a route through the city to the California State University East Bay campus, following the loop road to find the turnoff, leading to Mitch's friend's place. Parkside Drive was a one-way lane, very narrow and winding, Mitch, glad they weren't trying to find the place in the dark. Eventually, the numbers counted down to the one they were looking for and they pulled into the driveway. The house was a modest two storey with a double garage underneath but with parking off to the side. Using that area to park the truck, Mitch climbed out of the driver's side and stretched his back.

“Mitch! Well fuck me, you actually turned up!” A shout drew their attention to a window that overlooked the driveway, a man of Mitch's age leaning out and waving down at them.

“Jim, you ol' bastard, when did you get so old!”

With a laugh, the man disappeared only to reappear at the front door beside the double garage. Where Mitch was dark, Jim Cassady was light with sandy hair, brows, laughing blue eyes and a neatly trimmed beard. He and Mitch gave each other a brotherly hug, both men grinning broadly.

“How fucking long has it been?” Mitch asked, pulling back from his friend, but keeping his hands on Jim's shoulders.

“Too fucking long, you useless excuse for a friend,” Jim retorted, turning his head to speak to Jamie who was standing leaning against the truck, not wanting to intrude on the reunion. “Hope he hasn't bored the ears off you with his frequent lectures and over long monologues?”

Mitch dropped his grip on his friend and walked over to Jamie, grabbing her hand and threading his fingers through hers to pull her forward, to introduce her to his friend.

“Jim, this is Jamie...”

Jim whistled appreciatively, interrupting the introductions. “Yes, you are,” he growled softly, grinning at her. He flicked a glance at Mitch. “You never said you remarried! Congratulations! Do I get to kiss the bride?” Jim lurched forward and Jamie ducked behind Mitch.

“I didn't and she isn't,” Mitch told him succinctly. “I'm her keeper, for the time being, so keep your lips and anything else to yourself.”

Jim looked at his friend in surprise, then sent Jamie an outrageous wink. “Never mind, you'll soon have him twisted around your little pinky. He always was a sucker for a pretty face.”

Jamie blushed, her grip on Mitch's hand loosening, but he wouldn't let her go, holding on and tugging her along behind him after their host.
Part of the Cure

Chapter Summary

Mitch gets an offer he can't refuse, Jamie faces her fears

Jamie was dozing at the end of the couch, her feet tucked up under her. Mitch sat at the other end with Jim seated across the coffee table in an armchair. The two friends had been catching up ever since lunch, retelling old anecdotes about past acquaintances, as well as getting caught up on their own personal lives since they'd last seen each other, which was some time ago. It showed Jamie a different side of Mitch, one that laughed and smiled, face fully animated, with an ease she hadn't seen before, his hands expressing as much as his words, Jim engaging with him on an equally effusive level, years dropping away from them as they regressed to telling tales on each other. They both strived to include Jamie in their bantering, making her giggle with their alternative takes on a particular prank or run in with authority. Soon the comfortable cushions and the warm room took their toll and she felt her eyelids fighting to stay open. The voices of the two men washed over her and she easily slipped into a light doze, her head propped up by her hand. Eventually, that devolved to her head snuggling into the plump cushioning, the drone of voices sending her off to dreamland. Unfortunately, that hadn't been a particularly great place to be lately and she awoke with a start, her heart pounding. Both Mitch and Jim stopped talking, Mitch moving along the couch and putting a hand on her arm, her flinch making him withdraw it instantly.

“I'll go get the kettle on...” Jim gestured to the kitchen and beat a retreat. Jamie reached up to push her hair off her face and attempt to shake off the images still stark in her mind. Mitch was regarding her calmly, his hands in plain view as she pressed her fingers to her chest, feeling her heart racing.

“Bad dream?” Mitch asked, his voice neutral. He hated seeing her like this, his first instinct to gather her into his lap and cuddle her, but her flinch had told him she wasn't ready for that and would probably fight him if he tried.

Jamie flicked a glance at him and slowly straightened up on the couch, putting her feet to the floor in an attempt to appear something other than terrified. “Something like that.”

“You looked to be sleeping peacefully...” Mitch stated, still not moving. Jamie let out a shaky laugh. “Tell that to the birds pecking at your eyes.”

“My eyes?” Mitch asked, his eyebrow rising.

“Yeah, you were being attacked by these fucking great birds and they were tearing you apart.”

“Ouch.”

“And I...I was trying to beat them off, even shooting them, then I shot you and there...there was so much blood...” she stopped talking, her bottom lip trembling as she relived the last scene in her nightmare. Abruptly she got up from the couch and walked over to the big window, the lights of the city twinkling for miles around like a fairyland with the view the house had from this elevation. Mitch remained on the couch, his elbows resting on his knees as he leant forward, his head down. So he wasn't the only one to have dreams like that. Usually, she was the one in peril and he was prevented by someone or something from getting to her in time. When did she come to mean so much to him to provoke such nightmares? When had he come to mean so much to her? His friend returned from the kitchen bearing a tray of mugs and sandwiches. He cocked an eyebrow at Mitch who shook his head, Jim setting the tray down on the coffee table and resuming his seat in the armchair without comment.

“I didn't realize you'd had it so bad. We'd heard the stories, but it all was happening somewhere else.
We've only had one or two incidents in the wider area, so far. What happened to you?"
Mitch looked up at his friend. “Just after Jamie and I met we were witness to a pretty nasty incident at the LA zoo...”
Jim looked aghast. “You were there?”
Mitch nodded. “Yeah. The animals just went nuts. I got called on to do the necropsies, but only found one common factor - Iris Coloboma.”
Jim frowned. “That's a pretty rare condition in humans, unheard of in animals. Are you sure?”
Mitch gave him a look and Jim threw his hands up.
“But that's so strange. You know I specialize in genetics, well there have been some odd cases cross my desk in recent months.”
“What sort of cases?” Mitch asked.
“Babies, newborns. At least five percent of all those born in the last five years in the San Fransisco Bays area have displayed a keyhole iris....”
“But that must run into the hundreds!” Mitch interjected. Jim nodded. “Have you found an underlying cause?” Mitch asked.
“No, and that's not the only increase in rare cases, we've had a dozen new cases of Glazier's Syndrome in the past year alone, and worse this is the rarer spontaneous strain. This is my field, and I've made next to no progress in finding the root cause of the anomaly. I can't even pin it on a cluster effect, there are just too many.”
“And now it's in the animal population too. Jim, I have to find out what is causing this!”
Jamie listened from the far side of the room, hearing the frustration in Mitch's voice echoed by his friends. It would seem they had indeed come to the right place. If the two combined their research maybe there was a real chance they'd find the cause and then the cure if time and circumstances would only allow. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms to ward off a chill that suddenly chased down her spine.
A hand appeared in front of her holding a steaming mug of hot chocolate and she took it, smiling weakly at Mitch.
“Sorry if I'm being antisocial...”
Mitch waved her off. “Nothing like that. Jim read about that day at the zoo, he was shocked to hear we were there and what happened. He understands.”
“I wish I did.” She turned around and padded back to the couch, sending Jim a small smile before curling up with her mug of hot cocoa.
“I've only got the one spare room, but the bed's a king if you can make that work. Otherwise, it's the couch for one of you.” Jim indicated the spacious room and waved them to enter.
“This'll be fine.” Mitch replied, taking Jamie's silence for assent. He suspected that sleeping alone was the last thing she wanted to do after already having a nightmare earlier on. He would certainly miss her if she chose to sleep on the couch instead.
“That's great.” Jim clapped his hands together, satisfied he hadn't made a crushing faux pas after all.
“I'll see you both in the morning and we'll make plans then. Goodnight!”
Jim grinned at Mitch and turned to go, Jamie belatedly sending a soft 'goodnight' after him.
There was a generous ensuite attached to the room and she went in to check it out. She paused in front of the mirror and stared at herself for a moment, wondering if she'd ever get rid of those black circles under her eyes. Mitch hovered in the doorway, his personal kit bag in his hand.
“You going to take a shower?” he asked.
“No. I just want to go to bed and not dream.”
He stood back to let her go past him out the door, his face twisted into a grimace of understanding. Dumping his stuff by the sink he returned to the bedroom to sort out something fit to sleep in. Laundry was top of the list of chores for tomorrow, but for now, he had one more clean change, despite their sadly crushed and wrinkled state.
“I'll go use the bathroom...” He gestured and Jamie nodded to indicate she'd heard him. Casting her a
sideways look, he hesitated then went into the ensuite and closed the door.

Jamie sat on the bed feeling listless. Slowly she pushed off her jeans and undies, t-shirt and bra, leaving them in a heap on the floor. She pulled on a long sleep shirt that reached to her knees then peeled off her socks, adding them to the pile.

“Do you think we can do some laundry tomorrow?” she called out. “I’ve kinda run out of clothes...” She heard the tap running and figured he was brushing his teeth, then minutes later the bathroom door opened and he appeared in his usual nighttime wear of boxers, no t-shirt.

“I was thinking of doing the same thing...laundry, that is. We'll do a load tomorrow,” Mitch answered, padding around the end of the bed after gathering up her pile of clothes and adding them to his in a heap by the bedroom door. Jamie got to her feet and dragged her toes across the thick carpeting to take her turn in the bathroom. A few minutes later and she was done, switching off the bathroom light and walking slowly across to the bed, the covers already pulled back for her by Mitch who was laying on his side, head propped up on his hand, waiting for her.

Jamie lay on her back and pulled the covers up to her neck. Mitch switched off the bedside lamp on his side and the room was plunged into darkness. His voice floated to her out of the darkness.

“Why do you flinch when I touch you?”

Jamie turned her head in his direction but it was too dark to see him.

“I guess I haven't become used to you yet,” she answered, wincing at the lame excuse. She could almost sense that Mitch was probably rolling his eyes at her.

“You surely know by now that I don't mean you any harm. I wouldn't...I won't force myself on you.”

“I know. I just...I sometimes forget that you're that type of man, not the other type...”

“Who hurt you?” he asked gently.

Jamie fought back the lump rising in her throat. “I told you about Ethan, my supervisor at the newspaper...I said we hooked up after an office party and became lovers after that...” She swallowed. “That wasn't exactly how it happened. He was my supervisor, and we did live in the same building and he did give me a ride to work, but there wasn't an office party and love had very little to do with any of it.” She paused, staring blankly into the darkness, reliving that horrible night.

“He said I owed him for all he'd been doing, that he should have some recompense for being saddled with me, for being my keeper. He hadn't wanted to be, you see. I was part of his promotion to supervisor, and he was ambitious, so he agreed to be responsible as a means to advance his career.”

Her breathing hitched and she swiped at the moisture gathering behind her eyes. “I didn't find out about this until the night he decided he should be repaid for his magnanimity. Unfortunately, he was disappointed with my performance and decided to take his spite out on me by telling me everything. It all made for one wretched evening, all things considered.” She drew in a shuddering breath to calm herself down. Mitch remained silent, a darker shadow amongst many, only the sound of his breathing and heat from his body told her he was still there.

“Anyway, to avoid any more unpleasantness, I gave him what he wanted and became his nominal girlfriend, but it was all for nothing because he dobbed me in the first opportunity he had, to be rid of me.” She paused. “Then you came along and rescued me.”

Mitch listened to her story and had to bite his tongue to stop himself swearing out loud. He could feel the tension building in his shoulders as her narrative concluded with its unenviable compromise. As long as she did what she was told, she kept her job, the flat and her legality. If the man, Ethan had been in the room right then, Mitch would have cheerfully strangled him and disposed of the body. Her story went a long way to explain some things that had puzzled him. Why she'd behaved like a virgin on seeing him naked, why she wasn't more worldly in dealing with men, and yet accepted him readily enough, not running away as he suspected she'd wanted to that first night. She was attracted to him, it was plain in her kiss, but she was also afraid, her trust in men sorely battered by recent experience.

“You didn't need rescuing, Jamie Campbell, you just needed a helping hand with no strings attached. I'm glad I was there to do that for you.” He let that soak into the darkness between them.
“Why did you kiss me?” her hesitant question hung in the air.
“I wanted to know what you tasted like,” he answered. “I’ve wanted to kiss you ever since I met you.”
“Is that all men see in a woman? Someone to have sex with?” She sounded angry.
“For some men, maybe. Not all. Do all women fight against surrendering to men and their authority over their lives?”
“They damn well should!” her predictable reply shot back.
“Jamie, not all men are abusers, same as not all women want to be emancipated. No one size fits all.”
“Stop being so bloody reasonable. You have no idea what a woman wants, what I want.”
“Fair comment. Why don’t you tell me what you want?”
“I want to be able to make my own choices, to decide for myself without recourse to anyone, man or woman. I want to be able to go anywhere without worrying I don’t have the right papers or the right authority. I hate living in fear that the police will sweep me up and cart me off to some horrid place, punish me just because of my gender. I want...peace, I want to stop being afraid.” Her last words ended on a sob. “I hate that you made me cry again.”
Mitch sighed inwardly and shifted under the covers. Cautiously, as if approaching a wild animal, he carefully enfolded Jamie in his arms and drew her close, his movement slow so that she only had to tell him to stop or push him away for him to draw back, but she didn’t. Instead, she let him draw her into the middle of the bed, her head coming to rest against his collarbone, his arm about her shoulder holding her close. When they were settled and she showed no sign of scuttling back to her side of the bed, he let out a breath.
“I’m sorry I made you cry. I’m sorry I can’t change the way the world is, the way things work right now, but maybe with all that is happening, it’s time for a change, maybe you’ll get to see that change.” He spoke softly into the silky hair pressed against his cheek. Jamie lay a little tensely against his side, her hands held tight against her chest, fingers curled into fists, not touching him except where her cheek rested against the flesh of his shoulder. After several long, fraught minutes, she started to relax, her body unwinding from its defensive pose and letting her bones sink into the luxurious mattress. She could hear his heart thumping steadily in his chest, the hairs on his chest not coarse but soft, his skin velvety against her face, radiating warmth and comfort, unthreatening. As the minutes passed and he didn’t move, she tentatively unfurled her hand and laid it flat on his chest, a buzz of electricity humming up her arm from the tips of her fingers where they contacted his skin.
Mitch felt a corresponding well of heat from that small point of contact start to spread over his entire body as if he was a fuse suddenly ignited from her simple touch. Then she moved and he had to fight to stay still, her arm stretching over his torso, that action bringing her body flush up against his, the soft swell of her breasts pressing against his ribs. Her legs were now pressed up against the outside of his thigh, smooth satin against roughened velvet. Not surprisingly other parts of his anatomy started to wake up to the fact he had a woman cuddled up beside him. He fought to quell his base urges, but nature would out and he soon sported an impressive tent in his underwear. Manfully ignoring his wayward flesh, he remained still, his hand not moving from its place around her shoulders, his other arm crooked behind his head against the pillow. Any wrong move on his part and she’d scoot back to her perch on the edge of the bed and he’d be back to square one, worse than that because she’d not trust him to keep his hands to himself. He had to make sure not to fuck up this first foray into intimacy if he ever hoped to enjoy anything more with her in the near future.
And he sure did want to kiss her again.

When Mitch made no move at all, Jamie let herself close her eyes and give in to enjoying the feeling of safety and caring his hug engendered. Hugging for hugging’s sake hadn’t been big in her life after her mother died. Her Uncle and Aunt did their best for her, but since leaving their care her life had been starved of any real affection that didn’t involve a sexual transaction. She didn’t view Mitch in any sort of fatherly guise, but he did have a child, had known a wife and family and seemed to have
somehow avoided becoming bitter despite his checkered love life. Her last thought before slipping into sleep was that somehow she had found a true gem among the dross, a man worthy of the title.

Mitch knew the second she slipped into sleep, her body relaxing even more than it had already, her hand curling up to rest trustingly on his chest, her breath puffing evenly against his skin raising goosebumps of desire which he tamped down. That could wait until later, for now, he relished the trust she placed in him to sleep as she was, knowing he wouldn't molest or hurt her in her vulnerability. He smiled into the darkness and closed his eyes, ignoring the persistent pulse of his thwarted cock inside his shorts, not wanting to spoil the moment.

Daylight found them still cuddled up together, although this time Mitch was curled on his side, back facing Jamie who was snuggled up against his expanse of bare skin, her arm around his waist as it using him like a very large teddy bear. Neither had woken in the night due to dreams, and both were no longer looking so drawn or dark-eyed after a good nights rest. Jamie awoke first, a feeling of contentment and warmth bringing a smile to her face even before she opened her eyes. When she did she was faced with an expanse of flesh, lightly freckled. Withdrawing her arm from around his waist, she spread her hand wide, comparing the color of her skin with his, her fingers straying up to his neck to feel the thick hair at his nape, warm and soft as it combed through her hand. Done with exploring, she rolled away from him and sat up on her side of the bed. She thought back to what they’d talked about the night before and decided that a little understanding was not a bad thing. Mitch had been sympathetic without being patronizing, offering her comfort and nothing more. He'd made no move to try and coerce her into sex, not even to kiss her again, if he was playing a game with her it was a deep one, denying himself to gain her trust. Should she remain wary? Possibly, but he'd proven true to his word, which was more than she could say of Ethan. Mitch was kind and generous, she could do a lot worse. As much as she wanted to be 'free' as she'd stated, it was the reality of their world that emancipation was still a distant dream for the time being. Maybe, like Mitch said, this worldwide animal disaster would force change, wouldn't that be something? In the meantime, she was tied to Mitch Morgan for the foreseeable future and it was shaping up to be not all bad.

Mitch stretched and rolled onto his back, missing the warm body at his side. He heard the shower running and smiled. Last night had been revealing, learning about her recent experience and relating it to her present behavior and attitude. She needed to learn to trust him and last night had gone a long way to doing that. All night one or the other of them had curled an arm about the other, touching at some point or another as they changed position. He would have to leave it to her to initiate anything beyond the purely platonic, but he didn't think it would be long if her kiss was anything to judge by before Jamie wanted to explore further. Until then, he'd have to keep his libidinous body in check and let her set the pace. Talking of which, his hand gravitated down to his groin and the morning wood demanding his attention. The sound of water running shut off and he let out a sigh. He'd take care of his problem in the shower. In the meantime, he'd go and find where Jim stored his watching machine and get a load on the go.

When he got back to the bedroom, Jamie was out of the bathroom and sitting on the side of the bed, combing the tangles out of her wet hair. She twisted around to see him, sending him a small smile and wishing him a 'good morning'.

Mitch, still in his boxers, sent her a full-blown grin, gathering up his clothes to take into the bathroom with him. “Sleep okay?” he asked, backing towards the bathroom, his clothes held in front of his body to hide his unfortunate reaction to seeing her freshly washed and smelling sweeter than flowers. “I slept fine. You?” she asked, pausing to watch him sidle towards the bathroom doorway. “Peachy.” He indicated the doorway. “Just gonna take a quick shower.” He ducked into the bathroom and shut the door behind him. Jamie just shook her head slightly at his odd behavior and resumed combing out her hair.

As soon as he stepped under the water he enclosed his cock in his fist, moving his hand firmly from
tip to base and back again, over and over, biting his lip to stifle a moan as he brought himself off, easing the ache from being almost permanently aroused since kissing her. Was that only yesterday? He groaned softly, his hand moving quickly to bring on his climax, his body jerking as he expelled his seed over his fingers. Panting hard, he rested a moment before straightening up and quickly finishing his ablations. With a towel around his hips, he surveyed his appearance in the mirror and decided he really needed a shave. Twenty minutes later he emerged clean, dressed and ready for whatever the day might bring. Jamie wasn't in the room but he heard voices down the hall and spent a few moments straightening the bed covers before putting on his boots. Jamie was laughing at something Jim was telling her, the sound music to his ears. He soon joined them in the kitchen, Jim handing him a mug of coffee before indicating the choices for breakfast.

Over the table, Mitch and Jim discussed what options were available for Mitch to continue his research into the defiant pupil and its cause. Jamie listened but didn't take part, her gaze drifting to the view beyond the windows to the city gleaming in the morning sunshine. She turned back to look at Mitch when he touched her arm to get her attention.

“Jim is going to get us on campus and sort out a lab, then we're going to the zoo to speak to them about any abhorrent animal behavior.”

Jamie drew in a sharp breath when he mentioned the zoo. “I'm really not keen to repeat that experience, Mitch.”

“We're only be talking to the staff and possibly looking at their veterinary facilities while we're there. There's no chance we'll be in the same situation as before, I promise.”

Jamie gave him a look. “You know I'm going to hold you to that.”

He grinned at her. “Get your gear, and can you pack mine? I've got clothes to hang out.”

Jamie looked at him in surprise. “Don't you just use the drier?”

“Call me old-fashioned, or call Jim old fashioned, but he doesn't have a drier, so the line it is.”

Jamie smiled in genuine amusement. “Maybe I'll come out and watch. I don't think I've ever seen a guy hang out laundry before.”

In the end, they shared the chore, Jamie handling her own underwear after snatching it out of Mitch's hands when he held a pair up of her plain and sensible undies and wagged his eyebrows at her, making her laugh. With that out of the way, they piled into the truck, Jim locking up the house and using his own car to lead the way. Jamie switched on the radio and they were instantly assaulted with blaring news bulletins describing what was happening in LA. The city was under martial law and more looters had been found dead from animal attacks throughout the metro and urban areas, despite the numerous warnings. Large areas of LA had been evacuated and were now like a ghost town, patrolled by police or national guard. The city itself was grinding to a halt, businesses closing and production of goods halting as deliveries and orders dried up. The President was calling it a national disaster, as had been done for a handful of other cities that had been similarly affected across the States. The whole infrastructure of the city was buckling under the strain. News reports also detailed where refugees from LA could find shelter, centers for relief springing up everywhere in the San Francisco Bay area to deal with the influx of evacuees.

The trip to the campus took only minutes. Soon they were tramping through the quad to get to the administration block, the grounds oddly subdued, clusters of students talking together in hushed tones. Jim, Mitch, and Jamie were soon ushered into a room to wait, Jim having phoned ahead to request a meeting with the President of the CSEB to discuss Mitch's request for research resources. Jamie sat on Mitch's right, Jim on his left as they waited, the table big enough to seat twenty people. The door to the room opened and several people entered, one of them making Jamie suddenly white face, her eyes fixed on an unremarkable man in a plain, dark suit.

“He's the one that interrogated me.” She pointed to the man who calmly sat down in one of the chairs opposite and set down a fat dossier of papers. “What are you doing here?” she accused.
The remaining people found their seats and sat down, ignoring Jamie's outburst, which in itself was unusual. Mitch also remained standing, warning bells going off in his head. He turned to his friend. “Jim, what's this all about?”

His friend remained seated, staring down at his hands clasped together on the tabletop. “Sit down, Mitch,” Jim told him quietly, a resigned note in his voice.

Mitch glanced at his friend, anger churning his gut, but he stayed on his feet. Jamie moved to stand next to him, her hand finding his and holding on tight. The man in the dark suit spoke first.

“I believe we asked you not to leave the city, Doctor Morgan.”

“The agent supposedly from the FBI asked me, not you. Are you saying you're from the FBI? If you are, what right did you have to kidnap Jamie and then dump her in the middle of LA?”

The man smiled thinly. “Miss Campbell is on our radar and we have the right to question anyone who poses a potential threat to this country.”

Mitch laughed harshly. “Threat to the country? Then you'd better be prepared to interrogate everyone who runs a blog that voices unhappiness with some corporation or another. In fact, why not arrest anyone who holds a contrary opinion to yours?!”

The man smiled more broadly. “We're doing out best to do just that. But thank you for your suggestion. If you care to sit down, we'll begin this meeting.”

Mitch remained standing. “Meeting about what?”

“Meeting about you heading up a joint Taskforce to find a solution to our current crisis, Doctor Morgan.”

Mitch sat down abruptly. “Why?” he asked. Jamie remained standing, positioning herself behind Mitch's chair, his hand still in hers, now resting on his shoulder.

“You already have a team working on this,” Jamie accused.

Everyone on the other side of the table exchanged glances. The man in black seemed to be the spokesperson for all of them.

“We do have a team investigating various outbreaks and collecting data, but they don't have anyone like you.” He looked directly at Mitch. “Plus they have run into a few problems because of this.”


Again, a look was exchanged among the group facing him.

“None of the above, and yet all of the above.”

“Well, that's not cryptic at all!” Mitch snorted. “If your fancy group of international whatever they are can't find a cure, how do you expect me to?”

“We think you might be able to join the dots, so to speak. Our team has gathered information from around the world, but we have no-one qualified to analyze it, in as much as how it relates to what's happening to the animals. We know from what you were doing in LA that you are further along the track of finding a cure than anyone else. But without the information our team have accumulated your work won't be able to proceed or be successful. We need you, but you also need us and the information we can bring.”

Mitch indicated the others that so far hadn't said a word. “You are all part of this, members of this cabal?”

They all nodded. Jim included.

“You too?” Mitch asked, shocked.

“They asked me who I thought would be the best man to head up a research team,” Jim replied. “I put your hat in the ring.”

The man in the suit spoke again. “We looked into your past history, your body of work, and you are eminently qualified, then once we saw what you were doing at the UCLA, it confirmed that you were the most likely candidate to find a cure. You're on the right track, you're just missing some vital clues.”

Mitch sat back in his chair, letting go of Jamie's hand to rest his on the arms of his seat. Jamie kept her hand on his shoulder, for her comfort more than anything else. All eyes were on Mitch, but he was obviously thinking, his eyes reflecting his absorption in whatever he was thinking. The minutes ticked by, but no one interrupted or tried to hurry his decision.
Mitch suddenly moved, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table, his hands flat on the surface. Jamie lost her grip on his shoulder and instead folded her arms across her chest, still refusing to sit down. Mitch focussed on the man in the suit.

“I'll have complete access to any and all research to date?”

The man nodded.

“And I'll have access to a top class facility to expedite any tests I think necessary?”

Again the man nodded agreement.

“I will also need to pick a team of researchers in certain fields, as well as access to samples – living and dead, to advance the testing.”

“Whatever you need.”

“One more thing...” Mitch sat back in his chair and turned to look up at Jamie, reaching out his hand for her to take again. “Anywhere I go she goes too, any security access I have, she has access too...if that isn't workable, the deal is dead.” He ignored the babble of voices rising behind him, he only had eyes for her, his mouth pulled into a triumphant grin. Jamie looked at him with an expression of confusion and cautious hope. Eventually, the voices died away, and Mitch turned to face the people across the table.

The man in the suit looked pained, but he pinned a smile to his face and spoke.

“Agreed.”

Jamie left the meeting room and wandered down the corridor in search of firstly a bathroom, and secondly something to eat and drink, for both her and Mitch. More than anything she was glad to get out of the vicinity of the man in the suit. He made her uneasy on so many levels. Once Mitch accepted their proposal the initial planning started, a request sent out for notepads and laptops, tablets and pens to start drafting what would be needed to create the Taskforce. Jamie watched as Mitch transformed in front of her eyes into a man who had just been waiting to be given the opportunity to expand his scope and give wings to his ideas and theories. She knew he was a smart man, but until she heard him talking to people he considered his peers, in the language of science and experimental biology, she hadn't realized just how smart. This was his chance to shine and she wasn't about to hold him back.

Once he was engrossed in the discussions zipping across the table, she went to stand and stare out of the window, watching the students walking back and forth across the grounds below. When an hour had slipped by, she wrote him a note to tell him she was going to get a drink and he looked up briefly to ask her to get him something as well. Then he was pulled back into the conversation and she was forgotten again. This was the big league and she'd better get used to sharing him with matters that now spanned the world, not just the class he lectured in.

After using the bathroom, she followed the signs to the staff room, finding an espresso maker and a basket of sandwiches left for anyone to help themselves, as well as a covered muffin display plate. Finding a tray, she loaded up several plates and set the coffee machine going, producing a reasonable couple of cappuccino's to round out the food. Adding a couple of bottles of water from the vending machine, she carried her burden down the corridor and back to the meeting room. There, with a bit of help from her elbow, she opened the door and carried her treasure trove inside, Mitch's face lighting up on seeing her.

Everyone else stared as she rounded the table and set the trays down, sitting beside Mitch and doling out the plates, pausing midway to stare back at the others.

“What? You know where the staffroom is, don't you?” she said.

The chairman called for a break, and the room quickly emptied, Jim following the others after glancing at Mitch.

Mitch leaned back in his chair and took a leisurely sip of his coffee. “Have I mentioned you make a great cup of coffee?”

“You have now,” Jamie fired back. “How's the planning going?”

“Fancy a trip to DC?” he asked. Jamie lowered the sandwich she'd been about to bite in to.

“Never been. But I hear it's pretty close to Boston, isn't it?”

Mitch shook his head at her lack of subtlety. “Yeah. About seven hours by car, less by air.”

“So. No excuse for you not to visit.” Jamie caught his eye and did a creditable eyebrow lift to rival
Mitch grinned at her. “Only if you come with me.”

“Possibly. Always assuming they let you up for air occasionally.”

“You and me both. You're going to be part of all this too, don't forget.”

“Oh, come on, Mitch. What on Earth am I going to be useful for? You'll have your pick of the
scientist you want and from the sounds of it unlimited resources to draw on. I can't see that I'll
exactly fit into that scenario very comfortably, and I know they won't want me around at all if they
can find a way to exclude me.”

“You're wrong. There is a ton of stuff you can do that no one else can. We scientists can sometimes
get a little bit bogged down in the details and forget the big picture. I need you to keep your focus on
that big picture, keep tracing the attacks, map the animals involved, maintain the logistics of when
and where and who to, that is all just as important as finding the cure. I need your help, Jamie. I need
you to bounce ideas off and keep me grounded. Can you do that?” He had both her hands in his,
staring into her eyes with an intensity she found she couldn't look away from.

“I...I guess so,” she stammered, mesmerized by the depth of color and raw honesty in his gaze.

Mitch found himself drowning in her wide turquoise eyes, his heart kicking up a beat as he tugged
her hands to draw her closer. Her succulent pink lips parted slightly as he drew her towards him,
their eyes never wavering from the other until they were mere inches apart, then Jamie closed her
eyes and he pressed home his advantage, his lips warm against hers in a chaste kiss. When they
parted, her eyelids fluttered open and she graced him with a smile of such sweetness he had to have
more. Tugging more forcefully, he pulled her onto his lap and, despite her surprised squeak,
swooped in to claim her lips again, his tongue joining the party, her own tentatively stroking and
teasing his as the kiss deepened. Her arms were around his neck while he was holding her snuggly in
his lap and against his chest, his mouth no longer gentle, but ravishing, devouring her like the last
meal he would ever have. Jamie gave back as good as she got, her fingers threading through his hair,
hanging on for dear life as her soul seemed to be pulled from her body with the force of his
passionate attack emboldened by her melting surrender to it. Neither heard the door open or the
return of the group of men and woman from before, only the sharp intake of breath from one of the
woman breaking through the thrall and making Mitch slow the kiss down until he could bear to
break it entirely.

Jamie came back to Earth to find herself the censure of several pairs of eyes, her cheeks pinking in
embarrassment as she slid off Mitch's lap and returned to her own chair, her meal temporarily
forgotten. Mitch didn't react at all, maintaining an insufferably smug demeanor even when talks
resumed and Jamie was once more shut out of whatever was being arranged and discussed.
Bored, she gathered up the remains of the lunch and carried the tray back to the staff room. She
lingered there for a while, making herself a fresh cup of coffee and reading some of the magazine
scattered about. At length she returned to find the meeting finally breaking up, Mitch shaking hands
with everyone around the table except for Jim. After the men and women filed out, Jamie sat down
and waited to hear what their next move was. To her surprise, it was to return to Jim's place again.
Apparently, sometime over the talks, the two former friends had made up and all was forgiven.
Mitch had a bunch of notes to read over and Jim was still talking about sciency stuff she didn't remotely
understand. At one point Mitch broke off his discussion and turned to Jamie, holding out his hand for
her to take as they prepared to return to the truck.

“We're going back to Jim's place for tonight, then we'll be taking a military transport to DC
tomorrow.” He told her, his fingers wrapping around hers as she walked beside him. Jim was a little
ahead so she whispered her misgiving to Mitch.

“You were mad at him, what's changed?” she asked, speaking close to his ear.

Mitch shook his head. “He had his reasons, and I accept them. This is too important to hold a grudge,
Jamie. Things are going to be pretty hectic over the next few weeks and months, and I for one am
not going to turn down spending a night in a sinfully comfortable bed with you. Who knows when
the opportunity will come again.” His grin was infectious and she returned it, some of his bonhomie brushing off on her.

Jamie was just finishing packing her clean laundry when Mitch called for her from the other room. Jim had promised to cook dinner for them, Mitch offering to help. Happy to leave them to do something she had no talent for, Jamie decided to spend the time sorting out and folding her clean gear ready for the trip to DC the next day. She was nervous about the prospect of flying, but Mitch had assured her every precaution was being taken to assure their safety. They would be flying high above any mammal, bird or insect could reach plus they’d beefed up the radar array to be more sensitive to pick up anything in their flight path. The only dicey times would be when they were actually taking off, or landing at the other end. They wouldn’t be the only passengers, so everything was being done to make sure they arrived at their destination in one piece. Trusting in Mitch, she accepted his reassurances and prayed he was right. As if conjuring him out of her thoughts, his voice called for her to come eat, so she put down the shirt she was folding and left the bedroom.

In the dining room, the table was laid with candles and bottles of wine, Jamie taking one of the seats and pouring herself a generous glass of the still white on offer. Mitch and Jim appeared carrying platters, one of them mixed roasted vegetables tossed with herbs, another with some sort of meat dish in a sauce. Jim produced serving spoons and Mitch filled a plate under her direction. The meat was delicious, the wine tart but a perfect accompaniment, Jamie making a toast to the chefs when the plates were nearly licked clean. Jim then produced dessert and another wine, Mitch feeding Jamie spoonfuls off his plate when she protested she was full. At length, the meal was done and the candles pinched out, Mitch offering to clean up while Jamie was told to enjoy the last of the dessert wine and chat to Jim. With his friend clattering about in the kitchen, Jim sat at the other end of the couch and regarded Jamie until she grew uncomfortable.

“What?” she asked, emptying her glass and putting it on the coffee table.

“You know he's already halfway in love with you?” Jamie snorted. “We hardly know each other, and anyway, I'm not his type...I think.” It was Jim's turn to give a disbelieving laugh. “You're joking, or seriously deluded. Have you forgotten you were in his lap sucking face like there was no tomorrow?” Jamie waved a negligent hand. “He was just hyped up to be making progress on the cure,” she explained dismissively.

“You could do him some serious damage. Try not to be too hard on him.” Jamie felt her cheek blush. “He's no more in love with me than I am with him. We only just met.” “Just try not to hurt him,” Jim tried for the last time, getting to his feet and wandering back to the kitchen to give his friend a hand.

Jamie felt aggrieved that her pleasant buzz from the wine had been shattered by Jim's earnest assumption that Mitch had feelings for her. It was ridiculous, really. Okay, they had exchanged a couple of kisses, but that hardly meant long-lasting commitment. Yes, he’d asked her to be part of his team, but that simply meant he recognized she had something to contribute, not that he wanted her, certainly not because he 'loved' her. They were, what was the word he used? Platonic. Caring but not intimate, aware without obsessing. That was it. As if anything she did could or would hurt him. Eventually, the two men returned, but by then Jamie was out of sorts and decided to call it a night. Mitch protested but she flapped a hand at him and extolled him to stay and talk to Jim.

Once more back in the bedroom, she plopped down onto the side of the bed and pouted to herself. Her mood was quickly turning sour and she cursed under the breath, struggling to get out of her clothes to get ready for bed. Stripping down to nothing but her underwear, she got up and weaved her way to the bathroom to brush her teeth, grimacing as the toothpaste fought with the wine on her tongue. Still only in her undies and bra, she tottered to the bed and threw back the covers after switching off the overhead light, leaving just one of the bedside lamps on, casting the room into shadows. Feeling overly hot, she undid her bra and tossed it to the floor, flopping onto her back and
puffing slightly from the effort. She lay there, the room doing a leisurely spin around her head, and muttered to herself. Who asked him to go and fall in love with her, hmmm? She didn't want anything to do with another man, didn't she? He wasn't even a good kisser...no, she couldn't lie to herself, he was a very good kisser, not even taking advantage to grope her while he did. He did smell good, though. Not just his cologne or deodorant, but the man underneath, his skin smelled good and she liked it. Giggling to herself she wondered if he'd think it strange if she sniffed him all over. He probably would. She brought up the image of him naked, taking her time to look at him, imagining her fingers tracing over his body, combing through the hairs on his chest, trailing down his stomach to his...nope, shouldn't be going there. Giving a loud huff of annoyance, she turned on her side to face where he usually slept, her hand sliding up to smooth over the pillow where his head usually rested. She leaned forward and imagined she could smell him on the linen, burying her face in his pillow to make it more real. She was so absorbed in her thoughts and feelings she didn't hear the door open and Mitch walk into the bedroom.

His heart slammed against his chest wall and started to beat erratically. Jamie had her head buried deeply in his pillow her slender naked back swept by her hair, an image he'd only seen in his imagination so far. Although the covers were thrown back she wasn't under them her legs sprawled spread wide over the bed, the tiny scrap of fabric that passed for her undies all that preserved her modesty, but still leaving very little to the imagination. He stood unmoving with his back to the door, not wanting to spook the half-naked woman on the bed. As his other senses came in to play he noticed she was muttering something into his pillow, the words indistinct. Suddenly the muttering stopped and Jamie moved, pulling her face away from the pillow and flinging herself onto her back to stare, spreadeagle, up at the ceiling, still unaware that Mitch was in the room. She started to giggle, the laughter making her body shake, her breasts jiggling with the movement. Mitch felt his mouth go dry and his dick stiffen inside his jeans. She was perfection, small but delightfully curved, not overly endowed but with the most tempting, pink-tipped nipples he'd ever seen. His mouth started to water with the thought of closing his lips over them and sucking hard. Her hair covered her face and he could see her trying to blow it out of her eyes, her lips pursed with each effort. He wanted to cover all that creamy skin with his hands, then his lips, he wanted to worship her and show her how precious and beautiful she was in his eyes.

Jamie managed to get most of her hair out of her face and let her hand flop back to the bed. She heard a strangled sound and lifted her head. His back flat against the door, she saw Mitch watching her, his eyes glittering in the half-light of the bedside lamp. “Hey, Mitch...” Her body felt heavy and languorous, her head falling back to the pillow behind her as if her neck could no longer support it. “Come to bed...” She lifted her arms out to him.

He was out of his jeans, socks, and t-shirt in record time, only keeping on his boxers, his glasses discarded on the bedside table and he joined her on the bed. Jamie gazed up at him as he paused still on his hands and knees, looking down at her with such emotion in his eyes she felt she was drowning. “Hey, did you know that Jim thinks that you might be in love with me? Isn't that plum crazy?” She lay there wantonly, a smile spreading her lips wide and showing her teeth. Mitch ached to touch her, kiss her, do something to assuage his longing, but he paused, laying down slowly beside her instead, her eyes following him until she had to roll onto her side to face him. He mirrored her and they lay there, face to face, neither touching the other, just looking and smiling. He could see that her pupils were almost fully dilated, very little of the bluey-green iris visible. “Aren't you going to kiss me?” she asked, her eyelids dropping to half mast. “I know you want to, you've already kissed me...is it twice or three times? I can't remember?” “I'm not keeping count,” Mitch rasped, willing his rampant desire to subside and allow him to think. “As tempting as it would be to make love to you right now, I'd rather wait until you're a little less...relaxed,” he told her. Jamie pouted, something he found adorable.
“See...I knew he was wrong, you don't want anything to do with me, I'm not at all your type and can't possibly be in love with a nothing like me..” she frowned at him. Mitch sighed.

“Give me your hand,” he asked. She lifted her arm, the one she wasn't laying on, and presented him with her limp fingers. He enclosed them in his own and pulled her hand down to lay flat against his chest where his heart was still beating a rapid tattoo.

“Does this feel like someone unaffected by you?” he held her hand there to feel the heart thumping beneath his ribs. Then he pulled her hand so it dragged over his chest, down his ribs, over his belly to the boxers he still wore. He lifted her hand and placed it directly on his erection. “Does this feel like the something a man who didn't desire you would have?” He felt her fingers close around his cock and he drew in a sharp breath, his teeth gritting as she tentatively stroked him through his boxers. He let her play for a moment, then removed her hand from his body and placed it back on the bed beside her. Jamie let out a small sound of protest, but he ignored it. “When I make love to you, Jamie Campbell, you won't need a glass of wine to bolster your courage. You'll want me as much as I want you.”

She pouted at him again and he was sorely tempted to devour those lips under his own and show her just how much he wanted her, but he didn't. Instead he shoved his legs under the covers and lifted them to invite her to join him. As if only just realizing the temperature in the room, she gave a little shiver, then shuffled over in the bed and tucked her legs under the sheet, pressing her body against him to absorb his warmth. Mitch tucked the covers around her, his arm about her shoulder, and tried to ignore the feel of her naked breasts against his side, her bare arm reaching across his chest and rubbing innocently against his own nipples making them swell.

“You do sorely tempt a man,” he murmured, turning his head to nuzzle her hair, limiting himself to a chaste kiss against the bright strands. Her free hand was wandering, moving from his chest down to his waist, her fingers ghosting over his skin like the brush of a feather. His breathing started to get uneven as those dancing fingertips reached the waistband of his boxers, the head of his cock hard up against the thin fabric just below.

“Jamie? What are you doing?” he managed to grind out in a hoarse whisper. Her hand now left off its teasing and went straight to being wrapped firmly around his cock. He almost lifted off the mattress, certainly his hips jerked and he gripped her shoulder for a second before relaxing again. “You're going to be the death of me...” He whispered as the hand continued to stroke and pull at him, measuring his length and breath with increasing assurance, even dipping downwards to tickle over his balls. He groaned. He'd have to go back to his teens to remember the last hand job he'd had through his jeans or boxers. Jamie lay tucked up against his side, her flesh warm against his own, his hand sliding up and down her arm while she worked his hardened flesh, his lungs giving out fast panting breaths as his pulse hammered and his nerves fired. The whole innocent nature of the contact between them seemed to add a level of excitement, or maybe it was just such a long time since anyone had touched him sexually, but he was thrusting into the hand around his cock when his climax peaked and he moaned, spilling inside his shorts, the hand cupping him just holding while his hips jerked in the aftermath.

“Oh...God...that, er...that felt so good..” he whispered, Jamie not letting him go even as he softened against her fingers.

“I rather like holding on to you like this,” she purred, wriggling up against him, her smooth thigh lifting to settle on top of his.

“Hey, you're more than welcome to hold onto my cock anytime you like...Jamie Campbell.” He drew in a shuddering breath, his heart still jumping about in his chest. “But I warn you now, I won't always be satisfied with just a hand job, as pleasant as that was.”

Feeling empowered by her ability to reduce the man beside her to a quivering mess, Jamie licked her lips and tilted her head to whisper in his ear.

“If you knew how wet I am right now, you wouldn't be satisfied at all until you'd taken what is yours.”

“Oh...dear Lord...I think I've created a monster,” he groaned, surprised to feel his cock twitch again, even given the warm hand still wrapped around it.
“Have pity on an old man, Jamie,” he whispered. “I'd hate to disappoint with a poor performance.” She laughed, a soft chuckle in response to his pleading. “I don't think you're an old man at all, Mitch. I think you could give any younger man a lesson or two in how to use this...” she gave him a squeeze and he responded, stiffening against her palm when she cupped him, then, fingers together, she pressed them between his legs to stroke his perineum and back up again over his balls. His breath hitched and he reached down to grab her wrist. “Enough...please.” Her hand stilled and she didn't move it again, allowing his body to subside. When he released her wrist, she pulled her hand back up and just lay it back on his chest, an impudent finger finding one of his nipples and circling lazily. Mitch ignored the bloom of heat spreading over his chest and concentrated on keeping his hands off of her body, except for the one now resting on her shoulder. “We have a big day tomorrow. I think we should try and get some sleep.” He could almost see the scowling irritation she wore on her face in response to his suggestion. “Fine.” Was all she said before shrugging off his arm about her shoulders and turning over to present the long line of her naked back to him. Mitch sighed and closed his eyes. He consoled himself that it was the effects of the wine, and not an aversion to himself. She certainly wasn't afraid to touch him, so that was a plus. Next time they would try it when she was stone, cold sober. That was if she ever got over her embarrassment when the morning came. He had a feeling that Jamie wasn't usually so brazen or bold in making her sexual wants and wishes known. It was a shame, he had been rather enjoying it.
Close Scrutiny

Chapter Summary

Mitch takes on a new role, Jamie finds her feet

Jamie stood in the foyer and stared about her at the controlled chaos, a small mountain of gear at her feet. Mitch had been called away to address some matter or other, leaving her to take care of their stuff after disembarking from the plane. They had left Vandenberg over six hours ago to fly to DC and she was still having difficulty dealing with the speed of everything happening around them. She's certainly had plenty of time to deal with the excruciating embarrassment of her behavior the night before. Even now she could feel her cheeks heat up just thinking about it. Mitch had waved off her apologies and treated it all with a casualness that should have put her at her ease, but instead it just made her squirm even worse. She couldn't believe what she'd done, more so because she wasn't that drunk, more like extremely relaxed, not caring of her own nudity, her body and mind in the mood to tease and see how far she could push him. It turned out she could push him a very long way indeed. How she kept her knickers on after the hand job was the first surprise, her expectation that he'd take her there and then. When he didn't she was overcome with indignation, thinking he simply didn't fancy her, her brain really not functioning properly otherwise the fact he'd been fully aroused when he came to bed effectively refuting her own argument that he didn't want her. Then he'd let her do what she wanted without expecting to take his due was the second surprise. Not that she probably would have stopped him if he'd wanted to take it further, but even she realised they really were not at that stage in whatever it was they had. Sure, he'd told her about his daughter, an obviously painful and ongoing part of his life, and she'd told him about her horrible previous affair, but apart from a couple of kisses, was she really ready to dive into an intimate relationship based on such flimsy connectiveness. Now they were going to be working together on quite possibly the biggest project in the world right now, finding a cure for the animal mutation causing the current spate of coordinated attacks around the world. That alone was enough to blow her mind. Ever since they'd been collected from Jim's place, Mitch had instantly switched into work mode, the aide sharing their vehicle handing him a folder of information that he devoured all through the ride to Vandenberg Airforce Base, onto the plane and while they were seated for the six hours it took to fly to Washington. The aide answered as many of the questions that Mitch fired off as well as he could, but some would have to wait until Mitch got his hands on the actual results and samples gathered by the team currently investigating the phenomenon. Jamie felt like she was entering a tornado where Mitch was the center and she was just about hanging on to his shirt tails as the maelstrom gathered force. She only understood a fraction of the science speak he communicated with the people who spoke to him. The plane had been full, some of them soldiers being redeployed, some of them civilians needed in Washington, some of them scientists recruited from around the country to join the same Taskforce Mitch was to be head of. That still messed with her head, that a man who had been a simply university lecturer was now appointed to be head of a scientific team of ridiculously well-educated people, some the top specialists in their field. Even Jim, who Mitch considered one of the best, was to join them in a month to add his cache of knowledge to the whole. In the meantime Jim had important work to do where he was, so their farewells had been more 'see you later' rather than goodbye for good.

“Miss Campbell?” a female voice inquired, jerking her out of her thoughts.

“Yes?”

“I've come to take you to get settled. Is this all your luggage?”
Jamie regarded the smartly uniformed airman with a wary eye. The woman wasn't much older than herself, smiling easily and seemed a calm oasis in the chaos around them.

“Um...yeah, this is all Mitch and I brought with us. Is he coming too?” Jamie looked around, hoping to see him nearby.

“Well no, Doctor Morgan has already left, he was eager to get started, understandably. He asked that you be settled in and he'd see you later.”

Jamie blinked at the woman. Mitch had left her? She swallowed and lifted her chin.

“If you could give me a hand?” she asked, her voice steady, refusing to acknowledge that the woman's words meant anything.

Between the two of them, they hefted the bags over to a trolley bay, then loaded one up before pushing it out of the airport to a car waiting outside. Similar to the one that had picked them up from Jim's place, this was a plain black sedan with tinted windows and no identifying signage apart from a sticker on the windscreen intended to indicate the vehicle could park any damn place it wanted to.

Jamie was handed into the back seat of the car by the driver while the airman loaded up the trunk with everything she and Mitch had brought with them. Then the woman joined her in the back seat and they were off.

Jamie looked out of the window as the car wended its way through the late afternoon traffic towards its destination.

“Um...so, what hotel are we staying at?” she asked, turning to face the airman.

“You and Doctor Morgan are not staying at a hotel, per se. The members of the Taskforce are being housed near the complex itself, so you'll actually be staying in an apartment. They are fully serviced so you don't have to worry about cleaning or laundry and they are completely secure. Security is our main priority with all the high profile people taking part in this Taskforce. Plus, we don't want word of what is being done to leak out into the general populace, there are some who think that what is happening should be allowed to continue unchecked.”

“Who the hell would want that?” Jamie exclaimed, a little shocked.

“Religious fundamentalists who think this is the end of the world, who think this is God's work. Plus you have the fringe who think the government caused it in the first place...there's been quite a bit of political book made off this crisis.”

“Are they nuts? No one is safe, high or low, the animals certainly don't discriminate.”

The woman gave her an understanding look. “We are well aware of that, but some just prefer to remain blind to reality. We're really hoping the Doctor Morgan can find the needle in this particular haystack.”

“He wanted me to be part of all this. Why aren't I with him?” Jamie asked baldly.

“The message he left was for you to relax and enjoy while you can. He'll be joining you later, but he thought you'd be tired after the long flight.” The woman looked at her with an eyebrow raised, as if challenging her to pretend otherwise.

“No. He was right, infuriating man. We've kind of been on the road for awhile and it will be nice to be somewhere comfortable and safe for a change.”

“Have you both been caught up in any animal attacks?” the airman asked.

Jaime lifted up her hand to count them off. “Giraffe, zebra, rhinoceros at the zoo, birds, and hornets at Mitch's flat. Rats at a motel. More zoo escapees, particularly another rhino – or maybe the same rhino – and a mountain gorilla. I think I might have forgotten one, but anyway...yes, we've been kinda involved in a bit of stuff lately.”

“Wow. Of course, I've read the reports from around the world, and from the Team, but I didn't realize it had been so bad.”

Jamie nodded. “LA does seem to have seen more than its share of incidents.”

They lapsed into a more comfortable silence as the driver tooled the car on a route through the outskirts of the Capitol, the traffic decreasing the further into the minor streets they drove.

At length they passed through a checkpoint with impressively solid gates, the car waved through, obviously expected. Beyond, they descended down a ramp to an underground carpark where other vehicles of a similar design and color waited in rows to be used. The driver parked next to a rank of
lifts, popping the trunk at the same time. A small collection of trolleys waited in a recess and the driver went to get one for the baggage. Jamie got out and stood by the car, ignoring how tatty her backpack looked among the rest of the bits and pieces. The airman pressed the button to summon the lift and they waited. When the door opened they all got on, plus the trolley. Jamie wondered if the driver was doubling as a security guard, escorting them up to their floor which turned out to be the ninth. When the door opened again it was as if they’d stepped into a hotel corridor with thick carpeting, pictures on the walls and discreet lighting. With the driver pushing the trolley, the airmen led the way, stopping at a door and employing a security card in the slot provided to open the door.

“Oh. My. God!” Jaime exclaimed in awe. “Are you sure this is the right place?”

The driver and the airman exchanged an amused look as their charge walked further into the apartment and stared around. Jamie looked back at them as if afraid it was all some sick joke and she’d been brought to the wrong room.

“Seriously, is this meant for us?” she asked again. The airman nodded and flapped her hands for Jamie to explore further.

“We’ll put your gear in the bedroom for you to sort out at your leisure.” Jamie heard her but didn’t acknowledge the woman, moving forward to stare out of the window at the view. “You have got to be shitting me...” she breathed. This high up gave her a view over the nearby area, trees the pre-eminent feature of the leafy suburb. She had no idea what suburb they were in, but hardly cared the view was wonderful, lights twinkling everywhere, the fading light of the sunset still visible along the horizon from her viewpoint.

“We’ll leave you to get settled in. If there is anything you need, you only have to call.” the woman cleared her throat. “I was wondering if you might need some more clothes, you seem a little light?” Jamie blushed. “Yeah. I don't suppose you'll just let me wander around the local op-shops for something?”

The airman shook her head. “There's a catalog in the bedroom, have a browse through that. If you see something you like, just call the number on the back.”

“What about payment?” Jamie asked, thinking that Mitch had already borne so much of the cost. The woman waved her hand. “Not an issue. Same applies to ordering in. Just call the number on the card and it will be delivered, no money required.”

Jamie goggled at her. “Wow. Guess we really are that important.”

The woman smiled. “You are. If you need to go somewhere, call Phillip here, he's your driver. I will see you probably tomorrow when the Taskforce is introduced in a roundtable. Until then...”

“Hey, you know my name, and now I know his...?”

“Oh.” the airman grinned. “I'm Jo, Jo Samuels.” She held out her hand and Jamie shook it, then Jo turned to leave, Phillip following her out, the door snicking shut behind them. Jamie stood staring after them for a few moments, then turned to survey the room.

Jamie spent some time exploring her new home. The apartment consisted of a number of rooms, the living area the first to greet you as you walked in, then off that were a series of doors. It had two bedrooms, although the second bedroom only had a single bed and seemed more set up as an office or communication hub than a bedroom, per se. It had a desk with multiple computer screens, wireless keyboard, and mouse, a whiteboard, corkboard, and landline. She assumed the bed was simply for whoever was working in there, to take naps or relief from sitting in the chair all the time. The main bedroom was a dream with an ensuite containing both shower and bath. The bed was huge and she bounced on it a couple of time to test it. Another door opened onto a dining room and kitchen set up with gleaming surfaces and everything neatly stored out of sight. She opened all of the cupboards, one after the other, taking delight in each new discovery. The fridge was enormous and was stuffed full of, what looked like, everything edible that she’d ever imagined. The dining room looked out the same side as the sitting room so it also had a wonderful view of the surrounding area. Jamie wandered back to the bedroom and sat on what would be her side of the bed, noting a number of things on the side table. There was a remote with a brochure about what you could operate with it. She spent a few minutes having fun opening and shutting the drapes, and lowering the tv from its...
hideaway in the ceiling, as well as adjusting the lights to different levels. Another remote operated the tv, while a third changed the aircon settings. She saw the collection of brochures and sheets that detailed the takeout options available, then she saw the catalog Jo had mentioned. A mobile phone sat on top, a single number programmed into it. Curious, she leafed through the catalog, seeing a number of items she'd be happy to wear and a few that would be a sheer indulgence. More importantly, there were a number of basic items that she sure could do with. Putting the catalog down she surveyed the jumbled heap of their combined belongings. It was little enough when they were escaping LA, even less when they were staying put for a few days, but now this latest gig could last certainly weeks, if not months and their wardrobes were sadly lacking. She found a notepad in the drawer of the bedside table and started to note the sizes of Mitch's clothes as she pulled them out, one by one, including his underwear. She noted what he seemed to favor in the few shirts he owned, and started to compile a list. Then she did the same for herself. Putting the catalog down she surveyed the jumbled heap of their combined belongings. It was little enough when they were escaping LA, even less when they were staying put for a few days, but now this latest gig could last certainly weeks, if not months and their wardrobes were sadly lacking. She found a notepad in the drawer of the bedside table and started to note the sizes of Mitch's clothes as she pulled them out, one by one, including his underwear. She noted what he seemed to favor in the few shirts he owned, and started to compile a list. Then she did the same for herself.

She dialed the number, the call going through with only one ring before it was answered. “How may I help you, Miss Campbell,” a melodious female voice asked before Jamie spoke a word. “Oh. Um. You know who I am?” “You phone has a direct line to our call center. We know the room number and the occupant.” “Oh. Well, that makes life easy. I was wanting to order some clothes for Mitch and me from the catalog if that's alright?” “Perfectly. If you will just reel off the catalog numbers and sizes desired, I'll place your order immediately.” “Wow. Okay....” Jamie started down her list, the woman on the line noting everything she ordered without a single comment or judgment. When Jamie ran out of things, the woman ended the call politely and hung up. Jamie stared at the phone for a beat then put it down on the table. Having no idea how long before anything arrived, she hung up her's and Mitch's meager collection in the walk-in wardrobe then placed their personal stuff in the bathroom. She grimaced at their motley few items looking forlorn in the vastness of the room, then clicked her tongue in annoyance and left. Chucking the now empty backpacks into the hall cupboard, she went back to the bedroom to sort through the remainder of the not-clothes spread over the bed. She pulled the certificates and Clem's photo out of the protective tube and lay them on top of the dresser to lose their curl. Mitch had already taken possession of the hard drives he'd been keeping among his belongings, which only left his tablet, spiralbound notebook and pens, torch and a few other items to be thrown into his bedside drawer. Her own collection was just as insignificant. Her few photos of her Mum, a couple of items of her Mother's jewelry wrapped in tissue, and a dog-eared book she hadn't finished reading yet. All disappeared into the cavernous drawer, the remaining space around them mocking her. Her laptop she set up on the bedside table top. After sorting out the belongings, it was time to rustle up something up to eat. She perused the contents of the fridge and found some prepackaged salads. Choosing the first that came to hand, she peeled off the plastic film and carried it to the table along with a fork. She stared at the length of the table before her and blinked. Turning on her heel she took her dinner to the bedroom and decided to catch up on the news while she waited for Mitch to return. There were a couple more channels available for viewing, but mostly it was the same as elsewhere, news twenty-four seven featuring the state of different cities under siege almost, from animals, some under martial law, others simply doing the best to evacuate their citizens as quickly as possible. The news about the Taskforce hadn't been released either officially or unofficially, and the other Team seemed to have dropped off the news rotation as well. Frustrated, she shut off the tv and took her empty dishes to the kitchen to clean up. The sound of a door chime brought her to the front entrance and she looked at the small security screen showing the hallway beyond the door. She thumbed the button. “Can I help you?”
“Delivery for Jamie Campbell?”
“Oh. Sure. One moment.” She pressed the unlock button and the door swung open smoothly, the man beyond handing over a number of plain paper shopping bags.

“Sign here please?” the man held out a tablet and stylus. Jamie signed her name and the man smartly turned on his heel and left, the door shutting silently behind him. Picking up the numerous bags, she carried them to the bedroom and emptied them out. She quickly sorted them into what she’d ordered for Mitch, and what she’d got for herself, taking pleasure in peeling off her old clothes and putting on something new. She unwrapped the shirts she’d picked out and put them on hangers in Mitch’s part of the wardrobe, along with the new jeans and chino’s she’d ordered for him. There were new belts, a selection of ties, a couple of jackets plus new underwear, socks, and t-shirts to put in his drawers. Her side was looking a bit better as well with new jeans, assorted blouses and tops, new sweaters and light jackets, plus new underwear and nightwear to fill the drawers in her section. If they were going to winter in DC they’d need more stuff, but for now, they at least had several changes of clothes to be going on with. Wearing a new set of sleepwear, she shut the door to the wardrobe and wondered how much longer Mitch would be.

Mitch thanked his driver at the door to the apartment, took custody of the key card, slid it through the reader and entered his new home for the foreseeable future. It was late and he expected that Jamie would have already gone to bed, his feet dragging as he dropped the key card onto a side table and entered the main room, barely registering the view or the fixtures and fittings. He'd eaten sometime during the evening but couldn't for the life of him remember what it had been. Finding the kitchen he pulled open the fridge and perused the contents, snagging a bottle from inside the door before shutting it again. Unscrewing the cap, he took a long swallow, finishing the entire drink in three slugs. Leaving it on the counter he padded towards the first doorway, finding the spare room in darkness, light revealing the set up within. Grunting at what he saw, he switched off the light and shut the door, walking the few steps to the remaining door which he hoped was the master bedroom. It was.

“Hey,”
“Hey, youself,” Jamie's reply carried to him from the depths of the bed. He shuffled forward and sat down heavily on her side, closing his eyes. He heard the rustle of the bed covers, then she was beside him, her hand finding his arm and giving it a squeeze.

“Long day, huh?” she asked. He nodded and opened his eyes. She was kneeling beside him dressed in a simple tank top and loose, long pants in a soft shade of baby blue.

“That's pretty. Something new?” he asked, pinching some of the soft fabric of the pants in his fingers.

“Just got it this evening, along with a whole lot of other stuff, some for you too.”
Mitch lay back on the bed and took his glasses off before pinching his nose and rubbing his face. Jamie watched him, noting how tired he looked.

“Hungry?” she asked. Mitch shook his head.

“Just tired and looking forward to breaking in this bed.” He opened his eyes and looked up at her.

“I'm sorry I had to leave you...”
Jamie shook her head. “It's fine. You've got a great deal to do now, I was well taken care of. There are plenty of fun things in here to keep me amused. But I'll tell you all about them over breakfast. I'll go switch the lights off while you get ready for bed.”
He groaned and lurched upright again, watching as Jamie padded barefoot across the carpet, the soft material of her loose pants doing wonderful things for her bottom. Once she was out of sight he shuffled off to the bathroom and stripped down to his boxers, grimacing at himself in the mirror before deciding to leave off shaving until the morning. His stuff was all there for him, so he brushed his teeth and peered at the shower, wondering what the pressure was like, before leaving the bathroom and heading for the bed. He was just getting under the cool covers when Jamie appeared in the doorway, the room beyond all dark. She switched off the main light to leave only her bedside light on.
Mitch settled into the mattress with a long, drawn-out sigh of contentment. The crisp pillows cradled his head perfectly and he felt like he never wanted to move again. He felt the slight dip of the bed when Jamie sat down and turned his head to watch her pull her legs up to get under the covers with him. She reached up and switched off the bedside light, plunging them into darkness. His fantasy was for her to immediately find him in the dark and snuggle up close. Unfortunately she stayed instead on her side, a gap of a couple of feet between them.

“What's on the agenda for tomorrow?” Jamie asked.

“There's a lot needed to be done to get things set up, and the samples and data from the Team will need to be shipped to the new facilities before the real work can start. For now, we're compiling lists of equipment and personnel, a database of brains, if you like,” Mitch told her.

“Can I help?”

“God, yes. I need you to set up a sort of command center of information, with your incident map and other stuff I know you have filed on the laptop. At this stage, the paperwork trail will be more important than the science while we try to understand how this is being spread and what areas are worse hit than others. Can you do that?”

He heard her give a little sigh. “I guess I can do that. Where is our base of operations? The Pentagon?”

“No, thank goodness. Quite a bit nearer to here, as the crow flies. We'll be taking over a block of the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of the District of Columbia, or to make it shorter the CAS of the UDC. It gives us access to everything we need.”

“Do you think we'll get to meet the Team, at some stage?” Jamie asked.

“You wanting their autograph?” Mitch teased.

“Hardly. I just think they must be quite something, a bit like you.”

“Flattery will get you whatever the hell you want, but not tonight, I'm knackered.”

The silence stretched between them. “Jamie?”

“Yeah.”

“I don't know about you, but I sure could do with a hug. Do you think...?” He had hardly stopped speaking when the rustle of crisp sheeting announced her arrival at his side, her head fitting snugly against his shoulder, her hands tucked against her chest. His arm encompassed her back, holding her close. “That's nice,” he murmured, closing his eyes after tilting his head to press a kiss against her head. “'Nite...”

“'Nite, Mitch. Sweet dreams,” Jamie whispered back to him. Within minutes he was breathing deeply, fast asleep and she unclenched her hand to let it spread over his chest. She let the moment stretch, her fingers slowly stroking over his skin, seeing if he reacted or awoke, his breathing never faltering as she gently explored the texture and reactions of his skin. His nipple pebbled and rose to a peak under her tender circling, her breath wafting over the one nearest and it rising in response, giving her a matching pair. Intrigued, she ghosted her fingers over his chest, down his breastbone, dipping below the covers to stroke over the hair arrowing down to his groin. She paused often to check he was still asleep, his heartbeat never changing its regular beat as she stroked and petted the soft pelt over his belly softly rising and falling as he breathed. Soon her fingertips found the waistband of his shorts. She dragged the back of her hand over his belly, over his hip bones, tracing the edge of his boxers from side to side. She paused, considering whether she should explore further. His lips were parted as he drew in air, his eyes and brow relaxed, his head deeply sunk in the pillows. In the dim light of the room he looked more rugged, dark shadows painting the edges and hollows and making him look almost primal and all male. Satisfied that he was well under, she brushed her hand over the edge of his shorts, the fabric smooth under her palm, heat rising as she settled her fingers over his cloth-covered flesh. Even that slight touch was enough to bring him rising to meet her, her fingers closing over him just as she'd done the night before, but this time she didn't attempt to arouse him further, content just to hold him in her hand, hot and hard against her palm. It was a shockingly intimate thing to do and she felt quite wicked taking advantage of him like this, but she didn't care. It felt nice to hold him, felt right to lay claim to his cock in such an emphatic manner. She felt herself start to respond to the intimate connection, her own body softening and becoming hot...
and moist, Jamie moving her legs to ease the need at her core. After shifting to get more comfortable she let herself relax and drifted into sleep, his heartbeat sure and steady under her ear.

Mitch was having a wonderfully erotic dream, his breath hitching and his heart picking up as the scenes played out in his mind, his cock rising in response, the fingers laying lax in his groin enclosing his cock in a tight grip, further enhancing his dream state. Groaning softly he twitched his hips, willing the fingers to move, but they didn't, they just held him, his mind changing the dream from something sexual to frustration, fading away into confusion, his body softening without further stimulation, both sleepers shifting in their sleep as if sharing the disappointment of thwarted congress.

By the time morning speared through the curtains, they were on either side of the bed, backs to each other, all contact between them severed. Mitch was aware of a faint feeling of having missed something, while Jamie awoke glad that Mitch wasn't aware of what she'd done while he slept. Jamie headed to the kitchen to rustle up a coffee, while Mitch took a quick shower, jerking himself off to relieve some of the tension before giving himself a shave and taming his bed hair. The smell of coffee drew him to the kitchen, Jamie leaving it up to him to choose what he wanted to eat. Over breakfast, she filled him in about the features he hadn't seen yet, the drop down tv, the phone for ordering stuff, the new clothes. After they loaded the dishwasher, Jamie dragged him into the bedroom to show off what she'd brought him, Mitch impressed with her choices. Without thinking, he started to shuck his shorts, Jamie quickly turning her back while he chose fresh underwear prior to trying on some of the new clothes. He got her to turn around when he asked her which shirt she liked best, the pair of them laughing their way through the process, Mitch regaining the level of comfort there'd been between them before. With Mitch dressed, it was Jamie's turn to come in for some teasing, Mitch picking out a pretty blouse to team with her jeans, along with a soft, warm sweater. Jamie shooed him out of the wardrobe to give her privacy to dress, changing quickly out of her nightwear into fresh underwear, then the clothes Mitch had chosen. She also did her hair and dashed on a smidge of makeup from her small supply. When she emerged Mitch was sitting on the side of the bed and gave her an appreciative whistle of approval.

“Beautiful. I can see I’m going to have to work hard to concentrate on the job in hand and not think about kissing you every few minutes,” he teased. Jamie blushed and walked over to where he sat with an exaggerated swing to her hips.

“Maybe you should kiss me now and get it out of the way.” She stopped just short of the bed, her eyes glancing down to his knees, one eyebrow arched. Mitch quickly grasped her meaning and spread his knees apart to give her room to come closer.

“That sounds like a remarkably good idea, Miss Campbell, I knew your advice would be invaluable.”

Jamie moved forward until her own knees bumped against the mattress, her hands coming to rest on his shoulders. With him sitting he was at roughly the same height as her and it was easy for them to get close, lips touching lightly, his hands coming to rest on her hips, his knees gripping her thighs between his. The kiss started off light and teasing, butterfly pecks and chaste presses, tender and sweet. Soon Jamie parted her lips to let her tongue come out to play, licking and nipping at Mitch's lips, his own parting to let her in, the depth of the kiss increasing as she relaxed against him, his arms coming about her to hold her close. They frequently broke for air only to delve back in, flesh melding to tender flesh, tongues twisting and teasing. Jamie's arms now around his neck, her body flush against his, heat rising between them. Slowly, Mitch started to lean back until they were lying flat on the bed, then he rolled so that she was under him, the kiss taking on a deeper, more passionate course, his hands coming up to frame her face, her fingers burrowed through his hair, her jean-clad legs coming up to cradle him against her core, each trying to get under the skin of the other. At length Mitch broke the kiss to rest his forehead against hers, his glasses steaming up from the heat generated between them.

“If...we keep...this up, we won't make it...to the door, let alone...the university.”

Both of them were breathing heavily, hearts thumping under their clothes. Slowly they disentangled...
themselves and sat up, Jamie making some attempt to tidy her hair while Mitch sought to straighten his shirt and tuck it back into his trousers. He frowned as he tried to remember how it had become untucked in the first place.

As if to reinforce the good sense of their decision, a knock sounded at the door to the apartment.

“That'll be our ride,” Mitch mumbled, getting to his feet and finger combing his hair back to some semblance of order.

Jamie gathered up the laptop, notes, and chart to carry to the car, checking the mirror briefly before following Mitch out into the apartment. Phillip and Mitch were talking in the short corridor leading to the front door but stopped when she appeared.

“Ready?” Mitch asked.

“As I'll ever be,” she retorted bidding Phillip a good morning. Walking out of the apartment they headed for their first full day as part of the new Taskforce to find a cure, and save the world. No pressure.

Jamie rounded on hearing a knock at her door. It was the airman she'd met at the airport.

“Hi, Jo.”

“Hey, Jamie. Thought you might be glad of a break.” She held up a tray of coffee cups in one hand, a paper bag of something edible in the other.

“You must be a mind reader, Jo. Thank you.” She walked over and sat down at the small meeting table set near the window. Jo handed over one of the coffees, producing a couple of plates from somewhere to put the sandwiches and muffins on. Jamie hadn't realized how hungry she was until the food appeared. While she ate, Jo looked around the room, at the maps with their numerous pins and marks on them, the whiteboard with lists of cities and countries, and the bank of computer screens, each one showing a different news stream from various nationalities.

“Looks like you've settled in nicely?” Jo observed. Jamie nodded.

“I'm still getting this sorted. Could do with a copier machine in the room rather than down the hallway, but that's the only downside. There's just so much information to correlate, it's daunting.”

“It's only your first day,” Jo pointed out with a small laugh. “Give yourself a break.”

Jamie smiled back, holding up her coffee to bump softly against the Jo's in acknowledgment of the truth in that statement.

“I guess after that meeting this morning, we're all fired up and raring to get this whole Taskforce thing up and running, to start producing results.” Jamie bit into one of the sandwiches.

“And I'm sure that Doctor Morgan feels the same way, but there's still only so much can be done until the samples and information from the Team are forwarded, then the real work will begin.” Jo broke one of the muffins apart and picked at the chunks.

“So what has Mitch got you doing?” Jamie asked, having seen Mitch talk to the airman after the meeting. Jo swallowed her mouthful.

“Oh, this and that. He's concerned that you not be neglected in any way, that your given what you need to do whatever it is he needs you to do...” Jo frowned, reviewing what she'd just said. “I think that's right.”

Jamie laughed. “Yeah, that's right. He's got me working on two projects, one to track the spread of the mutations and secondly to catalog and track the spread of Reiden products into the world markets.”

“Is that all?” Jo asked. “I'd think it would take a room full of people to do that, not just you. I can organize help if you need it?”

Jamie shook her head. “No, really, I'm fine. I know what he's wanting, I just have to have it displayed in a way he can take in at a glance. Sort of like a larger version of a power point presentation.”

“Well, I won't keep you from your work.” Jo got up from the table and collected the dishes and coffee cups.

“Thanks for the break, I needed that.”

“No probs. Catch you later!” Jo whisked out of the office and disappeared into the stream of people
passing her door.
Turning towards her various display boards, Jamie stared at them already seeing room for improvements.

Days flew by as they both worked to knit the Taskforce together while waiting for the all important information and samples to arrive. When they finally did, the frenetic pace ramped up to a whole new level. Rarely did Mitch go home at the same time Jamie did, his arrival back at the apartment usually late in the evening, and him in a state of near insensibility, barely able to get undressed before falling into bed and almost instantly falling asleep. Breakfast had become the only meal they shared, and sometimes the only time they shared together as well. Once they reached the university they went their separate ways, Mitch called upon by everyone to oversee, supervise, have meetings about acquisitions, discuss latest findings and roundtables to assess progress. Jamie was often pulled into meetings to give the latest big picture updates, presenting the most up to date information on spread and species, casualty numbers and other logistical data. Her days were full and time often seemed to fly by. Jo became her liaison with several departments, feeding her information and helping her keep the various database current and relevant. Mitch required regular reports and Jo helped with that too, making runs to the copier and binding office and distributing copies.

Back home, Jamie took on overseeing that Mitch had whatever he needed, organizing his wardrobe, stocking the fridge and cupboards and giving him the headspace he needed, not bogging him down with domestic trivia, allowing him to remain focused on the events and results that were the sole focus of their world.

At breakfast on one morning he halted her frenetic buzzing about the kitchen to hold her close and kiss her, several pleasurable minutes passing as they reconnected. When they finally parted he stared into her puzzled eyes with something akin to awe.

“Thank you, Jamie Campbell.”

Jamie laughed softly. “Whatever for?”

“For this, for us, for making it possible for me to appear like a normal human being each day, rather than the shambling wreck I would be if I didn't have you. I know I don't say it enough, but I am so glad I tripped over you in that bar.”

Jamie stroked her hand over his cheek. “I'm thankful every day that you took me on without judging me, without any expectation or assumptions. Thank you, Mitch Morgan.” She leaned in and kissed him again, her arms wrapped around his neck while his arms held her close, returning her kiss with every ounce of feeling he had. All too soon they had to break apart and get ready for the day, as comfortable around each other as if they'd been together for years, not just a couple of months.

Jamie was putting together another report about the origin of the first reported outbreak when Jo rushed into her office.

“They're here!”

“Who's here?”

“Them, the Team, they just arrived.” Jo was positively bouncing in her excitement.

“Oh? OH! Does Mitch know?” Jamie asked, getting up and smoothing down her jeans.

Jo nodded. “He's holding a meeting to introduce them to the department heads, including you.”

Jamie turned to collect her most recent report and drew in a deep breath to calm herself down. “Then I guess we shouldn't keep them waiting.”

The conference room was packed, Jamie and Jo pushing the door open and sidling into the room, but getting little further in the crush of people. They would have remained there, squashed at the back if Mitch's aide hadn't been on the lookout for them and spotted their entrance. Patrick waded his way through the crowd and made a path for her and Jo to come forward, Mitch breaking into a broad smile on seeing her and waving her to the head of the table. When she reached him and was able to draw breath, she took in the group of people standing next to Mitch, the group a mixed bunch and obviously a little taken aback by the crowd now staring back at them.
Mitch held up his hands for quiet.

“As you all will appreciate, we are lucky to have with us the Team of dedicated people who have been working on the frontline of this worldwide event, and who bring with them a wealth of information both physical and observational to add to our pool of knowledge. This initial meeting is simply a meet-and-greet, to introduce the team members and hear a little of what they’ve been doing around the world. After that, we’ll organize a department by department Q&A to allow for more specific knowledge sharing, but for now, I'll hand this over to Jackson Oz. Jackson?”

Mitch held out his hand and the tall, handsome younger man shook it before turning back to face the room.

“Um...thank you, er...Mitch?” Jackson glanced at the older man, getting a nod of encouragement.

“Yeah, well, as you know, me and my team have been following leads in some pretty strange places, to find out what is causing this abnormal mutation in animals, birds and insects, most easily recognizable from the defiant pupil evident in the eyes. As Mitch has said, we'll get more into all that later one, for now, let me introduce everyone.”

Jackson reached up to lay a hand on the shoulder of the tall, solidly built black man at his side. “This is my good friends and safari partner, Abraham Kenyatta, who has been there from the start. We were witness to aberrant lion behavior while running eco-friendly safari camps in Botswana, Africa. Next to Abe is Chloe Tousignant, who also witnessed the lions attacking, in fact, she was part of a safari group attacked by the lions and the only one to survive, for which we are very grateful.”

Jamie noted that the slender blond returned Jackson's gaze with one that left no doubt as to their involvement, one that went beyond the professional.

“Next to Chloe, we have Logan Jones and Dariela Marzan, two very capable and resourceful members of the team who keep us safe and somehow manage to always find whatever we need, whenever we need it. And finally, on the end there, but by no means least, is our final member of this Team – Abby Westbrook.”

The appreciative group of scientist, aides, and others applauded them heartily, the group passing glances between themselves, obviously not used to such appreciation.

“Jackson, this is my partner Jamie, she’s the source of knowledge when it comes to logistics and statistics where it relates to the current situation.”

Jamie shook hands with the handsome leader of the Team, his grip firm and warm. In a similar fashion she was introduced to all the members of the team, the soldier, Logan, holding her hand a fraction longer, laying on the charm in a broad smile and laughing eyes.

“Pleasure to meet you, Miss Jamie. I know who to come to if I have any questions.”

Jamie pulled her hand away and smiled awkwardly at him, before passing on to the last member of the team.

“Ignore Casanova,” Abby jeered. “He just can't help himself. I'm Abby, and I'll be happy to pick your brains about the spread of this phenomenon.”

Jamie smiled back at the young woman with long, wavy brown hair and glasses. “Whatever you need to know.”

Jamie and Jo took their leave soon after, leaving Mitch and his aides to organize whatever was to follow.

When they were back in her offices, Jo carefully shut the office door before approaching Jamie's incident table where she spread out her maps and sorted her reports.
“Well, that Jackson is a dish.” Jo gushed. “In fact they all are.”

Jamie sat down at her desk and smiled at the other woman. “I'll admit that none of them seemed to have been hit with the ugly stick.”

Jo gaped at her. “Ouch. I keep forgetting, you're well and truly taken, so a handsome face is nothing to you.”

Jamie laughed. “Ouch yourself. I appreciate a pretty face as much as the next woman. I'm more in awe of what they've been doing, putting themselves out there in all sorts of confrontations with animals and managing to come out of it all unscathed.” She shuddered. “I've been in the thick of a few incidents with mutated animals and it's not at all pretty. Just scary.”

“Okay, well, I have to run. If you need me, send me a text.”

Jamie waved at her friend and PA as she left the office, her mind already on the presentation she was to give later in the day.

“As you can see, the movements and varieties of mammals, birds, and insects involved have expanded, as the area to be covered has. It's like an army calling up reinforcement.” Jamie clicked to the next map, showing an expanded area and the charted movement of creatures.

Apart from the usual department heads and Mitch, the room held the members of the Team as well. They'd already had a lively discussion going and interjected several theories based on their own groundwork and hands-on experience. Her report was taking twice as long as usual to run through, the frequent questions and interruptions making for a vigorous exchange of ideas and potential leaps of logic in understanding what was happening. Jamie was flattered that her correlation of information was providing such a platform for discussion. She didn't catch all of what was being said, so she was glad it was all being taped to be transcribed for general consumption later down the track. Mitch, Jackson, Abe, and Chloe were certainly firing ideas and observations back and forth, the other members chiming in with snippets, especially Abby, while the two military members of the group held their counsel for the most part and just listened.

Jamie frequently caught the young man, Logan, looking at her with a besotted look on his face, his smile lifting whenever she made the mistake of meeting his appreciative gaze. In any other situation she would have been flattered and a little enamored of the handsome soldier paying her so much attention, but in her given situation, his attention was more a source of irritated amusement rather than attraction. She only hoped that Mitch was too busy to notice the young man essentially flirting with her. Eventually, the discussion wound down and she was able to finish her presentation and sit down. Another quickly took her place and started a whole new report, this one based around possible vectors of change that had initiated the mutation. It was one Jamie had heard before so she tuned it out and looked around the table.

Her gaze was inexorably drawn to Mitch at the head, his face animated as he fed back ideas and theories to the scientist, forcing them to elucidate and expand their explanations on several points, clarifying for those that needed to catch up and making sure that every avenue had been explored before moving on. She loved watching him work, seeing him tease out the salient points from a long-winded discourse, pushing the scientist or researcher to really dig out the cause that really needed pursuing. His views were incisive and his conclusions cut through the padding to the core problem, dragging out the real issue that needed to be under discussion. In this meeting he was ably partnered by the French woman, Chloe who proved she was as smart as she was stylishly chic, her accented voice often sharp as she arrowed into the main point of the discussion. In the same way that Jamie watched Mitch, Jackson watched Chloe, his lips pulled into an affectional smile when the attractive Frenchwoman focused her attention on a specific person and basically grilled them about their assumptions. In a similar way, Logan largely focused his attention on Jamie, making her squirm a little to be under such unwanted focus. He was subtle about it, she was pretty sure no one else around the table noticed, but she half expected to find him playing footsy with her under the table, if the table wasn't so large and they weren't so far apart. She turned her chair slightly so that it faced towards Mitch, presenting her profile to the rest of the table and keeping her from meeting anyone's gaze, especially Logan's.
Later that night she was back at the apartment fixing herself something hot to drink when the front door opened and she heard a number of voices, including Mitch’s. She heard him call out her name and she responded, Mitch appearing in the kitchen doorway, quickly followed by all the members of the Team. Seeing that Logan was one of the group, unsurprisingly, she decided it was time for a demonstration of exactly where her affections lay.

When Mitch moved towards her around the kitchen island, she moved forward to meet him, wrapping her arms about his neck and kissing him, Mitch not slow to respond, wrapping his arms about her and almost lifting her off the ground. As a statement of their relationship, it was undeniable, the kiss lasting quite a bit longer than just a peck on the cheek. When they eventually surfaced Chloe and Abigail gave them a round of applause, the men all grinning, except Logan. Mitch grinned back sheepishly. “Sorry, been wanting to do that all day.” He leaned in to give Jamie a final soft kiss then they untangled themselves and faced their guests. Jamie faced the group with a smug ‘cat-got-the-cream’ expression, her campaign apparently successful.

Jamie wandered out to the huge lounge, somewhere she and Mitch had hardly used since they’d moved in. She curled up with her mug of hot chocolate on one of the long sofas, still tingling from the thorough kiss she’d exchanged with Mitch. Somebody sat down next to her and she looked up to find it was Logan, his expression rueful.

“Guess you told me, huh.”

Jamie remained silent, sipping her drink. Logan let out a gusty sigh. “I suppose it was too much to hope that the most beautiful girl in the room wasn't already taken. How long have you been married?”

Jamie choked but recovered quickly. “We're not, Mitch is my keeper.”

Logan’s eyebrows rose up. “You’re a kept woman, not a married one. Okay.” His cocky grin was back and Jamie frowned at him, confused.

“It doesn't change anything,” she stated. “I love Mitch, I sleep with him, he's everything to me.”

A few steps from the couch, Mitch stopped dead, absorbing her words, the smile on his face slowly fading to a more thoughtful expression. Not wanting Jamie to know he’d overheard her, he waited for the others to catch up then went to sit on the opposite couch so he faced the young couple. There could be only one reason Jamie felt the need to declare her relationship in such unequivocal terms. Logan had been coming on to her. The young man in question was certainly easy on the eyes, a lot closer in age to Jamie and had the cocky assurance of a young man that knew and used his attractiveness to women to get his way. That Jamie had needed to be so explicit meant that Logan wasn’t taking no for an answer. It certainly explained the public greeting he’d experienced in the kitchen. She’d been trying to warn the young idiot off, making it obvious that Mitch was her partner in more than work. Apparently, that hadn’t been enough, so she'd spelt things out to get her point across. But if Mitch was any judge, it would take a great deal more to fend off this particular breed of arrogance. Despite her laying her cards plainly on the table, Logan was still flirting with her, telling her of his exploits and making her laugh at his outrageous descriptions and exaggerations.

Jamie couldn't help it, he was funny and had a way of telling a tale that made her laugh even when she was actually shocked to hear what happened. He seemed to have taken her words on board, but they hadn't made him change his concerted campaign to gain her interest. He had such an easy, earnest charm that she couldn't remain cross with him.

Logan kept on pressing his advantage and keeping her attention all on himself, drawing her out and, in his own mind, reeling her in. In his peripheral vision, Logan could see Mitch watching from across the coffee table, the older man apparently not worried or threatened by the younger playing up to his kept woman. In Logan’s mind, Jamie was just being loyal to her legal guardian, the age gap too wide to mean they had anything other than a superficial relationship, despite the kiss in the kitchen. That had been just for show, he was convinced of it. It wouldn't take much for the bodacious and beautiful Jamie to fall into his arms, starved as she was for someone handsome and dashing to spend her time
with and share her bed with. Hell, Mitch Morgan was an old man, no real competition from that
quarter.

Mitch could read the thoughts going through Logan's head as easily as reading a book. It was a
situation he wasn't entirely unprepared for. He was aware of the age difference between Jamie and
himself, but it had never seemed as wide as it did now that a very much younger man, someone of
Jamie's age, was making a serious play for her. He took solace in the fact that despite the laughter
and her response to his flirting, her body was exhibiting all the signs that she was not at all
comfortable with the situation, her mug held in front of her chest like a shield and her smiles
becoming more and more forced as the minutes ticked by.

A half an hour later Jackson and Chloe were saying goodnight, the others getting up, including
Logan, to leave and find their own suites of rooms for the night. Jamie gravitated to Mitch's side, his
arm coming up around her shoulders as they waved the Team off and closed the door behind them.
Mitch dropped his arm and turned to go and clear up the mugs and glasses from the living room.
Jamie stood looking after him a moment before following. They worked to clear up together then
loaded the dishwasher, switched out the lights and headed for the bedroom.

Jamie sat on the side of the bed and worried at her bottom lip. She had changed into her nightwear
while Mitch had the bathroom, having already seen to her teeth and brushed out her hair and washed
off her makeup. Her meager collection had been replaced and augmented and she was enjoying
using makeup again, but always at the end of the day, she was just as happy to clean her face and let
her hair down.
Mitch appeared from the bathroom, throwing a towel into the laundry bag by the door.
“Mitch?”
“Yeah.”
“We need to talk.”
Mitch stopped dead. “We do? About what?” He moved again, walking around his side of the bed
and climbing under the covers but not taking off his glasses, and sitting up against the pillows.
Jamie twisted around and mirrored his posture, sitting upright, cross-legged and facing him. Jamie
looked down at her hands and frowned, getting her thoughts straight before speaking. Mitch just
watched her, waiting for her to say what she needed to get off her chest.
“Mitch, we've been together now for what, a couple of months?”
“Roughly three months, four days and fifteen hours, give or take.”
Jamie gifted him with a small smile. “Close enough. I think it's time that we...that you and I...um. I
think we should have sex.” She swallowed hard and fixed her stare back on her hands laying in her
lap.
Mitch couldn't help the smile that twitched his lips into a curve. “That's a pretty big step. What makes
you think this is the right time?”
Jamie looked up at him, tilting her head to the side. “You don't think it is?”
“I'm a man, Jamie. Anytime is a great time to have sex, but that's not what I asked. Why is this the
right time for you? Your last experience was not pleasant and I wouldn't be offended if you were put
off completely, but what I think isn't the issue. If you think you're ready to take our relationship to
that step, I'm on the same page.”
Jamie frowned at him. “Do you even want to have sex with me?”
Mitch let out a short bark of laughter. “For fuck's sake, I've wanted to since almost that first night we
shared a bed together!”
“Then why haven't you?” Jamie all but shouted back. “Maybe then I wouldn't be fending off
comments and suggestions from fucktard men who think I'm free to a good home for anyone that
wants me!”
Mitch stared at her, his face screwed up in confusion. “What the hell? How would fucking you make
any difference to how men like Logan look at you and treat you? It's not like I'm going to put a brand
on your face announcing Property of Mitch Morgan, am I!”

“I wish you would!” Jamie shot back. “Then I could at least hold my head up proudly and know that I belonged to someone who wanted me, who owned me and wasn't going to sell me off to the highest bidder...or betray me because he no longer wanted to be tied to me.”

“Jamie...” Mitch covered his eyes briefly, wondering how such a lovely, intelligent woman could be so royally screwed up. Taking off his glasses he turned and knelt on the bed, facing her. “Look at me.” He ordered, waiting for her to raise her head and meet his eyes. “I think I've been in love with you since that moment those officers asked for your papers and you looked at me so frightened, beseeching me to do something to save you. That was the moment you stole my heart and you've had it every moment since. I've kept my hands off you only by dint of exerting an extraordinary amount of self-control that has been sorely tested at times. You told me what happened in your last relationship, trusting me not to do the same, so I didn't. I let you deal with all that shit and hoped that at some stage you might look on me a little kindly, that maybe you'd want to stay with me and we'd have a chance to make something wonderful happen. I know we've kissed, and I've savored every time we have, but I wasn't about to push you into something you possibly didn't want. Kissing is just the appetizer to a whole lot of intimacy that you seemed wary of.”

“Mitch, I didn't...” Jamie interrupted but Mitch held up a finger.

“You flinched, Jamie. I'm not stupid, I knew that something had been done to you, that something had made you afraid, so I kept my distance, as much as I could...” He let a wry smile twist his lips. “You are very hard to resist, sweetheart when you look at me with those eyes and tempt me with that mouth.”

Jamie bent her legs under her and rose up onto her knees, bringing her almost flush against his bare chest.

“Then don't resist any longer. I want you to own every bit of me, mark me, brand me, tattoo me I don't care but make me yours, show me that you love me like you say you do...make me forget all those looks, all those comments when they think I can't hear them, take me beyond their reach, to where no one can touch me but you.”
Her words echoed again and again in his head, 'take me, take me!' and he was sorely tempted to do just that, his body leaping to nearly painful hardness just thinking about it. Jamie looked at him so pleadingly, begging him to do something to change her status, to mark her in some way to shield her from the people judging her. His rampant libido was shouting yes, but a cooler head prevailed and he drew in a deep breath. He put his hands on her arms, noting that his fingers were shaking with the force of his desire for her.

“I want you to know, first and foremost, that you are the most desirable, fuckable, woman I know. I want you so badly I can taste it.” He drew in a shuddering breath, mentally beating his body back as he backed away from the edge. “When I make you mine, there will be no need for branding, people will simply know, but I want something more than that right this minute. I want something that nobody can refute or question. Do you trust me?” He met her startled gaze, encouraged by the emphatic nod of her head.

“Completely,” she added. He loosened his grip on her arms and sat back on his heels. His shorts were tented to an almost embarrassing degree, his glance down drawing Jamie’s attention to his problem, her cheeks flushing a rosy pink.

“Don't ever doubt that you have an effect on me...recently, this has become an almost permanent state!” he joked with a crooked smile. Jamie leaned forward, her hand reaching for him but he grabbed it to forestall her. He held her wrist loosely but she didn't try to escape.

“What won't you let me?”

“I want you to have something first.” He let her go and turned to get off the bed. Jamie watched him, her face a picture of confusion. Mitch padded around the bed to find the leather satchel he habitually carried with the most recent notes and his tablet. After a brief rummage, he pulled out something and held it hidden in his hand. Mitch got back on the bed and once more knelt facing her. “I've had these for a couple of weeks, but I wasn't sure, until now when the right time would be for you to have it. I know we’ve only been together a relatively short time, but I'm as sure of my feelings as I can be. I know that what we have is right, and I think...I hope I've judged the timing right as well.” He opened his hand to reveal a small leather drawstring pouch, which he untied and emptied the contents into his free hand. Two rings tumbled out, one larger than the other. Jamie stared at them hardly daring to hope.
“I'm probably not what you expected to be bonded with for life, but I hope...” He swallowed hard. “I hope that you feel the same way. Jamie Campbell, will you wear this ring as evidence that you are now mine in every sense of the word. In body, in mind, legally, permanently, physically to do with as I wish, bonded for life to me in any capacity I choose for you, until life ends.”

Jamie gulped, her brain whirling with the implications. It was true they hadn't been together very long, but her former life seemed insubstantial compared to life since Mitch had come on the scene. If she did this, bonded to him, placed her life in his hands, there was no turning back. Of course the same applied to him, if he bonded with her, there was no parting them except by death, no divorce, no separation, come what may. If he died before her, she would inherit any and all of his estate, she would have status and never be looked down on, or harrassed ever again in her life. Marriage had loopholes, bonding did not.

Mitch was holding out the ring that would irrevocably seal the pact.

“Yes.” Her voice shook, as did her left hand when she held it out.

Mitch slid the smaller of the two rings on her third finger, then lifted her knuckle to kiss it. He held up the second ring.

“I, Mitchell Morgan, take you, Jamie Campbell as my bondswoman, to care for and love, to be responsible for any and all your actions now and in the future. I legally promise to share my assets in their entirety with you and make you heir to my estate in the event of my death. I will uphold your rights, defend your status and promise to provide everything you need, now and forever.” He handed the ring to her and she slid it on his left hand, third finger, the metal warm from him holding it. Like him, she lifted up his hand and kissed the knuckles.

Mitch blew out a breath, his lips parting in a grin. “You are now officially Jamie Campbell-Morgan,” he told her. Jamie grinned back, suddenly feeling euphoric.

“I think I'll stick with Jamie Morgan, less of a mouthful,” she retorted cheekily, giving him a one-shoulder shrug and lifting up her hand to admire the ring sitting snug about her finger.

Mitch backed off the bed and walked around to her side, holding out his hand, his eyes dancing with laughter. “Your first task as a bonded woman is...to join me in a bath.”

The scented water sloshed over the edge, the floor designed so that any excess water quickly found the concealed drain hole. Mitch had overfilled the bath in his haste, the water slopping over when he climbed in. Jamie waited until he was settled then performed a teasing strip of her nightwear, her former shyness apparently blown to the four winds on becoming his bondswoman. She stepped into the water and settled down, facing him, the water not hiding anything from the other. She had pinned her hair up and now leaned back against the bath edge, the water barely covering her breasts. Steam spiraled lazily into the air as they stared at each other, Jamie feeling a sense of liberation now that she was on an equal footing, her future assured and the man in the bath with her, all hers to play with.

Her foot found him under the water and she carefully stroked his taut flesh. Mitch let his head fall back and lifted his knees to give her greater access. It was as if he'd given her unlimited power, her anxiety all gone, her fears vanquished. By the giving of a ring, he granted her status that no-one else could, or would dispute. There'd be no more fears of police hauling her away, no worries that she'd ever end up in a brothel or workcamp, the ring on her finger made her untouchable, a free woman only answerable to the man sharing the bath, the same man groaning softly as she moved her foot up and down his cock.

Leaving off her attention to his chest, Jamie pressed forward to tease him with her breasts, their hard points brushing through the hair below his collarbone, her hand unceasing as it stroked and squeezed him between them. She wasn't just grateful to this man, she adored him and wanted nothing more than to bring him pleasure in any way she could. She stared into his slumberous eyes, her lips pressing kisses to his cheeks and nose before lowering to fasten over his mouth, lips pressing and
melding, moving and sliding while her body made love to him, her hand never ceasing its constant pace, her tongue moving to the same rhythm while more water flowed over the edge and ran across the floor.

She knew the moment he reached his climax, his breath hitching against her mouth, his body going taught while his cock swelled in her hand, then his hips jerked and he was expelling his semen into the warm water and over her fingers, his breath shuddering against her lips, his heart thumping against her breasts. With both hands free she smoothed her hands over his head and around his ears, kissing him with languid strokes of her tongue against his. When his eyes finally opened, she smiled broadly at him, his lips twitching up into an answering grin, the dimples deep on each side of his mouth. He sat up a little and brought his hands about to cradle her against him, one on her back, the other stroking down over her bottom, smoothing and molding the flesh in his turn.

“Why don’t we dry off and take this to bed?”

Jamie nodded and pushed against his chest to sit back on her heels. She rose up out of the water and stood for a second, letting Mitch look his fill, his hand moving up her slick legs to rest briefly at the top of her thighs on either side, his head coming forward to allow him to kiss her small thatch of dark, curly pubic hair, each ringlet holding a droplet of water that he lapped at greedily. With a final kiss, he sat back and held out a hand to steady her as she stepped out of the bath, Mitch quick to follow. They dried each other, Mitch using the process to press kisses to her damp flesh, his tongue lapping up the moisture from her feet to her navel while she stroked her fingers through his wet hair as he knelt before her. When he rose to his full height he bent one last time to scoop her up in his arms and carry her out of the bathroom over to the bed, there to lay her down gently before joining her, his mouth mapping her skin assiduously.

Jamie writhed under his fervent teasing, his hands stroking and squeezing while his mouth lapped and suckled her flesh as if she was a banquet, and he a starving man. She was pliant, unembarrassed when he moved her like a living doll to reach every part of her, lifting limbs and bending legs, rolling her over to explore her rounded bottom before moving up to map the freckles on her back and shoulders. When he rolled her onto her back again he moved his focus to her breasts, lifting her to reach his mouth, drawing in almost all the flesh and holding it between his tongue and pallette, playing with the hard nipple, engulfing her in heat before letting her go to do the same to its twin. His enjoyment of her body became hers, his mouth exploring all her hidden places, no part of her untouched, unworshipped in his quest to know every inch of her. When he settled between her thighs she arched and spread her legs wide, his clever mouth delving deep among her folds, driving her wild, his broad hands holding her down when she would have lifted off the bed in her writhing. He plundered her flesh, tasting her essence, inhaling her unique scent, all the while listening to every hitch of her breath, every moan and squeal, filing them away for the next time. She was laid bare and exposed, trusting herself to him in every abandoned pose he put her in, it was heady stuff and his ego swelled to match his revived cock.

Working his way up her body, he positioned himself at her opening and slid home, both of them moaning loudly at the culmination of all the foreplay. After all the gentle play of before, their coming together was almost violent, animalistic after all the build up. Mitch slammed into her repeatedly his face pulled into a rictus of pleasure as every muscle he had, worked to meld him deeper inside her body. Jamie groaned and writhed against him, meeting each thrust and wrapping her legs around him, drawing herself up to accept each plunge, drowning in his possession of her body, her heart and her soul, her mouth open wide as she ground her head into the pillows, neck stretched taut against the rising orgasm threatening to rip her apart and fling her off the cliff. When her climax hit she screamed, arching her back and clutching at Mitch, his own orgasm roaring through his body on a powerful surge, his last thrust embedding him deep inside her, hips jerking and cock throbbing in time with his heartbeat.

In the aftermath, they lay wrapped around each other, both breathing heavily, hearts thumping wildly but the connection still there, one body sheathed by the other, both content to remain that way for as long as possible. When his cock softened and slipped out, they both moaned at the loss, Mitch
kissing the nearest stretch of skin within reach, Jamie sighing her approval. “You were incredible, this...this was incredible...” Mitch murmured between kisses, his day-old whiskers raising goosebumps in their wake. Jamie just hummed, threading her fingers through his hair, or stroking whatever part of him she could reach. Eventually, she mustered the strength to say something.

“Do you think they'll let us have a day off, tomorrow? I don't think my legs will be able to carry me very far.” She felt the rumble before she heard it, Mitch laughing with his head between her breasts. “You think walking is a problem? Every time I see you now I'll be remembering what we just did, how you felt around me, how you tasted...” He drew in a long breath through his nose. “How you smelt...I think I could quite easily become addicted to this, to you.” Jamie smiled. “I've never given myself so totally to anyone like that before...I think I could grow to like that very much.”

“My pleasure, and yours, I think.” Mitch raised his head and peered myopically at the bedside clock. “There's still a few hours before we have to get up, come on...” He reluctantly relinquished his comfortable pillow and moved up the bed, pulling back the covers, Jamie diving under them, only waiting for him to lay down and cover them both before draping herself over him in a proprietary manner. She sighed gustily, smiling against his skin as his hand stroked patterns over her shoulders and under her hair which now hung down her back. The sweat was drying on his skin and she reached out with her tongue to taste him, lapping up the slight moistness.

Mitch felt the small touch and smiled to himself. His wondrous bedmate was a joy and he felt his heart swell with love for every bit of her, his body enjoying the lassitude of good sex after so long. His delight in her exuberance and her trust to give herself so completely made him humble and just reinforced how right his decision had been to offer her the ultimate partnership between a man and a woman.

The ring felt both strange and perfect on his hand, the metal gleaming in the low light of the bedside lamp. The rings were a matched pair in the quality of the platinum, his slightly wider, hers with a band of diamonds around the circumference of one edge. He’d seen them and wanted them, knowing somehow that Jamie was the one, that she had what he'd always wanted, always longed for. He just hadn't expected it to all happen so soon. He'd been prepared to give her however much time she needed, but Jamie was a force unto herself and presented him with a situation he couldn't back away from, nor wanted to.

Now they were both free to be and do together, whatever they wanted. The future was theirs.

Now he just had to make the world a place that once again offered a future. For all of them.

Jamie couldn't stop herself glancing down at the ring on her left hand, the weight of it, sparkle of the diamond, it was just hypnotic. Shaking her head at her own foolishness, she turned back to the pin board, checking that everything was marked and up to date from the latest reports. Satisfied it was complete, she took a picture and downloaded it to be added to the new report she was compiling.

The door to her office opened behind her and she turned, expecting to see Jo, Jamie's face alight with a wide smile. “Hey, beautiful. Miss me?”

Jamie stared at the cocky ranger and her smile faded. “Logan. Is there something you wanted?” she asked politely, quickly putting the display table between them.

“I thought I'd made that obvious last night,” Logan replied. “I want you, Jamie-girl, just you.” Jamie lifted her head and smiled tightly. “Then I'm afraid that what you want isn't up for grabs anymore.” She lifted her left hand, palm towards herself and spread her fingers to show off the ring. “You'll have to look elsewhere to find someone to flirt with.”

Logan narrowed his eyes and took in the diamond encircled ring. His lip curled. “He married you? That's a rather drastic reaction to a little flirting. He must have felt so threatened by me.”

Jamie gaped at him. “You arrogant little shit. Mitch is more man than you'll ever be, and for your
information, we're not married...we're bonded. So unless you can hold a reasonable, non-flirtatious conversation with me as an equal, I suggest you refrain from talking to me at all. Do I make myself clear?"

Logan had been glaring at her with a comical look of baffled surprise on his face, but now that changed to a scowl at being thwarted. He made to advance, but a slow clap started behind him and he spun on his heel to see Mitch standing in the doorway, the glint of a matching ring to Jamie's very obvious on his left hand. Jamie hadn't realized Mitch was there either, the mere sight of him making her shoulders relax and her hands unclench.

“I think Jamie has made herself perfectly clear. I suggest you run along and do whatever it is you do, somewhere else. This office is now off limits to you, understand?”

Logan's jaw worked but he accepted that this time he'd been routed by a superior opponent. He glanced back briefly at Jamie then faced Mitch, straightening his shoulders and tilting his chin up.

“Well played, old man. Caught yourself a juicy one there, congrats.”

Mitch stood sideways to allow Logan to pass, his gaze on the ceiling tiles. When Logan drew level Mitch lowered his gaze to the younger man and spoke softly.

“Keep yourself well away from her. I don't grant second chances when what belongs to me is threatened. Accept that she is not available and we might just manage a decent working relationship. Ignore the warning and you will find yourself off the Team, out of this Taskforce and thrown to the wolves...literally.”

Logan narrowed his eyes but accepted his dismissal albeit with poor grace. Mitch stepped into the office and shut the door behind him, effectively shutting the younger man out.

Jamie rounded the table and threw herself into Mitch's arms, clutching him tightly. When she eventually released him, she reached up to kiss him, Mitch cradling her face in his hands and deepening the embrace until they were both breathless.

“Thank you,” Jamie breathed, dragging her hands down from around his neck to rest against his chest, her head on his shoulder.

Mitch cupped the back of her head in his hand and held her there, his grim expression hidden from her.

“He won't bother you again,” he growled softly.

“If he has any sense he won't,” Jamie agreed, stepping back and looking up at him with admiration.

“Your timing was perfect.”

Mitch grinned. “I had a little help from an observant aide. He saw Logan heading this way and read his intentions accurately. The rest you know.”

“He was so fucking smug, the rat. And as for that 'juicy' crack...”

“I can punch his lights out if you want?” Mitch asked mildly, his eyebrow raised.

Jamie looked horrified. “NO! I mean, not that you couldn't, if you wanted to, but he's not worth it,”

“Alright,” Mitch laughed. “But the offer is out there if you change your mind. I have to get back. I'm looking forward to hearing the results of your new report.”

Jamie reached up and kissed his cheek. “I'll see you then. Now shoo...” She stayed there, watching him walk out of her office, leaving the door open, then across the bullpen to his own office. Only when he was out of sight did she move, returning to her table to stare at the presentation with sightless eyes, her thoughts all on the previous night's activities, a warm blush painting her cheeks. Logan had never really come close.

Jamie sat at the conference table and listened intently as Abby presented her findings. The entire science team was combining what Mitch had started, with what Abby now continued. The woman was inspired and held court among the elites, fending off queries and concerns, pointing out the inconsistencies of old theories, and promoting her current branch of research.

“We're still missing a vital component...” Abby was saying, pointing to a chemical sequence she'd written on the whiteboard. The door to the conference room banged open, interrupting her and drawing all eyes to the newcomer. It was Jackson Oz, with Abe on his heels.

“You need to see this!” Jackson said excitedly, carrying a parcel over to where Mitch sat. “But first,
read this, it explains everything.” He held out a sheet of printed paper for Mitch to take.
The room held its collective breath while Mitch skimmed the words, his eyebrows rising above the line of his glasses. When he had read it through twice he sat back and stared up at Jackson who was positively bouncing on the balls of his feet.
“Is it true?” Mitch asked.
“It's what we've been missing all this time. What we were searching for, what was mentioned in that journal we received. Someone out there is working behind the scenes, feeding us information that we ordinarily wouldn't have access to!” Jackson enthused, pulling open the box to reveal a glass container with opaque sides, the exterior looking like it was frosted.
“Our very own Deep Throat. Can we trust this source?” Mitch asked, passing the letter to the person beside him which in turn was snatched and read by Abby.
“Can we afford to ignore it?” Jackson retorted. “If this is what it purports to be in that letter, then we're holding the key to everything. This is the source, the Mother cell, as the letter calls it.”
“Then we need to get on to testing it immediately...”
“I want it,” Abby spoke up, her expression intent. “This could be exactly what I was talking about, the missing component that will bring all the elements together.”
Mitch nodded. “We'll need to apportion it carefully. We may not be able to replicate it and this is the only sample we have. No mistakes, people. This is our one shot. Make it work.”
Abby snatched up the container and, surrounded by all the other scientists, hurried out of the room. Jackson flopped into one of the vacated seats, Abe taking one opposite.
“So you have no idea who sent it to you?” Mitch asked, sitting back in his chair and crossing his legs.
Jackson shook his head. “It was waiting for me, on my desk in the office. I'm not even sure it was delivered by a courier, it could be someone here, part of the Taskforce even.”
“We could review the surveillance footage,” Abe suggested and Mitch nodded.
“Do that. If it is someone on the Taskforce I want to know who it is. If they are stealing secrets, then powerful people will find out and come looking for them. I don't want our people put in harm's way. Security will want to know who it is too, and how they got through the stringent clearance protocols in place.”
“We're on it, Boss.” Jackson bounced out of his chair and almost jogged to the door, Abe tipping Mitch a salute before following, Jackson's shadow in all but name.
“Could this really be a breakthrough?” Mitch's aide asked, the young man handing Mitch the printed letter that had been abandoned in all the excitement.
“Let's hope so. Can you take this to Leighton and see what he makes of it?” Mitch handed his aide the letter and the young man immediately left the room to carry out the request.
Mitch turned back to Jamie who had remained silent through all the carry-on. He reached for her hand and pulled it up for him to kiss. “I'm sorry we didn't get to your report, but until the next groundbreaking crisis demands my attention, I'm all yours. Tell me what you found out.”

Jamie preened in front of the mirror, fluffing her hair for the umpteenth time before switching out the bathroom light and walking naked to the bed, the covers already pulled back in readiness for her. Mitch was sitting up, glasses still on, reading his way through a thick folder of data, the bed cover sporting several sheets of paper with graphs, equations, and formulas on them. He was just as naked as she.
Jamie lay on her side, her elbow sunk in the pillows to prop up her head. “Watcha reading?” Mitch didn't even glance at her. “I won't be more than a minute.”
Jamie smiled to herself. A person could do a lot in a minute. She started her campaign by sliding her free hand up and down his thigh, brushing the hairs the wrong way under the covers. With each stroke, she brought her hand closer and closer to his groin.
Mitch was trying to read the last paragraph of the report but the words started to blur in front of his eyes, completely distracted by the small hand teasing him under the sheets. Giving up on finishing his reading, he gathered up the scattered papers and shoved them into the folder before dropping it
unceremoniously on the carpet, his glasses nearly thrown onto the bedside cabinet. Jamie had withdrawn her hand when he started to move about, her lips pulled up into a satisfied grin. When Mitch turned back and moved further down the bed, she threw back the covers, moving purposefully to her target. Mitch barely got his head on the pillows when a hot, wet mouth engulfed his semi-erect cock and sucked it hard. He yelped and drew his legs up, giving her more room to work, her busy tongue drawing a moist trail down to his balls and back up again, swirling at the tip and making him shudder in pleasure. That wicked mouth soon had him hard and wanting, his backside clenching and lifting to put more of himself between her lips.

“God, yes...” he moaned appreciatively, clutching the sheets either side while she kept up her relentless seduction. A few minutes later and he was almost incoherent, managing to gasp out a few words in a hoarse groan.

“Jamie...in you.....now.”

“You ask so nicely,” Jamie retorted, rising up from between his knees to straddle him, rubbing herself along his hard length, trapping him between his belly and her pleasure center. Mitch stared up at her through heavy lids, his mouth bruised from biting his lip in an attempt to hold back his orgasm. His hands reached up to cup her breasts, thumbs circling the pink buds on their crown. Lifting herself, Jamie steered his cock into her very wet core, sinking down on him to their mutual satisfaction. Pressing her breasts into his hands, she steadied herself by holding his forearms then started to rock and lift, twisting her pelvis with each downward thrust, grinding herself against him to bring on her own climax. She rode him like a wild thing, twisting and lifting, only to take him in deep, his hands supporting her efforts, glorying in the sight of her writhing above him. She shook as her body reached it's zenith, clenching around him and urging him on, Mitch pulling her down to his chest while his braced his feet and thrust upwards, shaking them both. She bit down hard on one of his flat nipples and he shouted, spasming deep inside her, his release pumping everything he had into her welcoming body.

For a long time, they basked in the aftermath, sweaty and sated, boneless and breathless. Jamie had her cheek pressed to his chest, hearing his heart thumping heavily against her ear. Her own was only just starting to settle when she sat up, his cock still inside her although softening. She made to grind down on him but Mitch only laughed weakly.

“Sweetheart, you're trying to raise the dead...you killed me.”

Jamie stopped her wriggling and just sat there, hands resting on his ribs, gazing down at him.

“Mitch?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you thought about children?”

“Yeah.”

“You have?” Jamie retorted. “When was that, and why didn't you say something?”

Mitch cracked open his eyes to look up at her. “I thought about it the first time I came inside you. You know I've had a child before, so my ability isn't in question. I figured you were okay with the idea because you didn't ask me to use protection. Was I wrong?”

Jamie chewed her lip. “Not exactly. I really only just thought about it. I realized I'm overdue for the injection and was going to discuss it with you. Kind of redundant now.”

“Jamie, if you're not ready, or have a concern, then we can talk about it. If you hate the idea of having a child...with me, I'll understand.” He covered his eyes with his arm, then pulled it aside, his eyes fully open. “No, that's not honest, and we need to be honest. I would be over the moon if you were to have my child, our child. I wasn't a very good dad the first time around, and I'm still not but if we can find the cure and set the world straight, then a trip to Boston is top of my list.” He drew in a breath and let it out slowly. “Does the idea of having children disgust you?”

“God, no. I just worry that when I'm huge you won't be quite so enamored of me.”

Mitch let out a bark of laughter. “Sweetheart, I really should get Audra to speak to you, she'd tell you I was a complete horndog when she was pregnant. There's just something about a pregnant woman carrying your child, it's a potent combination. Poor Audra thought we'd still be fucking when the baby arrived, not that she was complaining.”
Jamie smiled down at him, happy that he was happy. “Noted. Now, what were you saying about being too dead to rise again?” she gave her pelvis a twitch and felt his flesh swell and fill her again. “It's all this talk about pregnant women, it gets me rock hard every time.” Mitch reared up, Jamie letting out a squeal when he wrapped her in his arms and moved to flip her under him, still firmly seated and once more primed and ready. Jamie looked up into his darkly handsome face and looped her arms around his neck.

“I do like it when you talk dirty!” she whispered, drawing him down to meet her hungry lips.

Abby Westbrooke was waiting for him in his office the next morning. She looked like she hadn't slept, her clothes rumpled and her long hair confined in a loose knot at the back of her head.

“You wanted to see me?” Mitch asked, rounding his desk and sitting down. His left hand caught a stray beam of sunlight and it reflected off his ring. Abby stared at it in surprise.

“You're bonded?” she sounded incredulous. “I didn't see that when we first met.”

Mitch raised both eyebrows at her impertinence but chose to ignore it.

“It's a recent decision. Now, what do you have?”

Abby remained fixated on the ring. Her dark eyes, behind her glasses, seemed for a moment to be a little crazy, then she blinked. “Of course. Jamie.”

Mitch nodded. “Good guess.”

Abby sat down suddenly in one of the chairs, her barely leashed excitement of a moment ago drained away. “She's hardly your intellectual equal, but I don't imagine it was a meeting of minds. She's pretty, in a victim sort of way. You could have done better.”

Mitch stared at her, his mouth not dropping open only because he was grinding his teeth and biting back the acid rejoinder he wanted to fire at her. The bloody nerve of the woman.

“I'm more than satisfied with my choice.” He cleared his throat. “Now, you having something you wanted to bring to my attention?”

This time Abby took the hint and pushed her pile of papers over for him to look through. While he read, she watched, her dark eyes skating over his features, well aware of the busy brain behind the deceptively mild exterior. Mitch had the sort of mind she would give anything to explore, she had entertained hopes of drawing him into a closer relationship with her, one that would include meeting him as an intellectual equal with discussion ranging over many topics, as well as a mutually satisfying physical meeting of bodies, her own happily humming with the thought of what she'd would have done with him if the chance was ever given. But now there was a fly, a most inconvenient snag in her carefully crafted web.

No man considered becoming bonded to another without the most profound and deepest feelings engaged. Jamie must be one hell of a fuck to have lured such a smart man into such a disastrous decision. Sure, the girl had smarts, but she was way out of her league with Mitch. He embodied everything Abigail had been dreaming of. He was a genius, he had mileage but not so much that he didn't also have a killer body with the attendant equipment and knowledge to wield it. That snippet of intimate details she's found out from one of the professionals she'd talked to who had serviced him a year or two back. The whore had enjoyed her encounter with the cute professor so much she was able to give a startling amount of information given the right financial incentive. He was good looking in a professorial style and up until a few moment ago, he had been on the market. She had even gone so far as to snoop into his financial situation, very satisfied with what she found.

Now, with the simple application of a ring, all her daydreams, all her plans were shot to hell. Fuck.

Mitch looked up from the paperwork and noticed that Abby was a little engrossed in her thoughts, a smile playing about her lips, whatever she was thinking obviously pleasurable. He cleared his throat and her dark eyes swiveled to meet his.

“So you're convinced you have the potential for a cure, but you're lacking a test subject.”

Abigail leaned forward. “Exactly. This Mother cell is in nearly everything you can think of. We've tested innumerable products, foodstuffs, agricultural goods, you name it. Now we know what to look for, we see this element in all of them, including those samples of mutated animals taken to date. It
seems to be a mutating agent that is accelerating the natural evolutionary process, so we end up with bears that grow armour plate, rats that can spontaneously change sex and breed in unbelievable numbers as well as develop a hive mind and queens to feed the pups, why a sloth can cause an earthquake and a lizard a mini ice-age. All these incredible creatures we've seen, sampled or witnessed have all developed the defiant pupil, all have this Mother cell in their genetic make-up, all had been exposed to Reiden products in the last ten years.”

Mitch plucked at his lower lip while he chewed over her conclusions.

“You need an animal that displays the same mutation, the defiant pupil, but without having been exposed to the Mother cell in any Reiden products.”

“YES!” Abby jumped out of her chair. “I knew you would understand. Not one of those idiots could make the connection. I was starting to think I was the only one to see it.

If we want to make a cure, we have to catch this at its current stage, in other words, right now! If we let the mutations maintain their current projected path, we'll lose our window of opportunity in roughly six months. By then the genetic mutations will have gone past the effectiveness of using the Mother cell to reverse what's happened so far.”

Mitch frowned down at the paperwork, rechecking a couple of the sheets, his expression severe. Abby sat back down but leaned forward, watching his face. She saw the moment he accepted her hypothesis.

“All right. As you say, it's all here. What do you need from me?”

She felt giddy when his brown eyes stared straight into hers. She could see his intellect shining from behind his glasses, his whole demeanor acknowledging that she was the genius, the one to figure it out.

“I need...we need to find that one animal group that remains unaffected, or unpolluted by anything connected to Reiden products or GDJ International.”

Mitch started to shuffle the papers together, tapping them on the desktop to put them in order.

“Jamie will have a database of information we can use. Let's adjourn to her office and pick up Jackson along the way.”

Jamie looked up from her desk when the door opened and smiled broadly at the first person through, which happened to be Mitch. He was followed closely by Abby and Jackson, an air of suppressed excitement adding tension to the room.

“We need that world map you made showing all Reiden and GDJ international product sources and distribution.”

“Sure. Let me bring it up and I'll print it off. I can also project it if that would be easier?”

“Projection should be sufficient. Bring it up as large as you can, we need to see if there is anywhere that isn't touched by either company.”

Jamie worked for a few minutes, then downloaded the information to a thumb drive. Getting up she plugged the drive into a projector and dropped down the screen usually hidden in the ceiling. With the press of a couple of buttons the image appeared, the countries, counties or places that had any contact with either Reiden or its parent company were highlighted in pink or yellow, leaving very few places not colored in.

Jackson, Abby, and Mitch all peered at the various continents, looking for the veritable needle in the world sized haystack.

Mitch eventually turned to the expert. “Jamie?”

“There are only three places where there is no evidence of any imports or exports of Reiden products...”

Jackson suddenly interrupted her. “Do any of those places contain a leopard population?”

Mitch turned to the younger man. “Leopards?”

“My father left a journal which discussed the whole issue of defiant pupils. He specifically mentions leopards, but the context is not clear.”

Jamie was working on her laptop, correlating animal species by country. “Two of the places have leopards, one has a large population than the other, and possibly a better political situation than the
“So where are we looking?” Abby asked.
“Zambia,” Jamie announced. Jackson went back to the map and found the country. Jamie continued. “It's landlocked, bordered by Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Angola, Botswana, Congo, Malawi, Tanzania, and Namibia. The leopards are located largely in the Mfuwe area of the South Luangwa National Park, well known for its frequent leopard sightings plus the Lower Zambezi is also a good Park for leopard spotting, take your pick.”

“Good work, thank's Jamie.” Mitch turned back to the others. “Let me make some calls. We'll see how things are and what resources we have available.” He patted Jackson on the shoulder and turned to leave. “Send what you think I'll need to reinforce my argument, okay?” he addressed his remarks to Jamie who nodded, already turning back to her computer to do just that.

Unnoticed, Abby watched the interchange, noting the warmth in Mitch's eyes when he gazed at the redhead, noted the affectionate smile he bestowed on the woman when he thought she wasn't looking. For her part, Jamie came alive when Mitch was around, her eye luminous, her smile full of promise. It was little wonder the young soldier had zeroed in on the girl, she exuded a winsome sex appeal that was obviously very attractive to a certain type of male, Mitch, and Logan apparently just those sort of men. Jackson seemed impervious, but then he was lusting after the Frenchwoman, and Abe wasn’t entirely immune to the female soldier, Dariela. Abigail only had one male on her radar and the unexpected development of his bonding was now an unforeseen challenge to be overcome.

There was only one way to break a bonded pair – one of them had to die. If that could be achieved then she'd be perfectly placed to move in and console Mitch, sure that she could convince him to transfer his affections to herself, a worthy successor to the simpering journalist.

Wrapped up in her delusion, she didn't realize that she was standing alone in Jamie's office, the girl herself looking at Abby with a thoughtful expression.

“So sorry, I got caught up in thinking about the cure and quite forgot where I was for a moment,” Abby laughed, hiding her true feelings. This would not be the time to alert the girl to any suspicions. It was so easy to underestimate her intelligence, she's been a journalist after all and they were a clever breed in finding out secrets and hidden agendas.

“Just hang in there, it's all pretty overwhelming and exciting. Easy to get caught up, a bit like being on a roller coaster.”

Mitch faced Chloe over his desk, his face showing his obvious confusion. “It was you?”
“No me, per se, but a colleague that I need to remain anonymous. I am an agent of the French government, as you are aware, and it was a strange twist of fate that put me on that Safari to be rescued by Jackson Oz, but it was my experience in the field that promoted me for this mission. Although the Team was first funded and overseen by my department, that has since been transferred to a worldwide oversight committee, the same one that provides many of the resources you use here, in conjunction with both private and public supporters.”

“So why the mole?” Mitch asked.
“Because there are as many determined to stop the cure becoming a reality as there are those wanting a cure urgently. I'm not talking about the extremists and crackpots, I'm talking about those that want to take advantage of the present situation and milk it for everything they can get out of it. There are plenty of powerful people, corporations, and governments that think this animal revolution is an opportunity and they don't want it to stop.”

Mitch nodded. “So you've been undermining the underminers. Not stopping at industrial espionage, just where do you draw the line?”
“Would it interest you to know that the Mother cell wasn't the only important item of interest taken from the laboratory.”
“Oh?” Mitch steepled his hands. “Why is that of interest to me?”
“You have a daughter diagnosed with Glazier's Syndrome, a terminal diagnosis I understand.” Mitch dropped his pose of casual disinterest and sat forward, his eyes intent. “You understand correctly. What did you find?”
“The laboratory where we found the Mother cell, was working on a sideline of research into the cause and cure for Glaziens.”
“If you know about Clem, you know I did a very, very thorough search for a cure a few years ago and came up empty-handed. Are you telling me now that there is, in fact, a cure?”
Chloe nodded. “Not only a cure, but we found out that the same place that developed the cure, caused the disease, a byproduct of a mistake during the processing of the Mother cell. Your daughter was exposed to a product that contained the abnormality and she contracted the disease by this vector. It's why the disease appears so random and unconnected to any normal progression or distribution of a pathogen. It is very specific. We can only assume that because of the small percentage of casualties they didn't disclose their involvement or compound their guilt by association by releasing the cure. If they had, the company, the corporation would have been ruined by the subsequent legal ramifications.”
“Good, God!” Mitch looked flattened, then rage flooded his face and he rose to his feet. “We have to nail the bastards for this. Not only for my Clem but for all those that have died and those still suffering.”
Chloe let out a sigh, his reaction not unexpected. “Doctor Morgan, there is only enough of the cure for one application and none of our specialists have been able to replicate the formula. There is enough for a course of medication which will cure your daughter completely, but not enough if we use it for testing and can't find a way to replicate it.”
Mitch sat down suddenly, looking stricken. “No. Why tell me this just to snatch it away...”
Chloe interrupted him. “It's an unpleasant situation, but it has been agreed by those in the position to make these unpalatable choices, that you should use the cure for your daughter.”
Mitch stared at her, his face working. Could he turn down the opportunity to cure Clem because he felt guilty for all those who weren't being offered a cure? His eyes welled and a tear tracked down his cheek. Grimly he made his decision.
“Give me the cure. I'll travel to Boston this weekend.”

“You made the right decision,” Jamie murmured, stroking her hand over his tousled head where it rested against her breast. He had been preoccupied all evening and it wasn't until they were in bed that he told her what had happened, passing on everything that Chloe had told him. The conflict was tearing him apart. He clutched Jamie to him as his emotions roiled between rage at the people that allowed the disease to exist in the first place, and the raw sorrow at not being able to help so many children and their families still suffering the worst. She held him and listened to it all pour out, her arms providing the refuge for his conflicted emotions, her body the recipient of the tears he shed for all his daughter had been put through, all his family had been put through. Throughout it all, she reassured him and did what she could to soothe his ravaged emotions. At length, the storm passed and he slept, worn out, his arms wrapped around her, his head cradled against her. In two days they would travel to Boston, and Clem would have her cure. In three days a group of army special rangers would be traveling to Zambia to capture a leopard and bring it back to Washington to provide the missing link for the last stage of the cure.

It couldn't come soon enough.
Jamie listened in to Mitch talking to his ex-wife. Theirs had been a reasonably amicable divorce, as much as one can be, so she was surprised when she heard Mitch's voice become agitated and angry. The phone call was supposed to just arrange a time for Mitch to meet his daughter to administer the first dose of the cure, not devolve into a heated debate. From what she could make out something had happened to the dog Mitch had given to Clem, Audra using that as a lever to heap more guilt on Mitch despite him knowing nothing about the dog's veterinary bills until that moment. The call ended with a time set and Jamie took herself off to the bedroom to resume packing.

Mitch entered the room soon after, coming up to wrap his arms around her from behind and rest his chin on her shoulder.

“How’s it going?” he asked, nuzzling her neck.

“That depends on how long we’re staying in Boston.”

“Drive up tomorrow, visit Clem on Sunday, maybe same on Monday, drive back Tuesday.”

“Then my packing is done. Are we driving ourselves?”

“Phillip,” Mitch answered, pulling away, going to the closet to look through his own clothes. “It's a security thing.”

Jamie didn't argue just finished up folding the few garments she was taking.

“Everything okay in Boston?” she asked.

“Henry had a close encounter with a car and had to go to the vets. I'd told Audra I'd take care of any vet bills the dog needed, but she's so...” he gritted his teeth and grimaced. “Aaagh, I want to strangle her sometimes. Clem is my daughter too, and anything she needs, I'm happy to help with, including for the dog. I got him for her, for fuck's sake.”

“Is her husband out of work or something?” Jamie asked, not knowing much about the family.

“Justin has been stood down, same with Audra so things are tight. I understand she's loyal to Justin, but it's not like I expect anything in return. It's just so frustrating.” He threw down a selection of shirts on the bed, frowning down at them as if they were at fault.

“Did you get to talk to Clementine?”

Mitch blew out a breath. “Just for a minute. We said hi, I asked about Henry, told her I was coming for a visit, she said fine and that was it, she passed the phone back to her mother.”

Jamie sat down on the edge of the bed. “You know it might be best if I didn't come with you. Maybe I should stay behind...”

“No!” Mitch practically shouted. “I'd rather face a herd of charging hippos than face my ex-wife on my own, I need you to give me courage, otherwise I'll wimp out at the last moment.”

Jamie gave him a look. “You would not.”

“I might. Think of it as a mini-vacation from all the hard work you've been doing. You've never been to Boston, right?”

Jamie shook her head.

“There you go.”

“I still think I should stay well out of it when you meet Clem for the first time in three years. I could meet up with you later. Clem won't react well to sharing you with someone else.”

Mitch sat down heavily beside her. “Dammit, I hate it when you're right. Do you really not mind? Phillip can take you on a tour and then you could pick me up and we'll see some of the sights...”
together.”
Jamie laced her fingers with his. “I wouldn't suggest it if I didn't mean it. This is important, Mitch.”
He lifted their linked hands to kiss her fingertips.
“I know, but you are important to me too, don't ever think otherwise.”

The drive up to Boston was long and uneventful. Despite what was happening on the west coast, there was little evidence of the animal pandemic on the east coast, apart from some incidents involving birds and some odd behavior among the wildlife further north near the border. There was little to indicate any panic among the towns they drove through, the roads only showing moderate traffic levels despite the lack of flights to convey commuters between the cities and surrounding states. Mitch pondered on the difference between the east and west coasts, hypothesizing that maybe it had something to do with being more northerly. They stopped when needed for bathroom breaks, never lingering too long at any one place, taking food and drink along with them, rather than waste time eating by the side of the road. By the time they reached the outskirts of Boston they were glad to see the Sheraton hotel they were booked into. It was only a couple of miles from there to where Clem and her mother lived, so it was convenient and comfortable. As soon as they were checked in they went up to their room, Mitch using the room safe to lock away the small leather case containing Clem's precious cure. They'd already made a time with Phillip for him to drive them the short distance to Audra's the next morning, but for now, they could relax and enjoy a quiet evening together.

The next morning, after a good sleep and invigorating sex-in-the-shower before breakfast, they were heading for Lincoln Street in Newton Highlands and their rendezvous with Clem, the leather case sitting on the seat beside them.
“T'm just going to call Audra, make sure everything's fine,” he told Jamie, hitting the speed dial and listening to it ring. His brow knitted when the call went to the answerphone. “Odd.”
“What?”
“Audra's not picking up.”

Phillip pulled the car up in front of a modest house in the leafy street. Mitch picked up the leather case and leaned over to give Jamie a kiss. “I'll see you later, okay?”
“Not a problem. Enjoy your day with Clem.”

Mitch got out of the car but didn't close the door. All along the power lines birds of half a dozen different species were lined up, flapping and twittering, jostling and chirping. Given how many mature trees were present in all directions it wasn't entirely a surprise to find a large population of suburban species in evidence, it was just that they all seemed to have chosen this one street to congregate on and were all making the same noise. Mitch finally closed the door only to tap on Phillip's window, indicating for him to lower it.

Jamie watched Mitch go through the gate and up the path to the front door.
After several minutes of knocking he gave up and returned to the car, getting into the back once more.
“No one's home. I'll try Audra again...” He had barely pulled the device from his pocket to ring when it went off in his hand. He pressed the talk button and instantly he could hear screams coming from the speaker. “Audra? Audra! What's happening? Where are you?” Aside from the very human screams were the sounds of cawing and flapping. “Audra!”

Audra's hysterical voice came on the line, barely audible over the background noise but he made out the words 'park' and 'Clem', enough to galvanize him. “There's a playpark one street over. Try there.”

Phillip gunned the motor and the car shot off down the street, reaching the park in minutes. People were running down the street, regardless of the few cars, the high pitched screams of children piercing the air and sending tendrils of dread down Mitch's spine. Among the screams, he could hear a dog barking and looked to pinpoint the sound, finally spotting his ex-wife and his daughter, along with the Labrador, Henry, crouched under some playground equipment, sheltering from the crows
divebombed the parents and children running to avoid being pecked. One woman had a stroller and was trying to beat the birds away with her hand, but one bird got close enough to inflict a glancing head wound and the woman went down, leaving her child in the stroller exposed. Phillip was on the car phone, ringing the local fire department while Mitch and Jamie were out of the car but unable to do much while the birds continued their focused attack on anyone on the playground itself. To his horror, he saw Clem run out from her hiding place to where the stroller stood, one of the crows perched on the hood and looking ready to attack the baby inside. Clem screamed at the bird and waved her arms, making it fly away, giving her time to snatch up the bundle of child and blanket and run back to where Audra crouched, one hand holding on to Henry's collar. Soon the wail of sirens added to the cacophony and water jets suddenly shot out and targeted the birds both on the ground and in the air, driving them back until they all lifted in a black cloud and flew out of sight. Mitch had started running when the first jet swept over the playground, reaching Audra and Clem and bundling them, baby included, across the grass to where Jamie waited with the car door open. Once the family was safe in the back seat, Jamie walked around to the passenger front seat and got in. The baby was wailing at being jostled about, Phillip offering to take it from Mitch and hand it over to the authorities. Jamie went with him, giving Mitch time to reassure his family and himself that they were all safe and unharmed. Audra was moaning into her hands, Clem clutching her dog, her arms about the animal's neck as she cried into his fur. Mitch sat back against the upholstery and tried to recover from the adrenaline rush, his heart thumping and his hands shaking at the near disaster of the birds attacking the playground. Instead of the baby's mother, it could have been Clem laying on the grass bloodied, if not dead, his hand reaching out to stroke his daughter fair head, his voice telling them it was all right now, the danger was passed. Audra emerged from her fright and gathered Clem onto her lap, the two of them clutching each other, glad to be safe and unharmed. Mitch met his ex-wife's eyes and they exchanged a heartfelt look above their daughters head.

“Thank you,” Audra said, shakily.

“I'm glad I was able to help. It was our driver's quick thinking that brought the fire brigade. Using the water cannon was inspired,” Mitch told her, giving one of his crooked smiles, still hugely relieved that neither of them was hurt.

“You have a driver?” Audra asked. “And who was that young woman? Your PA?” She said it jokingly, but her gaze was sharp. She glanced down at his left hand and drew in a sharp breath when she saw the ring. Clem twisted in her mothers hold and stared at her father, her eyes red from crying.

“You saved us,” she stated quietly.

Mitch smiled at her and stroked a hand over her head. “You were the brave one, you rescued that baby! I was so frightened for you, I was sure the birds would get you, but you were too fast for them.” He beamed proudly at her and was rewarded with an answering smile.

“Is the mother dead?” Clem asked.

“I don't know, I hope not,” Mitch replied, looking up to see where Phillip and Jamie were. He saw them talking to a police officer, giving an account of what happened. “Look, stay here, I'll go get Jamie and Phillip and we'll get you home. I'm presuming you walked here?”

Audra nodded, still looking at him with a strange expression on her face. Mitch got out the car and went over to where Jamie stood.

“Did the mother make it?” he asked. Jamie shook her head.

“One of her neighbors has taken the child until the father can be contacted. It's so sad.”

Mitch put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “There wasn't anything we could do. Come on, we need to get Clem and Audra home.”

When they got back to the car, Jamie again got into the front passenger seat, leaving the back for Mitch. Phillip got behind the wheel and quickly did a u-turn to go back to Audra's house. Looking over at his ex-wife, he noted that Audra was staring at Jamie with a fixed look on her face, her lips pulled into a thin line. He knew that look and was glad that Clem was in the car, acting as a bulwark and preventing his ex from speaking what was obviously on her mind. Back at the house, those in the back seat all got out, Henry bounding up to the front door, Clem right
behind him. Mitch gathered up the leather case and prepared to follow, Audra turning and facing him.
“Aren't you going to ask her in as well?”
Mitch shook his head. “I'm here for Clementine. That's all that's important right now.”
Audra gave him a look then turned on her heel and headed to the door to unlock it. Mitch turned briefly to give Jamie a wave before following his ex-wife into the house, the door shutting behind him.
Jamie chewed on her bottom lip and waited for the front door to shut before turning back around to face forward.
“Where too, Mrs. Morgan?” Phillip asked, thumbing the ignition.
“Somewhere there aren't any birds,” Jamie replied, staring out of her side window and letting Phillip decide where they went.

Mitch sat at the dining table, Clementine beside him, the first dose of the cure for her Glazier's disease administered.
“You'll need to take one dose a week for the next five weeks, then once that's done, no more pills, no more injections, you'll be all better again,” Mitch told her, looking up to make sure Audra had heard his dosage instructions as well.
“Where did you get this, Mitch?” Audra asked. “I thought you'd stopped looking years ago.”
“I had, but only because there was nothing to find. This was a gift, a thank you for services rendered.” He rose to his feet to dispose of the used needle, his face twisted into a grimace. His ex-wife followed him into the kitchen, putting them beyond Clementine's hearing.
“There is a small price to pay for this.” He continued when he'd disposed of the syringe. “I think it would be a really good idea if you and Justin took Clem to Maine and stayed with his parents for a bit.”
“What's going on, Mitch?” He ignored her question. “You also need to keep a close eye on Henry. If he starts to show even the slightest hint of aggression or you notice anything wrong with his eyes, you get him in his crate and give me a call.”
“What is this all about?” Audra pushed.
“The bird attack today is part of something larger, something happening all around the world, not just here and not just in the States. If you notice anything at all, please, just call me..same goes for Justin.”
“Why would I do that?” Audra was now just being argumentative. He sighed. “Because I'm an animal expert, Audra remember?”
“No, I mean, why would I call you? About anything? I'm just curious.” She shrugged her shoulders, her eyes wide. “Is this your midlife crisis, Mitch? Where you start feeling guilty about all the crappy things you've done, like walk out on your wife and your baby girl? Is that what this is?”
Mitch frowned darkly. “No, it isn't.”
Audra got up into his face. “Buy a sports car. Go to a nightclub full of cheerleaders. Have a regular person's midlife crisis. But do not, for one second, think that I need you here.”
“You have it all wrong. I'm not here for you, I'm here for Clementine.”
“Why now? Why, after all this time, did you call and say you wanted to see her? Why now?”
“To do what I promised all those years ago. Find a cure for my daughter. I've done that now, can we just get this over with?” Mitch gritted out. “She has a chance to live a real life now. Once the course is complete she will be free of all symptoms.”
“And for that, and that alone I will thank you, but that doesn't change the facts. Who is that girl out there? She's young enough to be your daughter.”
Mitch snarled. “She's older than she looks, and what the fuck does it matter to you who I spend my time with. And if you're going to be mad at me for everything, might as well add this to your list of grievances. I repaid the money you spent on Henry's vet bills and before you spit it back at me, if you don't want it, put it into a fund for Clem. Don't deprive her of opportunities just because of your hatred for me.”
“Why don't you just fuck off, Mitch. Nobody wants you here.” They were so focused on each other they didn't see their daughter standing in the doorway, her face white, her fingers clenched in the fur of her dog beside her.

“Yes, they do. I want him here. So does Henry.”

Mitch scrunched his face up for a second before smoothing his expression and turning around.

“Hey, sweetheart, I'm sorry you had to hear all that.” He crouched down to her level, Henry instantly coming over to lick his face. “Hey, Henry. Good dog.”

Clementine approached slowly, not looking at her mother, but keeping her eyes on her father.

“Is Henry all better now? I heard he was in an accident,” Mitch asked.

“You said that on the phone. He's good now. Am I going to see you after today?”

“Yes,” said Mitch. “No,” said Audra at the same time. Mitch ignored her.

“I'm going to be back tomorrow, so until then, think about where you'd like to go, okay?”

“Can I bring Henry?”

“Sure, why not.” He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her soft cheek. “I'll see you tomorrow, kiddo.”

Clem graced him with a wide smile, then grabbed Henry’s collar and left the kitchen. Mitch rose up and turned to face his ex-wife.

“I'll be back around nine in the morning. Don't make this harder than it has to be.”

Audra gave him a sour look. “Don't bother bringing her around here. She's not welcome.”

“Never thought she would be.” Mitch turned to go. “Until tomorrow.”

Mitch walked the street to clear his head. He'd sent a message to Phillip and the car was on its way back to pick him up. He felt weary and wondered when his former good relationship with Audra had turned so sour. He knew it was hard for her, hard on the family for both parents to be out of work, adding to the difficulty of managing a sick child. He hoped that Justin would make Audra see sense and put the money he'd deposited in their account to good use. He also hoped they would follow his advice and take an extended holiday to Maine for the foreseeable future.

Despite them being close to finding the cure, it was going to get worse before it got better, and that was before all the clearing up was started and the getting back to normal could have a chance. He was so sunk in his thoughts he never heard the car pull up behind him, or his name being called. It was only when Jamie slipped her hand into his and gave it a tug did he come back to the present.

“Oh. Hey.”

“Hey, yourself. You were miles away. Ready to go back to the hotel?”

He stared down into her face and a slow smile lifted the corners of his mouth. “I am so glad to see you. Let's go back to the Sheraton, I have plans for that massive great jacuzzi in the ensuite.”

The following day's weather was a good as the last, Mitch feeling only a little nervous when he rocked up to the front door and rapped the knocker against the faded wood.

He heard barking and then the door was flung open and Clem stood there, grinning at him.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Mum's just making a picnic for us. Won't be a tick. I'll get Henry’s lead.”

Mitch hovered on the front porch, unwilling to venture inside. He saw Justin coming down the stairs and the two men nodded to each other.

“Hey, Mitch.” Justin held his hand out and Mitch shook it. “Thank you for the financial input. We really need that right now.”

“Happy to do my part. I bought the dog, so only right I should pay for its upkeep.”

“Well, thanks. Audra said you suggested going up to see my parents?”

“Yeah. The sooner the better. That bird attack is only a part of a larger problem. It's possible that things won't be so bad further north.”

“I hear it was pretty bad on the west coast.”

“Not where anyone really wants to be right now. A cure is being worked on as we speak, so hopefully it won't be that way forever,” Mitch told him. Clementine, with Henry in tow, clattered
down the hallway, pushed past Justin and ran down the front path to where the car was parked. Justin craned his neck to see into the car, but Mitch put him straight.

“Jamie stayed home, today. She felt I needed to concentrate on Clem.”

“Sensible woman.” Was Justin’s only comment before standing aside to let Audra hand over a backpack of picnic stuff.

“We’ll be back in a couple of hours,” Mitch announced, then turned away to walk down the path to the car, holding the door open for Clem and Henry to clamber excitedly aboard.

The park bench was in partial shade, Henry sitting below and panting happily after playing fetch for a few minutes.

“Nice park you got here. What makes it yours?”

“Well, Mom never really lets me out of the house by myself anymore. But when she does, I’m allowed to come here. With Henry,” Clementine told him, swinging her legs.

Mitch rummaged in one of his pockets. “Oh I, um brought you a present.” He handed her a slip.

“Cool. A piece of paper.” She tried to be polite but couldn’t help the look of confusion crossing her face. Mitch smiled. “Open it,” he prompted.

“You do know I’m still at the age where I would play with a doll, right? A doll would’ve been fine.” This time he let her have a full-fledged grin. “Duly noted. Just open it.”

Clem careful unfolded the thin flip of paper. “A parking ticket. You got me a parking ticket?”

“A really old parking ticket.” Mitch pointed to the faded date. “It’s ten years old, to be exact. I got that outside of Brigham Women’s Hospital on the day you were born.”

Clem looked at it a little more closely. “Okay.”

“When your mother’s waters broke, the neighbor had to take her to the hospital, because, uh, I was at a duck sanctuary in Westport and there was traffic, and I was late. So I had to park illegally, and I got that ticket. But I made it there on time.”

Clem lifted her head and looked up at him. “And you saved it?”

“I did. To...you know... commemorate me making it to the delivery room to see you arrive. Anyway, now it’s yours.”

Her expression lifted and she smiled broadly. “It's like a family heirloom.”

Mitch smiled softly and ran a gentle hand over her glossy head. “Yeah. Something like that.”

“With a ketchup stain.” Clem pointed out. Mitch peered at the dark patch.

“Oh, that's, um - coffee, I think. Anyway, let's eat.” He lifted up the backpack and Clem delved inside.

“I remember your mother's cooking's not so good. Have these been approved by the FDA?”

“ ‘Fraid not,” she said around a mouthful of something between the bread.

Mitch inspected his portion. “What is it?” Clem peered at the filling.

“That's either very old cheese or very new meat.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes, Mitch slipping the contents of his sandwich to Henry under the seat.

“Do you have a wife? Or a girlfriend?” Clem asked, reaching for another triangle of bread.

“Something like that.”

“You'd never met Justin before, right?”

“Not before this morning.” Mitch passed on a second sandwich and bit into an apple. “You like him?” he asked.

Clem nodded. “I do. A lot. He's awesome.” She looked up at him again. “But I don't call him 'Dad' or anything, in case you were wondering.”

Mitch paused in his chewing. “Okay. So, um, how you feeling?”

“Not bad. For a dead girl.” Clem replied with a one-shoulder shrug. Mitch nearly choked.

“You know, you really don't have to call yourself that anymore. The stuff I bought for your mum to give to you will sort all that out. You won't be dying anymore.”

“It's just what the other kids call me when we go to one of the support days, for those like me.”

“Well, you won't have to go to those support meetings ever again. And anyway, you'll be up in
Maine, so try to think of what you're going to do with all the time you have now.”
“Wow. I guess I can start to think about what I want to be when I grow up.”
Mitch felt a lump block his throat and he had to swallow hard to get any words out. “Yes, baby. You
can, you have your whole life in front of you.”

In the end, Mitch decided to extend the visit by another day, Jamie not objecting, happy that he was
making great strides with his daughter. She still insisted that it was too soon to introduce her to the
child, so Mitch took Clem and Henry to the river to give the dog a real outing, and to give Clem a
change of scene. This time they got takeout from a little bakery, the sandwiches stuffed with salad
and fresh meats, followed up by tiny cream cakes and juice. Clem had a great time running around in
short bursts with Henry at her heels before flopping down on the rug by her father, both of them
laughing at Henry, his long pink tongue lolling as he panted, giving the humans a doggy grin
amongst the slobber. All too soon it was time to say goodbye, and Mitch crouched down to give his
daughter a long hug, her head heavy on his shoulder.

“Will you come and visit us in Maine?” she asked.
Mitch nodded, his throat too tight to speak.
“I'll miss you,” Clem said solemnly, leaning in to give him a buss on the cheek.

“Hey, let's take a selfie.” Mitch held up his phone and Clem pressed close, her arms about his neck,
both of them smiling for the picture.

“Send me a copy?” she asked.
“Sure will. Now scoot.” He stood up and watched her enter the house, Henry at her side, Clem
turning and giving him a final wave before the door shut behind her. Mitch swallowed hard and spun
on his heel, swiping at his eyes as he walked along the sidewalk, his breath hitching. Phillip had
parked a little way ahead and he was glad of the moment to himself. By the time he climbed into the
back seat he was a little more composed.

“Time we went home,” he announced to the driver, Phillip nodding his understanding and tooling
the car away from the sidewalk to return to the hotel. Mitch stared out of the window blindly, his
thoughts turned inward, replaying some of the moments of the past day.

Their last night at the Sheraton was bittersweet. They had a meal in the downstairs restaurant then
brought the dessert up to the room for later. Mitch had been unusually quiet but Jamie had expected
that and when they were alone once more she took his hand and led him into the bedroom. There she
slowly divested him of his clothes, then took off her own before making love to him. She wasn't
trying to make him forget, just letting him know he was loved and allowing him to express some of
the emotions he was holding back, his climax leaving him shaking in her arms, his head once more
buried against her breast. Afterwards, they sat wrapped in the sheets, eating the desserts in bed,
talking about the day and what they hoped had been happening back at the Taskforce.

“Will they have the leopard by the time we get back?” Jamie asked, licking the last of the cream off
her spoon.

“Probably not. It's not like there's a leopard specialty shop down the road. I imagine we'll see the
beast after the weekend, then Abigail can work her magic and get the cure underway.”

“You know she has the hots for you?” Jamie teased. Mitch scowled.
“I think she's weird and seriously creepy. But that said, she's as smart, if not smarter than me.”

“Wow. I don't know much about her other than she's part of Jackson's team. Do you know where
she came from?” Jamie asked.
“No. I assumed she was recruited to join the team by Chloe. As for her qualifications, I'll have to
look her up and see what she's got on file.”
Jamie put her plate on the bedside table and dropped the sheet around her body. “Enough shop talk,
mister.” She kissed him, licking his lips to clean the chocolate off them. “Time to work off those
calories.”

They were packed and on the road before dawn the next day, the seven-hour trip back to D.C an
unavoidable endurance with flights still grounded. With all the activity the night before, both slept for
several hours, Phillip not similarly affected, smiling at his charges reflected in the rearview mirror as he drove the interstate south.

Mitch was jolted awake when the car had to stop suddenly.
“What’s happening?” he asked, Phillip meeting his eyes in the mirror.
“Some sort of incident up ahead. Traffic is backed up. I can see flashing lights, so the emergency guys are on site as well as the police.”
Mitch stared out the side windows. “Where are we?”
“About halfway to D.C. Milford. Outskirts of Bridgeport, Connecticut.”
“Damn, we've slept for three hours!” Mitch exclaimed, checking his watch. Jamie was still snuggled up next to him and he jostled her a little to wake her up. “Hey, sweetheart, rise and shine.”
“Are we back in D.C already?” her sleepy inquiry made him chuckle.
“Nope. Bridgeport. Something’s holding up traffic.”
Jamie suddenly sat up, pushing her hair to get it out of her face. “Do we know what it is?”
Mitch pulled back his arm that had been around her shoulders. “No idea as yet. It's unlikely we'd be stuck by the same incident twice.” He caught Phillip's eye and explained.
“When we had to leave L.A we were stuck in a traffic jam because a plane had come down on the northbound lane and we ended up abandoning our car and walking to get past it.”
Phillip nodded in understanding. “If this doesn't start moving, I'll simply turn the car around and find an alternative route. There are plenty of options before we'll be reduced to walking,” He assured them.
Jamie stared out at the treelined roadway, then twisted to peer out the back window at the cars behind them, three abreast across the interstate. “Um...you might have to revise that u-turn. We're packed in pretty tight here.”
“Let's hope the traffic gets moving soon, then.”
They sat and waited for another half hour but nothing was moving. In the end, Phillip opted to go see what was holding things up, leaving his charges with strict instructions not to leave the vehicle until he returned.
Jamie sat forward, watching Phillip's tall figure move down the aisle of cars and trucks until he was lost to sight. Slumping back into the thick padding she stared out of the side window, meeting the eyes of a small child in the next car over, her mouth lifting into a smile, the child waving until someone called to get its attention and it turned away.
Mitch was writing up some notes in his journal. There was no signal available for him to use either his phone or the tablet, so he employed longhand to put down some thoughts he was having on how to distribute the cure when it was finally available.
“Mitch?” Jamie's low question drew his attention up from the page. Jamie was sitting forward again, eyes fixed on the row of cars in front of them.
“What is it?”
“I think something is happening...”
“What...?” He started to ask only to have the car in front suddenly start reversing, quickly bumping into them and shunting them backward. “What the hell?!”
More cars were doing the same, reversing as far as they could before trying to get out of the stream of traffic, panic making them uncaring of who they hit or how much damage they caused. Horns started blaring, the air filling with the screech and crunch of tires and crashes and over it all a steady drumming sound that seemed to come from every direction at once.
“Phillip!” Jamie shouted, seeing their driver running towards them, vaulting over car bonnets and dodging people. He reached their car and yanked the driver's door open and threw himself inside.
“GET DOWN!” he shouted, seconds before a hail of bullets sprayed over the cars, hitting some, bouncing off others. People started screaming and Mitch pushed Jamie to the floor of the car, covering her with his own body. Phillip was hunched down in the driver's seat but was already getting the car moving, backing forcibly into the vehicle behind to give him room to turn. More bullets pinged off the windshield and ricocheting off the road surface. The car lurched forward and
shunted the car in front several feet, Phillip jerking the car into reverse to back up, just as quickly spinning the steering wheel to peel them out of the queue onto the shoulder of the highway. Everywhere was chaos, people running in all directions the drumming sound becoming deafening as Phillip drove down the shoulder, dodging those fleeing, sometimes running onto the grass edging and bouncing over branches and rocks. Mitch and Jamie were being flung back and forth, unsecured while the car raced away as fast as the terrain would allow. When it became less hectic, Mitch hauled Jamie onto the seat and they buckled in, hanging on to the straps to keep upright. Jamie twisted around to stare out the back window, seeing more cars join the stream leaving the area any way they could. She turned back and met Phillip's flickered glance in the rearview mirror. The man looked grim, steering the car around stalled trucks and gawping spectators, most of them not understanding why anyone was driving in the wrong direction. She twisted around again and saw in the now far distance that a cloud of dust or smoke had risen above the jammed traffic, an explosion making her gasp as one vehicle jumped into the air only to crash down on another, the distant figures of people scattering before the devastation.

“Oh, God. What is doing that?”
“A massive stampede of animals,” Phillip told them, his voice steady but his knuckles white on the steering wheel.
“What species of animal?” Mitch asked.
“Moose, Elk, Roe deer, cattle...if it had hooves, it was part of the biggest stampede of animals I've ever seen or heard about.”
“Who was shooting?” Jamie asked, her fingers entwined with Mitch's.
“No one, everyone, whoever had a gun was firing at the oncoming animals...there were a lot of casualties...” Phillip swallowed. “When I got up to the front where the police were, you could look down the interstate and there were animals as far as you could see, hundreds of them, possibly thousands. It was nuts! It was like the strangest standoff. They were just standing there, watching, sometimes stamping a hoof, but not moving, it was eerie.” He paused in his narrative, the queue of cars finally coming to an end and giving them a clear road ahead. He kept the car half on the shoulder to avoid any oncoming traffic. Several vehicles behind them didn't bother with that nicety, but floored it and overtook them, accelerating down the empty road, several others doing the same.
“That's not going to have a good outcome,” Mitch muttered, and his words were borne out with horrific inevitability when they came upon an accident, two cars had collided head-on with no survivors in either vehicle. They were coming up to a junction and Phillip swung the car across the three lanes to go down the on-ramp and get them off the interstate. Out of immediate danger from the animals and a potential accident, Phillip drew the car over to the side and parked, getting out of the car himself and going to stand with his back to the car, hands on his hips. Mitch and Jamie unbuckled and climbed out of the back seat, the road empty of traffic for the time being. Both needed a bathroom break so they advised Phillip and set off a little way into the trees lining both sides of the road. They took care of their business and hurried back to the car, Phillip leaning against it, his arms folded over his chest.
“You okay?” Mitch asked, noting the young man looked unusually grim.
“We have a problem. One of the bullets got through the grill and punctured the radiator.”
“Damn. Can we do a temporary fix?”
“Already done, but very temporary. Hopefully enough to get us to a garage or gas station.”
Mitch looked down both stretches of the road seeing nothing in either direction. “Do we know where we are, I mean exactly?”
Phillip nodded. “We're in luck. If we go back the way we've come, we'll be slap bang in the middle of a light industrial area and we should find all we need there.” The younger man drew in a breath. “It means recrossing over the interstate.”
“Do what you have to do. We trust your judgment,” Mitch told him.

Whatever was happening further south of the intersection, it hadn't reached there when they crossed over to the other side and drove as fast as their driver was prepared to push the engine. They reached
the industrial area and quickly found a repair shop to help with the damage. The mechanic couldn't replace the radiator, but he was able to repair it and they were only delayed a further hour before they were back on the road and choosing an alternative route to get them to D.C.

It was dark and very late when they rolled through the suburbs of Washington, down Connecticut Avenue where they passed the university before heading for their apartment block. In the basement garage, they bid Phillip goodnight as he would be taking the car back to the carpool to be exchanged for another before calling it a night. Mitch and Jamie were never so glad to see their apartment door, practically falling into the entranceway before shutting the door behind them. With dragging feet they trudged into the bedroom and started shedding luggage, shoes, and clothes, in that order.

“I'm so tired my eyes won't stay open,” Jamie slurred, laying on top of the covers in just her underwear. Mitch soon joined her, flopping face down on the bed, still wearing his boxers and one sock, the removal of that small article of clothing defeating him.

“I'm just going to lay here for awhile, wake me in a week or so.” Jamie gave him a small grunt in lieu of a reply, both of them falling asleep in the space of seconds.

A door slid quietly open on well-oiled rollers. In the darkness of the apartment, a black-clad figure slipped from the storage space and trod carefully around the shadow-shrouded furniture towards the bedroom, the door already open for the intruder to enter and stand at the end of the bed. Mitch was still laying on his face, his arm flung out to make contact with the back of the woman sleeping beside him. He was snoring softly, completely relaxed and deeply asleep. The figure withdrew something from their pocket and approached the bed. Leaning over Mitch they sprayed something very close to his face, so close he breathed it in at once, his breathing not changing but the intruder knowing it would keep him under much longer than normal. Then they approached the other side of the bed to where Jamie faced away from Mitch. Putting the first aerosol away, the figure pulled out another one and again sprayed this near to the face of the real target of the attack. This time it took several puffs of the aerosol to be inhaled before the black-clad figure drew away from the bed and stepped back on silent feet. Neither of its victims had stirred, the shadowy figure leaving the bedroom, its work done. Using the cloned pass card the intruder walked out of the apartment, a device in their hand scrambling any surveillance in the hallway, as it had in the room it had just left. With insulting ease the genderless figure used the pass key to access the emergency stairwell and left the building with no one any the wiser. When the security team arrived on the floor seconds later to investigate the camera fault there was nothing to see and no one to find.

Mitch awoke feeling well rested and a feeling of contentment warming him. His feelings of guilt and helplessness that he'd carried around for years about his daughter and her illness were gone. Clem was going to get better, she was going to live and have a life well beyond her previous prognosis, that alone was a reason to celebrate. Their connection as father and daughter was now more than just the promise of a phone call, it was a real, emotional tie that he could build upon in the future. And then there was Jamie, unashamedly the love of his life, as cliché as that sounded, and the reason everything else was looking so rosy. He reached out and touched the peachy skin of her back, tracing his fingers down her spine, pausing to mold and stroke the warm flesh.

“Jamie?” he called to her softly, in case she was still asleep, his hand coming to rest on her waist, curling around the soft contours and tugging to roll her towards him. At first, she seemed to resist him, her body only rocking a little as he exerted more force, then she rolled onto her back and he looked up into her face.

“Jamie?” In horror he stared at her, his eye registering the blood coming from her nose, some of it smeared over her cheeks and flaking, the bruised mottling under her skin, the lax mouth and half-open eyes. He reared back and scrambled off the bed, grabbing his glasses first, the phone second. The switchboard immediately picked up.

“What is your emergency, Dr. Morgan?”

“It's Jamie...we need an ambulance, medics...oh, God, I don't know what it is, but she's...she's...” he
started to hyperventilate. “We have our medical team on their way up to your suite right now, try and stay calm. Is she breathing?”
Mitch held the screen of the phone to her mouth and saw the faintest fog of moisture mist the surface. “ Barely.”
“How is her heartbeat, her pulse?” the operator asked. Mitch put the phone down and held onto Jamie's wrist, panicking when he felt nothing, then tried again and felt a small beat under her skin. “ Barely there and very slow.”
“Dr. Morgan, the medical team is at your door. Please go and let them in.” Mitch dropped the phone and ran from the bedroom to the front door, flinging it open to allow the small team of three medics to enter. “The bedroom!” he told them, pointing the way. By the time he got back there the paramedics were in full recovery mode, one checking vitals and calling out the results while another put an oxygen mask on Jamie's face, speedily inserted a needle in her arm and a clip on her finger to measure oxygenation of her blood.
Mitch watched it all from the bedroom doorway, one hand on his hip, the other running repeatedly through his hair, his own heartbeat racing.
“How long has she been like this?” one of the medics asked.
“I don't know. I just woke up and found her like this. She was fine last night when we went to bed, we were tired, sure, but not sick. I'm not sick. What the hell is this?” He looked at the clock on the bedside table, astonished to see it was nearly midday.
“Can you tell me if anything unusual happened yesterday? Did Jamie have anything different to eat from you, anything to drink that might have been suspect? Did you encounter any insects yesterday that could have caused this?”
“No, no and no. We'd just driven down from Boston. As far as I know, we ate and drank the same stuff, our driver would be able to confirm this.”
“Dr. Morgan? Why don't you go and get dressed? We'll be taking Jamie to Bethesda, and I'm sure you'll want to come with us...”
“Yeah, sure...I'll get dressed.”
“Does Jamie take any medication?”
“No.”
“Okay.”
Mitch backed out of the bedroom into the walk in and hastily grabbed a change of clothes, dressing in record time. Grabbing his satchel, he tucked his mobile into it along with his passkey, then re-entered the bedroom to see the medics loading Jamie, now wrapped in a blanket, onto a gurney to take her away.
He happened to glance at the bedside table and saw her ring sitting there, which the medics had taken off as a matter of routine. Snatching it up he put it in his pocket and followed the medics out of the room.

Jo picked up the phone in Jamie's office and answered it breezily. What she heard on the other end made her face fall and her brow crease in worry. Mitch was talking, his voice gravelly and slow.
“Jo, can you let Jackson know what's happened? I won't be leaving her until I know she's on the mend, so don't expect to see me anytime soon.”
“Are you okay?” Jo asked. She heard Mitch sigh deeply.
“I'm fine. They have her in isolation. They don't know what it is, but she's stabilized at least and she's hanging in there. That's the best I can tell you right now.”
“I'm so sorry. I'll inform Jackson and get him to call you with what's been happening in your absence. Give my best wishes to Jamie if she...er...when she wakes up.”
“I'll do that. I'll be in touch.” Mitch hung up and Jo stared at the phone for a heartbeat before getting up to go find Jackson Oz and bring him up to date.

Jackson was in the shared office with his team, all of them looking up when Jo knocked and entered. “Mitch just called. Jamie has been taken ill. He asked me to tell you he won't be back here until she's
better, or they know what she's suffering from.”
“Where are they?” Chloe asked.
“Bethesda, at the naval hospital. She's in isolation, apparently, but Mitch says he's fine, so it's a
mystery at the moment what is making her sick.”
“I thought they were both in Boston?” Abe mentioned. “Not due back until tomorrow at the earliest.”
Jo nodded. “That was the plan. I really don't know any more than that.”
Abby Westbrooke pushed past the airman and entered the room. “Why all the long faces?”
“Jamie is sick,” Jackson told her. “Mitch is with her a Bethesda.”
“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that. Is it serious?” Abby asked.
“We don’t know,” Jo answered her. Abby shrugged and sat down, a strange expression on her face.
Jo saw it and a shiver of cold slid down her spine. “I’ll keep you guys up to date if I hear anything.”
“Thanks, Jo. Appreciate that,” said Jackson, giving her a tight smile before Jo left the room, the
group instantly talking among themselves as the door closed behind her.

Jackson turned to Abigail. “Will it make any difference if Mitch is not here?”
“Fortunately we have everything in hand. The leopard arrives tomorrow and then the real work will
begin with formulating and testing, then sorting out the distribution.”
Jackson nodded, his expression thoughtful. “Any ideas about the whole distribution issue?”
Abby grinned. “Lots of ideas, not so many workable ones. Insects are one way, birds are another.
Airborne distribution seems the likely front-runner. Depending on how hard or easy it is to
synthesize the cure in bulk, we may even be able to get away with a gas drop as a vector.”
Chloe spoke up. “Is this the consensus of all the Taskforce?”
Abby shrugged. “Some, not all. We'll be better able to make a decision when we know how stable
the formula is. It could be a simple matter of spraying an aerosol at an affected animal and hey presto
– all cured.”
“Well, keep us posted. With Mitch out of the picture, I guess we'll act as proxy until he's back.”
Jackson got up. “Back to work, people. The sooner we crack this the better for everyone.”

Abby left the meeting feeling euphoric, hugging her folder tight against her chest, unable to stop the
wide grin pulling her lips apart. Even the mental image of Mitch spending all his time at Jamie's
bedside didn't mar her happiness. Soon the silly bint would be dead and Mitch all her's to console.

Mitch stared hollowed eyed through the window at Jamie, her body slight under the blanket covering
her. The mottling under her skin had spread, covering her neck and chest and progressing down her
torso, the same on her back. She was now on life support, her breathing compromised, several
sensors on her head to monitor brain activity, her eyes taped shut. The medical staff, wearing full
isolation suits, were working in the room on her blood tests, skin scrapings and an assortment of
body fluids and samples, none of them giving up their secrets as to what was the cause of her illness.
Mitch had already gone through a raft of tests but nothing had shown up, and he'd displayed none of
the symptoms, so he'd been cleared for the time being. The car they'd used, the apartment, all were
being forensically tested for any hint of what might have happened, but so far no one was making
any guesses or even theories of what she was suffering from. The only theory that coincided with her
symptoms was that she'd inhaled something at some time, possibly bacterial or viral, but really no
one had a clue.

Had he regained his daughter only to lose the love of his life? The thought roiled and twisted through
his brain, his heart breaking with every minute that passed. Someone had set up a chair against the
wall and he dragged himself over to it, almost falling into the plastic seat, his head falling forward
into his hands, propped on his knees. He stayed hunched over like that for a long time, then an alarm
sounded and his head jerked up. It was coming from her room. He staggered to his feet, stiff from
sitting so long, his hands coming up to brace him against the glass. Inside the room, the medics were
fussing over the bed, Jamie hidden from him. He stared at the monitor showing her vital signs, the
one for her heart looking erratic, the white line going flat even as he watched.
“NO!” he lifted his hands and brought them to slap hard against the thick glass. “JAMIE!”
The team inside were working feverishly to bring her back, a defibrillator brought into to play, her body arching upwards with each heavy charge, Mitch's sight blurring with each unsuccessful attempt until he couldn't bear to watch any longer and sank to the floor, his face contorted, tears falling unheeded. “Jamie...”
Chapter Summary

Mitch tries some slight of hand, as for Jamie.....

Jo looked up from the phone and almost dropped it. “Mitch?” He looked right through her and she shivered. He walked on past her desk, not stopping and not speaking, Jo finishing her call hurriedly and setting off after him. Others saw him and did the same until a trail of people followed in his wake, no one speaking but inferring from his presence that something terrible had happened. His expression was enough but added to that was his unshaven state, rumpled clothes and fisted hands so it didn't take a genius to figure out something traumatic had taken place. Like the Pied Piper he led everyone to the conference room, those not seeing him, speedily informed by phone of his appearance. The room quickly filled, Jackson and Abe some of the last to appear. Mitch remaining silent until the last person had trickled into the room, their attention all fixed on him. He lifted his chin and stared around the room, meeting each pair of eyes and noting those that looked away from the stark grief etched deeply into his face.

“I didn't expect to be back here today, in fact for quite a few days. I was expecting to be spending my time beside the woman I so recently bonded with.” He held up his left hand to show his ring. Beside it, on his little finger, another ring now sat. “Instead I have to tell you that I will never again be able to stand, sit or sleep beside that woman. She was murdered by someone, as yet unknown, while she slept in our bed, only two nights ago.” He paused as a shocked murmur went around the room. Mitch bent his head, staring down at the table top while he gathered himself. “Someone, and I will find out who, murdered my Jamie for reasons as yet unclear, but I will find out. The killer should have killed me at the same time because I will hunt them down.” He looked up again, his dark eyes blazing, once more meeting each pair of eyes in the room. “I won't be doing the hunting alone. As we speak, a search is taking place of all the laboratories and offices being used by members of the Taskforce. No one will be exempt from the search, no belonging, no lockers and no desks or workstations will be ignored.” He waited for another round of shocked sounds and whispered comments. “Additionally, no one will leave the building until they have been searched. Somewhere is the proof that will point to the killer. I don't need your consent or your cooperation, I have the full backing of the government agency that funds all this, as well as the FBI and military, and they will be quite ruthless in finding who did this.” He held up a hand when the room filled with agitated voices, all clamoring to be heard. “I have no interest in hearing your complaints or your alibis, you can tell them all to these gentlemen that I turn this meeting over too.”

Outside, he walked the short distance to his office and entered, shutting the door firmly behind him and dropping the blinds so no-one could see in. Instead of making for his chair behind the desk, he headed for the long couch, kicking off his shoes and shucking his jacket before laying down, his rumpled jacket now his pillow. With his back to the room, he lay there, eyes closed and let exhaustion suck him under, his last fervent wish that he didn't dream.

Abigail sat down in a chair and chewed on a nail. It would appear she'd done her job too well and had now placed herself in jeopardy of being found out before the corpse was cold. All around her was chaos, the room filled with angry and anxious voices disclaiming their innocence and
denouncing the right of the agents to search anything or anyone. All were ordered to quiet down and submit or be taken forcibly and interrogated. If they hadn't done anything, there was nothing to worry about. The agents knew what they were looking for, and would take no longer than necessary to achieve their goal of searching the premises and everyone in it. If everyone cooperated, then it would all be over in a matter of hours, so it behooved them to sit down and listen to instructions. Before long people were being sorted into different groups and taken to other rooms to be questioned. As the room emptied, Abigail was losing her nerve, her thoughts chasing each other around like a rat on a wheel, all her plans looking to backfire if she couldn't access her own files and hide the evidence that pointed to her involvement.

Soon she was one of only a few people left to be assigned to an agent. The door was still being guarded by another agent, while the other was taking names to tally against a list, hers assuredly on it. She stood up, deciding to brazen it out, and approached the agent, giving her name and where she worked, then waiting while the last few did the same, then the whole group was taken out of the conference room and along the hallway.

“I need to use the bathroom,” Abigail called out, the string of people stopping when the agent held up his hand. Another woman and a man in the group also stated they needed the bathroom, lending a useful cover to her own attempt to escape. The agent, backed up by the one guarding the door, indicated for the few needing the facilities to go ahead, the group loitering in front of the bathrooms while the men and women split to each of the doors. The other woman quickly entered one of the stalls, leaving Abby alone. She immediately went to the window but it was shut tight with no visible means to open apart from smashing. She turned on a tap to pretend she was doing something and used the time to search for an alternative escape. A grating in the ceiling into the ducting appeared to be the only other avenue and she judged that by standing on the sink she could just about reach it. The other woman was done, the sound of a flush sending Abby to the sink to splash water around.

When the other woman appeared, Abby ducked into one of the cubicles. When she heard the door to the toilet block shut, she left the stall and climbed onto the sink, reaching up to remove the ceiling panel, pushing it inwards, into the duct itself. That done, she jumped and managed to grab a hold either side of the opening, grunting as she hauled herself up into the cavity and sliding the ceiling tile back into place. Panting from her exertions, she carefully and quickly shuffled on hands and knees in the opposite direction of the other bathroom, losing herself in the duct work as speedily as she could.

The fugitive only had a few minutes head start. She knew the FBI would look to seal off any exits, but she wasn't heading for an exit, she was heading towards her lab and her laptop.

Jackson and Abe were watching the agent conversing on his radio near the door. They had been waiting their turn to be questioned when the radio had squawked on the agent's shoulder of his jacket. The man immediately turned away and spoke into the mike, keeping as much distance between himself and the group of scientists and civilians as possible.

“What do you think is going on?” Abe asked quietly, crossing his arms.

“Possibly whoever they're looking for has tried to escape?” Jackson shook his head. “I have no idea. I only know it wasn't me or anyone on my team.”

“To murder the girl, Jamie, is a bit extreme given she wasn't even one of the scientist working on the cure.”

“Maybe someone was after Mitch and made a mistake,” Chloe added her input.

“Without knowing what she died from or how, it's impossible to make a viable hypothesis,” one of the women scientists dropped into the conversation.

“Maybe it's not to do with this at all. She made several strong allegations against Reiden Global during her journalistic career. Could be a kickback from that,” one of the male scientists offered. The three friends turned to stare at the man who shrugged and turned away.

“Mitch didn't look like he was taking it well,” Jackson said. Chloe looked at him askance.

“Is that any wonder? Mon Dieu, he'd just lost the love of his life. I'm surprised he managed to even
make it in here. The man looked devastated.

“He didn’t look well,” Abe agreed. “He must have pulled some major strings to have this case investigated to such a high level.”

“They wouldn't have made him the leader of the Taskforce if they didn't believe he'd get the job done,” Chloe observed. “Without knowing anything, less than we did, he still managed to get as close, in fact, closer than anyone else to finding a cure, before the Mother cell was even known.” She looked around the room at the people gathered. “Which makes him a pretty important man, but enough to warrant an FBI investigation into his murdered bondswoman?”

“Obviously they think so unless this is less about Jamie, and more to do with a mole in the Taskforce?” Jackson suggested.

“A leak?” Abe questioned. “You think they were trying to sabotage the cure! Seems a strange target if they were.”

“Not so strange if their plan was to make Mitch unusable through grief. You can hardly expect a deeply grieving man to put in his best work,” Jackson retorted. “Even if he is a genius.”

“Even so,” Abe contested. “Mitch is now only a part of the cure, not everything is dependent on him anymore.”

“Which brings us back to why kill the girl?” said Jackson.

“Jealousy?” Chloe suggested. “It's a motivation in a great many murder cases.”

Jackson considered what she said. “All this because someone has the hots for Mitch? Seems a bit far-fetched. Plus, he said it happened while they were sleeping, at night, in the most secure apartment building possible.”

Chloe suddenly spoke. “That is why they think it is one of us. Who would know where they were staying, or how to get into the building or even their apartment number? To carry off such a thing would need insider knowledge. Nobody, unless they have a need to know, would be privy to that information, so it's someone who had access and a way to find out, then carry out the murder without being seen by security. Whoever did this is very, very clever and highly motivated.”

At last, the agent had finished his conversation over the radio and turned back to face the room, drawing everyone's attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen. We will need to lock you in this room for the next half hour until a situation has been resolved. Any questions you have will be answered at the end of that period.” Not waiting for any replies to his extraordinary statement, the agent whisked himself out of the room, locking the door behind him. Abe immediately went over to check and found the door secure.

“Dammit.”

“At least that confirms it wasn't one of us,” said Jackson.

Abby cursed quietly to herself as she peered down into the lab, noting the agents still in the room and obviously guarding the workstations, her's included. They would know by now who was in the ductwork and if she didn't appear at any of the exit points in due course, that she was still in the ductwork. Then it wouldn't take a great leap of logic to narrow down where she'd be. Of course, if they searched her locker they'd find the outfit she'd worn at the apartment block, further incriminating her, as well as the signal scrambler and the aerosols. That alone would be evidence enough, but she wanted her laptop and notes. They held the real reasons, the motive behind her murdering the stupid bitch. They also held her 'get-out-of-jail' card. The murder was of little significance when ranged alongside her superior intelligence and what she could offer to anyone who held her. Abby was supremely confident that whatever happened, she wouldn't spend more than a token amount of time behind bars, she was simply too valuable an asset. Still, there were things on that laptop that weren't for public consumption. She had to get it.

Mitch awoke with a start, his sleep interrupted by something he couldn't at first put his finger on, then he rolled over and met the gaze of the man he'd first met all those months ago at the university – the man in the very nice black suit who had interrogated Jamie.

“Is it done?” Mitch asked, his voice hoarse.
In as much as she gave herself away by trying to escape.

Who was it?

Abigail Westbrooke, one of Jackson's team.

Mitch nodded as if the answer wasn't a surprise to him. The weapon she used?

Already on its way to the hospital for examination.

Mitch sat up, resting his elbows on his knees to rub his eyes with the heels of his hands. The agent looked at him with a gleam of admiration in his eyes.

You knew who it was, didn't you?

Once they discovered the poison used, it was a simple matter of deduction. The pool of suspects was pretty small, and with the motivation to do it, even smaller,” Mitch waved his hand around to encompass the building. “This was just to flush them out of their hole.”

The man nodded. “Do you want to see her or talk to her?”

You have her in custody? Mitch asked, looking up at the agent.

She tried to get to her workstation, probably to get her laptop to erase evidence, but we'd already lifted that and replaced it with another. The trap worked perfectly, so yes – she is most assuredly in custody.”

Mitch got to his feet. “Then you don't need me here. You know where I'll be if you want me for anything further.”

“We can handle things from here on. We've already released the rest of the scientists and office staff, so things will be back to normal by the end of the day.”

Mitch let out a bark of laughter. “What the fuck is normal, any more? I wish you'd let me in on the secret because I'm fucked if I know!”

The agent gave him a thin smile. “We'll keep in touch with any further developments, Dr. Morgan. Good luck.”

Mitch watched the man leave, closing the door behind him, then pulled out his phone and punched in the number. “Phillip? Bring the car around, I'm ready to leave.”

In the end, he'd asked Phillip to divert to the apartment so he could shower and change his clothes before returning to the hospital. He also picked up a huge bunch of flowers to brighten up the hospital room on his way there. Now he sat in a relatively comfortable chair beside a bed where a host of medical machinery kept watch over the patient with assiduous care. On the bedside table, his bouquet sat in a vase, the one spot of color in the uniformly pale palette used to decorate the room. The door to the room opened and he looked up to meet the eyes of the one duty nurse, who smiled back at him.

That's a beautiful bouquet, Dr. Morgan,” she remarked, picking up the chart from the end of the bed and pulling out a pen ready to take readings.

“I thought the room could do with a bit of color.” He watched the nurse go about her checking of vital functions, inputs and outputs, even lifting the limp hand laying on the covers to check the pulse. “Everything still stable?” he asked, as he did everytime the nursing staff went through the same routine.

“No significant changes, Dr. Morgan, but that's a positive in this case, not a negative. If things remain unchanged for the next twelve hours, we can hope for an improvement soon.” The nurse replaced the reams of charts back at the end of the bed, the pen disappearing into a pocket. “I'll be back shortly to empty her bag. Can I get you anything?”

Mitch shook his head, giving the woman a thin smile. “I'm fine.”

Giving Mitch a confident smile, the nurse left the room. He pulled his chair closer to the bed and leaned forward, taking possession of the only part of her that didn't have a tube or monitor attached to it – her right hand. He lifted it carefully as if it was made of spun glass, bending his head to kiss the lax fingers, the skin soft and warm, before holding it between his own, resting on the bed cover. The awful mottling had largely receded once the antidote had started to reverse the effects of the poison – a modified snake venom administered via a spray that had been inhaled to cause maximum exposure in the shortest possible time. It had taken a swab
around her mouth to identify the substance and mode of delivery, and the administration of an antivenom that actually pulled her back from the brink of death. Even now she was still on basic life support, in an induced coma and a cocktail of medication to keep her organs from failing. The nursing staff was unfailingly optimistic but reality was a harsh mistress and the odds were still fifty-fifty.

Mitch would take what he could get. Her heart was still beating, her lungs still breathing and her brain still thinking. Anything more was icing on the cake. The pantomime carried out at the Taskforce had been necessary, because whichever way you looked at it, someone had tried to murder Jamie. Under normal circumstances, he would have expected him to have been the target, but when it became evident that she had been the sole victim of the attack, it wasn’t necessary to be a rocket scientist to narrow down motives and opportunities. An agent of Reiden Global had been an early suspect given Jamie’s past association with the corporation, but after it was more closely examined, it was dismissed, the real culprit more likely closer to home. From then on it was agreed to play out a ruse to weed out the offender, a plan that ran like clockwork and trapped the murderer neatly.

Now he just wanted his love to wake up. Any other demand on his time was irrelevant until that happened.

Abigail stared sullenly at the bars surrounding her on all sides. The cage was set inside a room big enough to allow a substantial space between the bars and the walls. In the cage were a bed, a desk and chair and a commode. There was nowhere to hide, no privacy and presumably twenty-four-hour surveillance. Talk about overkill.

A door in the gray expanse, that was her view, opened and admitted a guard, then a man in a black suit. How cliché? She thought. The man approached carrying a lightweight metal chair and positioned it just beyond arms reach of the bars.

“Miss Westbrooke.”

“I hope they’ve sent me a smart one, I’m tired of dealing with the help.” She drew up her chair to exactly the same distance as he was from her bars on the inside. “What scintillating questions are you going to ask me today?”

“Why attempt to murder Jamie Morgan?”

“I wanted Mitch Morgan...wait, attempted?”

“Jamie Morgan isn’t dead. You tried to poison her with an aerosol laced with snake venom. A particularly nasty strain that had been modified. Lucky for you, she survived.”

Abby snarled at the man. “Lucky! This...” she indicated the cage. “Doesn't strike me as particularly lucky.”

“I don't know. If you'd managed to kill her outright, it wouldn't have taken Dr. Morgan very long to find you and rip you apart. He didn't strike me as a very forgiving man, not when it came to his newly minted bondswoman. He still might.”

Abby laughed. “Hah. I know my own worth. I wouldn't be here if you didn't have some other purpose for me than rotting in jail for the next fifteen to twenty.”

The man smiled unpleasantly. “We don’t jail woman, Miss Westbrooke, certainly not young and passingly attractive ones, you should know that. We have an entirely different use for someone like you, regardless of your intellect. It doesn't take brains to lie on your back and spread your legs. Even less to remain chained to a chair to do menial tasks to earn your keep.”

Abigail stood up and kicked her chair back. “You wouldn’t dare. I have a keeper who would have something to say about that.”

The man nodded. “Yes, you do. Dr. Robert Oz, your father. We have yet to track him down, but how do you think he'll feel when he finds his son if working to save the world, and you are working to bring it down, hmmmm?”

“He knows what I'm worth to science, he'll get me out of this.” Abby tossed her head, sure of herself.

The man smiled his infuriating smile again. “That's always assuming he knows where to find you.
There are many ways to make someone disappear in our society. Not least a chemical lobotomy and incarceration in a brothel.”

Abby narrowed her eyes at him. “But you would have done that already, rather than set all this up at the government's expense. You want to keep me, or at least what I have up here.” She tapped her head. “I'm of more value to you alive and sane.”

“True, but the matter of how to control you becomes a blindingly obvious problem. We'd like to keep the scientific genius, we just don't want to keep the psychotic murderer. You see our dilemma.” Abigail grinned. “All too clearly. Can I make a suggestion?”

The man nodded his agreement. Military want a weaponized hybrid to go into battle instead of a man? I can make that for you. Want to use a hybrid bird that can fly into enemy territory without raising a hint of suspicion, spy and relay back intel, or just act as a one bird suicide bomber? I can make that happen. We've already seen the effects this mutation is having on some animals. They are growing armor, communicating over great distances, organizing themselves, banding together as different species, predator and prey with the same motivation. I can change them into whatever sick and twisted weapon you can think of.”

“And that is the only reason we didn't hand you over the Dr. Morgan. We've seen what you had on your laptop. We've studied the science and been told it is possible, even probable if nature is allowed to take its course, but that would take time.”

“I can have a working prototype grown and programmed in three months,” she boasted, her eyes gleaming behind her glasses.

“But you still can't have Mitch Morgan. Give up your obsession and I think we can work out a mutually agreeable arrangement.” He sat back in his chair, completely relaxed, hands in his lap, one leg crossed over the other.

Abby stared at him, pacing a few times in front of the bars before righting her fallen chair and sitting down on it. “If she lives, I'll give him up. If she doesn't, I expect him gift wrapped and gagged in my bed.”

“We'll leave that discussion point until we know one way or the other.”

“Agreed. Now when do I get the fuck out of here.”

Mitch remained nominally in touch with the Taskforce, keeping informed about progress now the leopard had been delivered. A provisional cure had been formulated and now tests were being run on a selection of mutated domestic animals to find the best way to effect delivery. Right now, orally was the only way that it was proving one hundred percent effective, which raised a host of problems with distribution and coverage. Mitch listened but didn't offer any solutions, leaving it to the boffins to sweat the small stuff.

They also had to find an answer to the problem of longevity, the cure not keeping very long and breaking down until it became inert if left to dissipate in the air for too long or from too high up. Mitch took it all onboard but didn't add anything to the discussion, merely signed off on the paperwork and left them to it. Jackson and his team had left to investigate reports that the mutation had skipped from the animal kingdom to humans, a worrying aspect if proved true. They were going to track this 'missing link' and get it back to the Taskforce for further study. Their first port of call, South America.

Back at Bethesda, progress in Jamie's recovery was slow, but it was progress. Mitch spent as much time as possible with her, only pulled away when he needed to return to the apartment to shower, change and sometimes grab a few hours rest, usually at the request of the nursing staff, Phillip employed to get him there and back and make sure he ate something. The driver also picked up and relayed the files for him to peruse and sign off, Mitch spending the time at his vigil to catch up on paperwork. The nurses sometimes found him reading some of the reports out loud to the patient as if holding a conversation with her, by necessity a bit one-sided. A week slid by, then two, then three. Jamie was taken off the life support when she was deemed able to breathe on her own once more, but she wasn't drawn out of the coma just yet. The poison had caused her brain to swell, as well as impacted on her liver, kidneys and spleen, all of which were showing positive improvements, but still
some way from fully recovered.
After a month it was decided to bring her out of her coma and start to assess her brain function and any side effects of the poison. Mitch sat out of their way beside the door, the medical team working around the bed, attaching new monitors while removing the old. They had to peel back the bed covers, one of the nurses giving a sharp gasp when the covers went below Jamie's waist. Mitch, alerted to the situation, stood up, seeing between the medics that the sheets and gown Jamie was wearing were soaked in bright, red blood.

“What the hell?!” He made to move forward, but one of the nurses turned to hold him back.
“Please, Dr. Morgan let us work. Was Jamie on any birth control? Do you know if she was pregnant?” the question came at him like bullets and he struggled to answer them.
“Are you saying all that is just menstrual fluid? Because I find that hard to believe, right now!” Jamie was being stripped of her soiled gown, as well as the sheet under her, a pad placed between her legs to stem the flow after she was hastily cleaned up. All the bed linen and gown were placed into a large sample bag for testing, a new sheet quickly placed under her body and the covers once more pulled up.

“Dr. Morgan?” The nurse persisted. Mitch rubbed at his forehead.
“No, she wasn't on any birth control. She was on the injection but that lapsed, and as far as I know she hadn't had a period in the time we've been together. If she was pregnant...” his words suddenly caught up with him and he stopped dead, staring back at the nurse with so much grief the nurse was hard pressed to look him in the face. “If she was pregnant, it was too soon to tell.” Mitch finished his voice a mere whisper. The nurse nodded and turned away sending one of the other nurses away with the fabric to be tested.

Before the team had finished their fussing around the bed, the same nurse came back with a piece of paper, handing it to the head nurse, who read it and then looked up into Mitch’s eyes.
“I'm so sorry, Dr. Morgan.” Was all she said.
Mitch stared back at her as if not understanding, his face screwed up in a quizzical look, then the words sunk in and he fumbled for the chair as if he was blind. Once seated his face fell and he stared blankly at the people around the bed, his hands resting limply on his thighs.

“Dr. Morgan?” the nurse was crouching down and peering up into his face, seeing the devastation as he mourned silently. “Dr. Morgan, I think you should come with me and leave my girls to finish up here. Given what's happened, I don't think we'll be bringing Jamie out of the coma right now. We need to see how her body copes with this latest trauma. We're giving her a transfusion and medication to stop the bleeding. She's not in danger, but we need to monitor her recovery from this very closely before we attempt anything else.

Mitch met her gaze, then closed his eyes and nodded. Distantly he heard the nurse make a phone call to his driver, requesting that he come and collect him, but he really didn't register everything else she said. In his strange state of mind, Phillip seemed to appear beside him only seconds later, Mitch accepting his help to stand, leading him down the hallway, blind to what was passing by until he found himself seated in the car and speeding down the road. He blinked and turned his head to stare out at the passing cars and people, but couldn't seem to clear the fog shrouding his thoughts. The next he knew he was sitting on the couch back at the apartment and Phillip was pressing a glass into his hand with some amber liquid in it. He tossed it back in one mouthful and held it out for another, Phillip refilling it and handing it back. Two more drinks disappeared in like fashion before the security man took the decanter away.

Before he had time to protest the removal of the alcohol, a plate of food was pressed into his hand and he started to eat whatever it was, not tasting or smelling the ingredients, just eating because he needed to, to remain alive for when Jamie woke up. In the strange way that time seemed to be moving for him, he was soon laying in bed, the lights out and he was alone. In the privacy of the dark, he finally allowed his feelings, until now frozen and numb, to flow. His mouth opening on a silent scream as he drew his legs up and curled into a ball, tears squeezing passed his tightly closed eyelids to dampen the pillow under his cheek.
Jamie surfaced slowly, her senses coming online before her eyes even attempted to open. She felt disassociated from her body, as if her head was floating like a balloon, detached and unfeeling, looking down at herself laying in the hospital bed. She could hear soft sounds all around her, the gentle beeping of a monitor, the soft hiss of oxygen, the quiet swish of fabric over skin as a nurse worked beside her on something. She heard the low murmur of voices, one male, the other female, their words indistinguishable, flowing over and around her but insubstantial. She breathed in and could smell something faintly floral, something astringent like disinfectant. When she breathed in again she caught the smell of an expensive cologne, the aroma bringing up images of a man, someone she knew, someone she loved being around because of the way he smelled.

Her overview narrowed and turned grey, her floating sensation fading, her body sinking back into itself, into the mattress, feeling it give way as she gained weight and substance.

“Jamie?” the male voice was speaking her name. He sounded hoarse, as if he had a cold, his inflection soft and encouraging, nothing to fear or be afraid of. “Jamie?” she heard her name again and turned towards the sound, wanting to hear more. Her brow knitted into a crease between her eyes, her brain demanding she open them but her eyelids apparently glued shut despite her best effort.

“I know you can hear me, sweetheart. Keep fighting to open those beautiful eyes for me. Don't give up...”

She felt her face working as she tried so hard to prise her eyes open, and then suddenly they were. A mere slit to start with, but with each blink they opened a little bit wider, the room limits out of focus, but suddenly a face appeared in her line of vision and a bright light flicked back and forth in front of her, making her wince. It disappeared and she blinked, desperately tired, but wanting to see who belonged to the voice. Another face swam in to view from her right side and she turned her head to see better.

“Hey, there you are,” the face spoke to her and she smiled up at it, matching the smile stretching the lips hidden behind a scruffy, grey peppered beard. She really did try to keep her eyes open but it was like they had lead weights on them, pulling them shut even as she mewed her distress. The voice she liked to hear came again.

“I'll be here when you wake up the next time, don't worry. You're safe...”

Before she sank for the last time, a name popped into her fuzzy mind and she relaxed. “Mitch.”

The hours and days afterward produced longer and longer periods of wakefulness. She was still displaying a level of confusion that had her doctor shaking his head and tutting to himself, but for the most part, she was recovering well. Her strength was completely depleted so with the introduction of real food came the physiotherapy to work unused muscles and build up the strength to allow her to leave her bed. When all her blood work and test came back in the green, it was decided the last stage of her recovery could be done from home with help from the physio and a nutritionist to aid her return to a normal life. An occupational therapist was also employed to visit frequently and help with any lapses in physical and mental abilities, coordination and speech.

On the first day back at the apartment, Mitch carried her into the apartment itself, then set her down on the sofa with its wonderful view over the surrounding area. He had arranged the furniture to give space for the therapist to use, a masseuse added to the team to help augment the physical therapy and help stimulate her brain as well as her body.

She didn't understand how close she’d come to dying, but she did wonder why her arms and legs were so thin, her body having shed what little weight it had to start with, leaving her seriously underweight and accounting for a lot of her physical weakness. Along with her therapists, who visited on an almost daily regime to improve her physical conditioning, there was the nutritionist, a woman who also fulfilled the roles of extra in-house security and a companion for Jamie when Mitch had to leave her alone for any length of time. Every precaution was taken for her welfare, and no chances taken with her safety.

In the ongoing attempts to give her back her life, two subjects were never raised or discussed within Jamie's hearing by anyone connected to her. One was Abigail Westbrooke and her involvement in
trying to murder her, and the other the loss of her child. In her currently confused mental state, neither subject came close to being questioned, the one because no one mentioned the name and her illness was explained to her as a nasty brush with viral pneumonia, while the other was only known to a handful of people, and only one outside the hospital itself. Obviously it couldn't be left out of her medical records, but it was buried under a great deal of medical and security red tape to be almost completely obfuscated to anyone other than Mitch. To the casual observer, it would be listed under the complications from viral pneumonia in the public records. Only in the second, high security rated record was the truth laid bare.

A month after her release from hospital, Mitch came home early, a huge bouquet of flowers in his arms. The nutritionist, Felicity, was in the kitchen putting together a meal for them both before she left for the day.

“Hey, Flis, that smells good,” he said, fishing about in one of the cupboards for a vase.

“I'll be out of your hair in a minute. All you'll have to do is reheat the meat and serve with the salad I've left in the fridge, Dr. Morgan.”

“How's my girl been today?” he asked as he filled the vase with water.

“It's been a good day. Nothing untoward to report.”

“Thank you, Flis, I'll see you in the morning.” Putting the bouquet into the vase he carried it to the living room where Jamie was sitting, frowning over a magazine, an old edition as few were being printed given the current situation. She looked up and sent him a wide smile, especially as he was half hidden behind the huge display of flowers.

“Oh, Mitch, those are beautiful. You do spoil me.”

Mitch set the vase down on the low table and stood back, admiring it for a moment before seating himself beside her.

“It is rather spectacular, and I couldn't possibly spoil you enough.” He leaned in and their lips met in a brief kiss that held more affection than passion. It was one of the issues they were going to try and address that night, with the encouragement of Jamie's counselor. Their last physical interaction had been the last night in the Sheraton hotel, now months ago. With all that had gone on since then, it was little wonder sex had been relegated to the bottom of the list of important things to address. Mitch had been informed straightforwardly that Jamie was starting to get anxious, questioning why they didn't make love, why Mitch didn't seem to desire her?

For Mitch the answer seemed obvious, she was still recovering from nearly being dead, her normally slender frame still not back to where it was, her air of frailty making him afraid he'd break her if they did anything more than cuddle before going to sleep. He didn't have to carry her anymore, her physical strength returning with the therapy, massage and nutritionally balanced diet, but he still thought she looked delicate, fragile compared to what he considered his brutish male body. As for the problem with him desiring her, that was a non-starter. Mitch frequently had to wank off in the shower to lessen his sexual frustration, often more than once a day. No, lack of desire wasn't at all an issue, it was just he was scared to hurt her, to inflict pain on her from his clumsiness. He also wasn't entirely convinced that she was completely healed down under, despite assurances from her doctor that apart from the excessive bleeding when the fetus was unexpectedly aborted, everything was back in perfect working order again.

Despite his misgivings he was going to try and quell the nagging negatives and show her in every way he could that she was as desirable as she'd ever been and he wanted her with as much passion and love as he ever had. More so now he'd come so close to losing her.

“Whatcha thinking?” she asked, wondering why he was frowning, obviously lost in some thought or other. His face cleared and he smiled.

“Just work stuff, but I've decided to banish that and just enjoy being here with you. I'm glad you like the flowers, the florist made them up to compliment your hair and coloring.” He looked at the creamy roses and delicate apricot, pinky shades and thought his money well spent.
“Is that how you see me?” Jamie asked, not seeing the subtleties that Mitch obviously did.

Mitch leaned forward the touched the velvety petals of one of the roses. “This is what your skin feels
like to touch, soft and silky. And this is the color of your lips when you're lying back on the pillows
all flushed from me kissing you. And this, this wonderful pink is just the color of the flush you get
when you come with me still inside you, your breasts and neck suffused with a blush of heat.”

Jamie stared at him, his gaze on the flowers, but her's fixed on his profile. “Oh, my that's...beautiful.”

He turned to look at her, his brown eyes warm and melting. “I'd love to show you, prove to you that
all these colors are you, from your hair to your toenails, and everywhere in between.”

Jamie blinked at him. “Oh, Mitch...yes please.”

This time when he kissed her he didn't hold back, giving her a taste of what he usual held leashed,
his lips and tongue dancing with her's until she had to break apart to draw breath. She stared at him,
blinking slowly.

“Take me to bed, Mitch.”

He picked her up, her arms coming up around his neck as he carried her to the bedroom.

The shedding of their clothes was like peeling back the layers of a flower bud, each bit of skin
revealed worshipped, kissed and stroked, the whole process taking much longer than usual, but
bringing them closer together with each reveal. After many sighs and tender touches, they lay facing
each other, clothes all gone, just air and emotions between them. Mitch let his gaze roam over her
face, noting the changes as his eyes roamed lower, but also acknowledging that she wasn't made of
glass but all woman, warm flesh and blood, rosy and waiting for him. He reached out to ghost his
fingers over her collarbone, over her shoulder and down her arm before dipping to cup her breast,
thumbing the nipple to a peak.

“You are so beautiful,” he said softly. His hand smoothed down her side to the dip of her waist, then
over her hip and down the length of her smooth thigh. “You feel beautiful.”

Jamie giggled then suddenly looked serious. “I'm sorry I'm so skinny, I don't seem to have put on
much weight. Flis says my appetite will come back in time.”

Mitch brought his free hand up to grasp hers and bring it to his mouth. “You are perfect. I'm just
afraid I'll hurt you or...break something.”

Jamie reached across the stroked her fingers down his cheek, tracing the lines that bracketed his
mouth, over the dip in his chin before gently shaping his lips. “I'm stronger than you think. Nothing
you can do will hurt me, Mitch. You are the gentlest man I've ever known. I just want you to love
me again.”

Mitch grabbed her hand and kissed the palm. “I never stopped, not for a second.” He leaned over the
small gap between them and kissed her, his arms drawing her forward until she was flush up against
him, her arms around his neck, one of his hands splayed over her back to keep her close, the other
running down her leg to lift it upwards to drape over his hip bringing her sex flush against his cock
which was rising rapidly between them. While they kissed he stroked between her legs, keeping his
touch light, feeling the moisture between her thighs, evidence that she was as ready for him as he
was rampant for her. Carefully he positioned himself at her entrance, Jamie moaning when he rubbed
himself in her own moistness before pushing forward, sliding thickly into her body, both of them
pausing in their kiss just to enjoy the sensation of fullness and being enveloped.

“Oh, God, I love your body, I love everything of yours...you are perfect!”

Jamie pressed herself incrementally closer, her bent leg digging into his lower back to urge him to
move within her. Lips found lips and he slowly pulled out, only to sink balls deep with each surge,
both flexing their hips to deepen the rhythm, sweat breaking out wherever they touched, Mitch
lapping at her jaw, her neck, anywhere he could reach. Jamie raked her fingers through his hair,
tugging his head back at one stage to give her access to kiss his jaw, his clean-shaven skin still giving
off a hint of his cologne, driving her to nibble on his ears then down the cords of his neck while his
lower body started to quicken. Mitch dug his toes into the sheets, raising one knee to give him more
leverage, Jamie wrapped around him like a second skin, their bodies so seamlessly joined they were
one together, striving to bring pleasure to each other, their hearts picking up speed with muscle and
sinew stretching to meld them closer. Mitch started to grunt with each thrust, Jamie still lavishing attention on his neck, biting down on his ear when she felt the onset of her climax, her body shivering around him, her internal muscles clutching at his flesh, urging him on. In a final long slide into her body, he came, his arms tensing about her while his hips jerked, forcing more of himself inside, expelling his essence to hopefully find a home and replace what had been so cruelly lost.

“I love you,” he growled softly against her ear, his lips tracing a gentle path down her jawline to her lips, giving a deep, lingering kiss, even while his body still jerked to expel the last drops of his lifeforce within her. “Don't ever leave me,” he whispered, her fingers convulsively cradling his head so he couldn't move away, her lips, swollen and tender, doing their best to convey her complete surrender to the emotions coursing through her. Words seemed so inadequate when you loved someone with your entire body and soul.

When eventually hearts and lungs returned to a more normal tempo, they moved only enough for Mitch to roll onto his back, Jamie draped like a delicate cover over his torso, arms and legs still tangled and unlikely to be undone in a hurry. When he finally slipped from her body she let out a mew of protest, lifting her head to look up into his face with slumberous eyes and ruffled bed hair.

“Don't ever leave me,” she groused, smiling to show she was teasing. Mitch grinned and lay back, his head deep in the pillows. “Could get a bit awkward trying to go about our daily business like co-joined twins.” Jamie thumped him. “I know it's not practical, but it does feel glorious when you fill up all my empty spaces.” Mitch for once was speechless, unable to come up with anything more profound to top that artless, but spectacular compliment to his prowess. He reached for her left hand. “Keep holding it up for me.” He lifted his own hand and took off the ring he'd been keeping safe for her on his pinky, sliding it back on her own finger where it truly belonged and now sat snugly, as it should.

Jamie lowered her head to rest against his chest, listening to the steady thump of his heart. “I love you,” she whispered into his skin, his hand running up and down her back as she relaxed completely against him.

Later he pulled up the sheet to cover the expanse of creamy skin draped over him and prepared to get some rest before his delightful partner decided she was up for another round of lovemaking.

“Can I come to work with you today?” Her question caught him off guard. “I feel so much better today, positively wonderful after last night...” She gave him a mischievous smile, one he returned, his body rising just thinking about the previous night. Mitch exchanged a glance with Flis who had arrived to take over when he left for work. The caregiver-come-security guard shrugged one shoulder, handing the decision over to him.

“Only if Flis gets to come too. It's still early days, sweetheart,” he answered, drinking the last of his coffee.

“I wasn't planning on spending the whole day, I'm sure you have a ton of stuff to do. I just thought a change of scene?” Mitch smiled and bent to kiss her cheek. “Why the hell not. Flis can keep you company if you need to come home for any reason. Right, Flis?”

Jamie looked over at her usual companion who winked and smiled back. “I think it's a great idea.”

Flis sat up the front with Phillip, the trip to the University not taking very long, the car parked close to the bank of lifts. Both security personnel accompanied the Morgan's in the ride to the Taskforce floor, and remained vigilant, although discreet, as Mitch walked Jamie out of the lift and through the bullpen to her long-neglected office, his arm there for her to lean on, his pace slow to accommodate hers. To the staff who hadn’t seen her since her last day before the poisoning, she looked frail and insubstantial, as if a strong breeze would blow her over, but there was no disputing the depth of her delight in being back amongst them, or the solicitude and careful handling by Mitch. The presence of the two security guards, alert and watchful, were also noted.

Jo had jumped up when she saw them approach, coming forward to embrace Jamie, albeit carefully.
“It’s so wonderful to see you looking so well,” Jo gushed, her smile tempered with the shock she tried to hide at Jamie’s fragile looking state. For her part, Jamie didn’t notice anything amiss and was glad to see Jo again.

“I’m not quite up to fighting fit yet, pneumonia rather took the stuffing out of me, but I’m getting stronger every day, aren’t I, Mitch?” Jamie looked up at him with such a look of trust and love it brought tears to Jo’s eyes and she had to swipe at her face before Jamie turned back.

“You’re doing great, and this is just early days, you’ll be back here before you know it.” Mitch gazed at his love with soft eyes, his expression changing when Jamie was no longer looking at him. He looked around at the people in the office. Very few knew the whole truth of what had happened so many weeks ago, but he dared anyone to comment on Jamie’s present condition.

“Why don’t we have a look at your office. Jo’s been keeping it up to date until you feel ready to come back.” He steered her towards the door and Jo quickly walked over to open the office door for them. It was like the vibrant, confident bundle of energy that was Jamie Morgan had been replaced with a fey ghost of the woman. Jo met the eye of the female security agent and was surprised at the sympathy apparent in her gaze.

“I’m Flis,” the woman announced, holding out her hand for Jo to shake. “Nutritionist and caregiver for Mrs. Morgan.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Jo Samuels,” Jo introduced herself.

Phillip, Flis and Jo remained outside the office, like guard dogs keeping back anyone who dared to intrude. Most of the staff, after the initial surprise, were already back at their stations only occasionally casting glances at the three people standing outside the office. Soon, the Morgan’s were leaving Jamie’s former office and walking the short distance to Mitch’s. The pace was slower than before, the small reserve of energy that Jamie had to start with, already heavily depleted, Mitch keeping an arm around her back, while she clung to his free hand to steady herself, the smile on her face strained.

When they entered his office, he gently lowered her to sit on the couch, seating himself beside her and never letting go of her hand, Jamie closing her eyes briefly and resting her head against his shoulder.

“Didn’t think it would take so much just to walk to your office, isn’t it silly?” Jamie muttered breathlessly.

“Early days, sweetheart. You’ll be back to your old self in no time, just not today,” Mitch told her, squeezing her hand. He looked up at the other people in the room. Flis was on hand in case he needed help, standing behind the couch. Phillip was at the door, on guard as always, and Jo stood near to his desk, her expression hopeful but anxious.

“Thank you for keeping all the data up to date, Jo,” Jamie said, her voice stronger but her eyes still closed. “I might need you to keep on doing that for a while.”

“No problem, Jamie. Happy to do it.” Jo tried to smile but it was wobbly at best.

“I think we should call it a day and get you home,” Mitch murmured, Jamie not arguing, just nodding against his shoulder. He stood up and gathered her into his arms, her head heavy against his collarbone, her arms coming up to loop around his neck. If the visit to the Taskforce offices proved one thing, it was that Jamie still had a long way to go in her recovery, something he already knew, but he wasn’t about to deny her such a simple request and it did the staff good to see her alive and making progress.

With Flis and Phillip in tow, he walked to the lifts with Jamie in his arms, Jo following as far as the lift bank. There Jamie lifted her head, eyes dulled with tiredness but still managing a broad smile for her friend.

“It was so good to see you, Jo. I’m sorry to leave it all still in your care, but I’ll get better, I know I will.” Jo smiled at her friend and clasped her hand, giving it a squeeze. “Of course you will, in no time at all. Until then, take care.” Jo watched as they all got into the lift, Mitch giving her a small nod before the doors closed. Careful to wipe her face to remove all trace of her distress, Jo straightened her uniform and turned on her heel to walk back to her desk, ignoring the glances, silently warning
anyone away from asking questions about what they'd just witnessed.
Up Against a Hydra

Chapter Summary

Mitch battles on all fronts, Jamie comes into her own.

They had the definitive cure for the animal mutation, at long last and well within the six months deadline, after hours of laboratory time, they had it. It was proven, it worked, it reversed the effects of the mutation in respect to behavior in all the animals in the test group. There was cause for celebration and they did, but it was tempered by the knowledge that the mutation had jumped to humans. Isolated cases, it was true, but the fact it had crossed species was troubling. They had yet to capture a live human specimen, the terminology questioned until the footage from Jackson's team was viewed. They had tracked down the reported hybrid in South America, but the creature, and there really was no other term for what they found, was violent in the extreme with no possibility of reasoning with it. There were also alarming side effects that hadn't been seen in the animals – the creature bled a viscous black fluid in place of normal bodily secretions like tears or blood, the skin all over its body had thickened resulting in lumpy growths and excessive muscle development producing strength, speed and agility far above the norms, but controlled by a mind that didn't recognise its own name or differentiate between friend or foe. Somehow, exposure to the Mother cell through a bite from a mutated animal had regressed the victim's mind back to the bare minimum, a fight or flight state where the only option was to attack and kill whatever got in its way, whether animal or human. In each incident, use of tranquilizers hadn't been enough, despite excessive amounts used. The mutated body seemed impervious, the nervous system compromised and not feeling pain to the extent of one case where the male victim had lost an arm, the bone still sticking out, and it didn't remotely slow him down. Like the mutated bears growing their armor, the victims of the cross-infection developed weapons depending on their gender. If female it meant extended and strengthened nails to act like claws, enhanced eyesight, hearing and a taste for flesh, regardless of its source. If male, they had the same enhancement of the senses augmented with incredible strength and endurance. The one motive that none of the human mutants had displayed was a desire to reproduce, only displaying an appalling imperative to slaughter indiscriminately. So far the incidents had been few, roughly one or two victims per continent, but with the rising numbers of animals attacking human populations around the world, that number was sure to increase.

Vectors for distributing the cure were now being tested, the most likely viable being to use birds, in particular pigeons and doves, in enough numbers to cover as much ground as possible and time was running out for them to do it. The group behind the Noah Objective was pushing hard to get countries to agree to allow them to use their airspace to distribute their TX-14 gas to wipe out only the animals, or so they claimed, then repopulate with fresh gene-stocks. It had become a race as to who created and distributed an effective cure for the animal pandemic, while everywhere around the world, people continued to die and chaos ruled. In all countries, the USA included, domestic pets were being rounded up and either euthanized or caged to prevent them attacking their owners and extended family. Mitch had already had a tearful phone call from Clem, now living in Maine with Justin's parents, telling him that Henry was currently incarcerated in a hastily built secure facility, despite showing no signs of infection or aberrant behavior. Mitch did his best to assure his daughter that soon all the animals would be better, Henry included, but it did little to ameliorate her distress.

The use of the bird programme was pushed forward, curing them in large batches, then releasing them to spread it, the catch and release method the quickest way to get the birds on the wing, but it
would take time before positive results started to be reported, time they were running out of.

“Mitch?” Jo knocked on his door, sending his aide, Patrick, a smile before returning her attention back to her boss.

“Yeah, Jo. Come in. What do you have for me?”

Jo thought he looked tired, his face drawn and grey-tinged. The previous weeks had been full on as they worked to disseminate the cure, the process ongoing with the help of the US military transporting cured birds all around the country as well as overseas. Mitch had stayed long hours to supervise and coordinate the production and administering of the cure, plus the shipping of the birds on an accelerated timeframe. Everyone on the Taskforce had voluntarily put in more hours, but Mitch had done the most, and it showed.

“We’ve received another cadaver to be processed, but I think you'll want to see this one for yourself.”

“Animal or human?” he asked, rubbing a hand over his face.

“That's the thing. They don't know,” Jo told him. Mitch screwed up his face in confusion.

“What?”

“They wouldn't explain other than to say you'd want to see what Jackson has sent you.”

“Fine. Patrick, we'll take a break. Get those reports typed up and we'll pick this up when I get back.”

Mitch waved his aide away and got to his feet, grimacing when his joints popped from sitting too long. “Lead the way, Jo.”

Down a floor, they entered the area set aside to perform autopsies, necropsies, and dissections. One entire room was a walk-in freezer where bodies of a wide range of animals hung wrapped in plastic, either waiting to be seen, or already cut up. Human victims were kept in there as well, but in body bags and on rolling gurneys. Several vets were on hand around one particular dissection table, the lighting subdued except there.

“Gentlemen, ladies, what do we have to dig around in today?” Mitch asked, walking up to the table.

The group of pathologists parted and Mitch got his first glimpse of something that would become commonplace in the coming months.

“What the fuck is that?”

“That, Dr. Morgan, is just what we asked ourselves.” One of the pathologists, gloved, gowned and masked, lifted one of the spines on its flank, the motion lifting some of the fur, displaying more spines seeded all down the side and back of the creature. Mitch moved around the table to inspect the animal, that being what it was, from all angles, seeing the long snout, prominent canine teeth, small ears, massive shoulders and black-tipped spines.

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“Are the spines poisonous?” he asked, careful not to touch the tip of the bony extensions.

“We've yet to determine. What we do know is that this is not just a mutated animal with a defiant pupil, this is a whole new creature, a hybrid of several creatures probably gene-spliced together.”

“Sort of like Frankenstein's pet?” Mitch quipped, wishing he wasn't so tired and able to take a hand in the necropsy. “Where did Jackson find this?”

“Patagonia, according to the details they sent with it, and this wasn't the only specimen they came in contact with. There was a pack of these. They showed speed, agility, intelligence and seemed almost impervious to bullets and darts.” The pathologist read further. “This particular member of the pack was not only shot and darted, but a local stabbed it with a spear right through the body to the ground below. Even then it wasn't completely killed until another spear was put through its chest, supposedly piercing the heart.”

“So it's hard to kill. Great. Do what you do best, I'll be interested to read the results, and as usual, we need the information yesterday,” Mitch told them with a wry smile. A soft ripple of laughter greeted his sally, and he turned to go, satisfied he'd soon find out exactly what they were dealing with. Back in his office, he rubbed at his eyes before putting his glasses back on. His aide entered with a bundle of paperwork in his arms. Mitch looked at the pile and let out a sigh.

“Give me the Cliffs Notes version, Patrick....”
In the end, Mitch had to bring the file about the strange hybrid creature home with him, as he simply ran out of time, and wasn't prepared to spend another late night at the lab. He also wanted to share the latest news with Jamie.

Arriving at the apartment, he heard laughter when he opened the door. Walking into the kitchen he surprised the two women making something together, the benchtop awash with flour, and other ingredients as well as the paraphernalia of cooking over every inch of surface.

“Mitch!” Jamie's squeal of pleasure was the precursor to her jumping into his arms, floury hands and arms wrapping around his neck before she was kissing him enthusiastically between giggles.

“You're home early, that's wonderful.”

He turned around and sat her bottom on the kitchen bench, Flis quickly moving a few items to clear a space.

“And you've been cooking?” Mitch queried, looking at the mess spread over the surfaces.

“Flis has been teaching me a few recipes.” She leaned forward to whisper in his ear. “Apparently it's very therapeutic.”

“But do we get anything edible at the end of it?” Mitch asked. Jaime rolled her eyes.

“Of course. What are we making again, Flis?”

“Shortbread.”

Jamie pulled back to look Mitch in the face. “An old family recipe;” she told him, before kissing him again.

“My mother used to make shortbread,” Mitch said. “She had some of those old-fashioned wooden molds you put it into to create a pattern...”

Flis held up a round of wood and waggled it. Mitch grinned.

“Yeah, just like that.” He turned back to Jamie. “Hey, I need a shower, so you and Flis keep on cooking, and I'll be back in a bit.”

When he re-entered the kitchen awhile later it was back in pristine order, the benchtop cleared and the warm smell of fresh baking scenting the air. Mitch sat on one of the bar stools and leaned over to snatch a finger of shortbread off the wire cooling rack, popping it in his mouth and chewing with a blissful expression on his face.

“Mmmm that's so good.”

Flis appeared from the hallway, her bag over her shoulder. “I'm off now. Enjoy.”

Mitch gave her a wave. “Thank's Flis. See you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Flis.” Jamie appeared from the bedroom, waving to her daytime companion, having changed out of her cooking clothes, into something more comfortable and not covered in flour. She stood next to Mitch, his arm looping around her waist to pull her closer.

“It's nice to have you home a bit earlier,” said Jamie, accepting a piece of shortbread and breaking it in half before taking a bite.

“I thought you might like to hear the latest developments,” Mitch told her. “Why don't we take a plate of this and go sit on the couch.”

When they were comfortably sitting on the sofa, Mitch leaned forward to pick up the folder he'd left there earlier on. Jamie was sitting with her feet up beside him, her interest in the contents muted. Despite it being nearly four months since the attempted murder, Jamie was still suffering the after-effects of the mutated neurotoxin that had nearly killed her. Physically she was back to her old self, having gained back her weight and strength with no lingering symptoms of the attack, but her mental processes were taking longer to recover. Somedays she was curious, engaged and intent, other times saw her seem to slip into a dreamy state, showing no interest in anything other than Mitch, having no concerns with what was going on outside the apartment, in the country or in the world at large. What was missing from both was the passionate journalist, seeking the truth, keen to right the wrongs and bring down the bad guys. That constantly moving, strongly opinionated, passionately independent Jamie was nowhere to be found, or at least, was taking an extended vacation. It didn't make Mitch love her any less, but he did mourn the loss for her sake. He hoped that what he'd brought home might trigger some of her former interest and maybe give her a reason to get back into her abiding
love of research.
“Jackson and his team have found us a new creature. It was delivered today, all the way from deepest South America. Patagonia to be precise. According to his notes, they tracked a whole pack of these animals after reports reached them that they were taking over territories that the local wildlife was no longer able to defend, preying on man and beast alike. This one took the combined efforts of the Rangers, Jackson, and Abe and the local tribesmen to bring down.” He passed over a photograph of the dead hybrid, the image was taken by Abe to show the scale of the creature against the men and woman who killed it. The necropsy supplied the actual measurements, but whichever way you looked at it, the beast was big and dangerous. Jamie looked at the image and traced a fingertip over the spines that seemed to cover its flanks and back.
“It looks formidable,” she observed, holding on to the picture while Mitch read out some of the facts and figures. Mitch stopped at one piece of information.
“Apparently it was a female and pregnant at the time, carrying a litter of six pups.” Jamie looked up from the picture. “That's sad, and a little scary to know they are able to reproduce in such quantities. Have they been seen anywhere else?”
“Actually, I was hoping you could help answer that question for me. Do you feel up to coming into the office and see if you can trace any reports that might be these creatures?” He held his breath, hoping her interest had been piqued.
“I think I'd like that. You said Jo had been keeping my other data up to date, maybe there is something in that we can correlate to these creature sightings, you never know.”
Mitch smiled down at her, glad his little ruse had worked. He read through more of the file, noting that the pathologist reported that further testing was needed to narrow down the different animal genes making up the DNA strands. It was assumed that the base animal was either a large dog or a wolf, but they'd need more time to be more specific. And the big questions hadn't even been touched upon – who had created them, and where had they come from?

Mitch idly munched on a piece of the shortbread he'd brought in to work with him, reading the latest progress report on the release of the birds. Some early reports were encouraging, the incidents of bird attacks decreasing, the same with other animals groups. On the downside, there was another report of an affected human victim, a man in a refugee camp somehow managing to evade detection by security and hide his physical changes before wreaking mayhem, killing over a dozen men, women and children before being brought down. When Mitch came to the end of the report he had to read it again for it to sink in. They had a live one. The victim wasn't dead, in fact, was on its way to the Taskforce via a special flight and would arrive within twelve hours. He picked up the phone and called his aide.
“Patrick, I need to speak to the head of security...at once...yeah...okay, and Patrick, I need to call a heads of departments meeting as soon as possible. Yeah...okay, well call me back when they're ready.” He hung up, then got to his feet. This was going to need a whole new team to study this latest development.

Jamie tried to ignore the air of excitement that seemed to have everyone in a ferment. She and Jo were working in her office with the door open, the babble of voices reaching them where they huddled over one of the maps spread out on her incident table.
“Can you go and find out what all the hubbub is about?” she asked the airman, Jo leaving her side to find out what had everyone jumping about. When Jo returned she was similarly excited. Jamie looked up. “Well?”
“We're soon to take delivery of another specimen, a victim of the animal mutation...”
Jamie straightened up from leaning over the table. “So?”
“This is one of the human mutations,” Jo explained.
“I thought we already had some of the cadavers on site?”
“We do. This is a live one. They're forming a completely new team to study it.”
“Him or her?”
“Oh...sorry, didn't ask.”
Jamie cocked an eyebrow at her friend.
“Never mind, Mitch will now. Can I leave you to correlate these half a dozen reports with this map? I'll be back in a tick.”

Mitch looked up from his desk to see Jamie in his doorway.
“Hey,” he said, leaning back in his chair, his former frown banished to be replaced with a smile.
“Hey,” Jamie replied, walking forward and taking the chair in front of his desk. “Everyone's very excited about your latest specimen.”
Mitch looked at her quizzically for a moment then his confusion cleared. “Oh, you mean the human mutation on its way here? Yeah. That is pretty exciting. The first time we've had access to a live one.”
Jamie threw up her hands. “Good, Lord, you're doing it too. This is a person, a human being we're talking about.”
“A human being that slaughtered a dozen people with his bare hands before the authorities could capture it. We're lucky they didn't tear him apart on the spot.”
“And what happens when he gets here? Is he to go under the knife, have bits chopped off to see how he reacts? When did we lose our humanity, Mitch?”
He looked at her and wanted to rejoice, not because of what she said, but because she was being passionately involved in something the way she would have been before the attack, in a way she hadn't been for so long. Some of his feelings must have been evident on his face, her expression changing from righteously angry to confused.
“Why are you smiling? This is hardly a cause for amusement!” Now she was back to angry.
Mitch held up his hands as if in surrender. “No, you are absolutely right, this is not me smiling because of the matter at hand, I promise. I'm just glad you have you back...here, with me.”
“Whatever!” Jamie dismissed his thin excuse. “This person is still a human being and you can't treat him like an animal, regardless of what he's done.”
“Sweetheart, I know that. But we need to find out how the mutation is affecting his brain, his body, and his reasoning ability. We also need to know if, once bitten, the mutation can be passed on by an infected person via fluids, another bite, scratching, a whole host of things we need to find out.”
Jamie looked at him closely. “You're not just saying this to mollify me?”
Mitch shook his head. “Not at all. If anything, we are saving him from a summary execution, given what he's done under the influence of the secondary Mother cell mutation.”
“Exactly, whoever he is, he's not responsible for his actions.”
“I understand that, but I don't think we're going to be calling a lawyer for him, you do realize that.”
Jamie nodded, albeit reluctantly. “I was just taken aback at the way everyone was talking about him. Like he was another of those creatures, those hybrid things you examined.”
“And in some ways, we will be doing a lot of the same testing and taking samples as we would if he was one of those hybrids, but the fact that inside is a human being will not be forgotten.”
“All right then. I just...”
“I know. If you ever feel that something is going against what you think is right, don't hesitate to take me to task about it. I need you to do that, sweetheart, because sometimes I just want to reach out and press that big red button and let a fucking great bomb take care of everything!” He pantomimed a big explosion going off with his hands, sound effects included from his mouth, albeit quietly. “BOOM!!”
Getting up from her chair, she walked around the desk and sat down in his lap, Mitch leaning back to accommodate her, his hands resting on her waist to keep her steady.
“I can't imagine the sort of pressure you're under, but if it all gets too much just tell me. We're in this together, have been right from the start. Let me help carry some of the burden...you're not alone.”
Mitch gazed into her face, seeing the determination that had been missing before. “I love you.”
Like the sun coming up, Jamie beamed at him, her eyes sparkling and soft lips pulled wide in a smile that bathed him in absolution. “I love you, too.”
An instant later and reality intruded, Patrick knocking on the door to get his attention.
“Sorry, Mitch, but the meeting with the heads of department are just waiting for you to arrive.” Mitch sighed. “Thank you, Patrick. I'll be right there.”

Patrick shut the door behind him. Instantly Mitch pulled Jamie forward and kissed her deeply, lips melding while tongues tangled. After a minute he pulled back, both of them breathing heavily. “I have to go,” he announced.

“I know.” She slid off his lap and walked over to the door, turning to look at him before leaving. “Together.”

Mitch sent her a smile. “Together.”

Then she was gone. Gathering up his notes, Mitch felt that suffocating mantle of responsibility fall heavily onto his shoulders again, the brief time he'd spent with Jamie the only period it ever seemed to lift. Time once more for Mitch Morgan, totally awesome scientist, to get everyone onboard and preparing for the new arrival.

Mitch could hear the creature long before he set eyes on him. An almost constant bellowing, muted by walls and doors to be sure, but still loud, and getting louder the closer he came to the special containment area set up for the study of the specimen. Outside the door, he was required to suit up, including gloves, goggles and a face mask and ear plugs. The reason for the extreme precautions was evident when he walked into the lab. The specialist team to study the human variation of the mutation were standing well back from the cage that held their specimen. Each of the team members was fully suited up in white overalls, but each also sported occasional dark splotches on their formerly pristine suits. Mitch remained where he was by the door and beckoned one of the team over.

“Care to bring me up to date?” Mitch asked. The team leader glanced back at the latest acquisition and sighed.

“We're just debating which anaesthetic to use to knock him out, but in the meantime, he's been employing a trick beloved by the monkeys at the zoo...”

“Throwing his shit at his audience?”

“Yeah. In a way it's not so bad, we needed to test what was coming out of him anyway, it's just necessitated an extra layer of protection around the cage, hence the perspex walls.” The man waved his hand at the few of his team actively engaged in something. “We’ve had ample urine and faeces samples to process, but until we find a way to knock him out and secure him, not much else.”

“Who'd be a scientist, huh?” Mitch joked, getting an answering grin from the team member.

“All in a day's work. We'll adjourn to the back office and get out of these overalls, then we can carry on discussing the next step.”

In the end, it took three tries of different combinations of anaesthetic and tranquilizers to finally cause the man to fall unconscious long enough for the team to clean him up, get him onto an examination table and secure him. Then the serious work of sampling, blood drawing and everything associated with building up a physical, neurological, chemical and biological profile went ahead with as much speed as possible. Photos were taken, an ultrasound performed, even a hasty CT scan to give a picture of what was going on inside was included. By the time the man was released back into his cage to sleep off the effects, every possible aspect of his body and biology was cataloged and sampled. Testing would start on the varied body fluids, from blood to semen, spinal fluid to aqueous humor from the eye, even his saliva were all subjected to a barrage of careful tests. A picture of the man before his process of mutation was blown up and posted on several of the walls to remind the people that whatever he was now, he used to be an ordinary human being with a name, a date of birth and an ordinary life before nature changed all that. Mitch hung around to see the early results of some of the test, especially interested in the CT scan and the changes made by the mutation to the basic body's organs. At first glance, there was little to see, but when you started to look at the thickness of the skin, the growth of internal membranes around crucial organs, plus the thickening of some of the bones, it became apparent that the mutation was in the process of building a human being perfectly designed for battle. There was also the little matter of accelerated healing. The man
had been shot by the local police, but that hadn't killed him and now they knew why. The bullet, which hadn't been taken out, was now wrapped in tissue inside the body cavity, the pathway of the bullet entering the body was completely healed with only the smallest of scars to indicate where the bullet had struck the skin. It was an aspect of the mutation that had several people jumping about in excitement. It tied in with what had been found while examining the hybrid creature from Patagonia. The wounds it sustained had already begun to heal before the two spears had inflicted the mortal injuries. The speed of repair was astonishing, now evidenced in the human specimen as well. It was something that hadn't been noticed in any of the animals with simply the defiant pupil. Certainly, the bears had shown that the mutation could take the form of a defensive growth, and this was seen in several similar cases, but the accelerated healing was unique to the hybrid and the human. It suggested, to Mitch's mind, that these two incidents were a possible second stage, an evolution of the mutation, but it was just a theory. They had still to cure the first mutation before they started on worrying about the second stage.

Reports started to trickle in, some from close at hand, others from further away, but all of them affirmed positive results of the bird-borne cure, it was starting to work. At a local dog pound, workers, overrun with agitated and aggressive animals, were astounded to come in for their normal morning rounds and find all the dogs behaving normally, no more aggression, only wagging tails. Further afield was a report from a cattle farm where all the stock had refused to be rounded up or approached, the farmer reported that the cattle were waiting for him at the gate, some of them back to their usual docile selves and submitting to being herded again. Another report came across his desk from a forestry ranger who reported that at long last the bears were leaving for their winter caves to hibernate, instead of attacking cars and invading homes bordering the wilderness. With each new incident highlighting a return to normal animal behavior, it was logged on a wall-sized map of the United States. The reports showing that the released of the birds were having the desired effect in all the areas they were released. Reports from overseas showed the same was happening there, some from cured birds imported to the country, some from migrating birds carrying the cure as part of their worldwide travels. He and his Taskforce had achieved the impossible, they had cured the animal apocalypse and in time the cure would reach every corner of the world. The Team, the Taskforce, and even Abigail Westbrooke had done it. There was still work to be done, still birds to be cured and released, that would remain ongoing for months to come, but it was working and it meant the Noah objective was dead in the water. Mitch would have loved to have been there when Andrew, no General Andrew Davies got the news that his pet project was canceled. But the best report was from his daughter, Clem phoning him in great excitement to tell him Henry had been released, along with all the other pets, from their cages and returned to their owners.

“You said you'd cure the animals, and you did!” Clem shrieked down the phone, Mitch holding it some distance from his ear.
“Sure did, kiddo. I'm glad you have Henry back. I'm sure he's happy to see you too.”
“Thank's Dad...when will I see you again?”
“Soon, I hope. Still got a few things to sort out here, but I'll be up to see you as soon as I can get any time off, okay?”
“Bye, sweetheart, love you too.” He stayed on the line and listened to her hang up, his heart too full for him to speak for a moment. “Love you too,” he whispered to himself.

A few days later Mitch was in his office and heard a knock on his door. “Come...” He looked up and the FBI agent in the very nice suit was back, the ever-present folder under his arm and a grim expression on his usually impassive face.
“To what do I owe this visit?” Mitch asked.
“I need to speak to you about Abigail Westbrooke.”
Mitch threw down his pen and sat back in his chair. “What about her?”
“There's several things we never imparted to you about her, things that are not in her public record.”
“Like what?” Mitch asked.
“Firstly, that she is the natural daughter of the late Robert Oz and half-sister to Jackson Oz.”
“What?” Mitch stared at the agent in disbelief. “Jackson said nothing about her...”
“Jackson is unaware that Abigail is his sister. His father never told him.”
“But she knew?”
The agent nodded. “We didn't know what her motive was to get herself on the team, but truth be told, they were glad to have her. She is as smart, possibly smarter than you.”
“I'm aware of that,” Mitch retorted. “She is also an attempted murderer. I'm assuming you have her locked up somewhere?”
The agent let out a sigh. “We did. For a short time.”
Mitch sat forward and scowled at the agent. “What do you mean you did?”
“Abigail Westbrooke was transferred to a secure facility to continue her particular line of scientific study. Unfortunately, she escaped from there and hasn't been seen since. We think she is in South America somewhere but we can't be sure.”
“So you're coming to tell me this why?”
“So you can be aware that Miss Westbrooke may, or may not, still be interested in getting her hands on you, thus putting Jamie at risk as well.”
Mitch eyed the agent narrowly. “What sort of scientific study was Abigail engaged in for you?”
The agent fidgeted, then handed over the folder. “You need to read this. We think she didn't so much escape as be liberated by a group called The Shepherds.”
“I've heard of them, they preach about the destruction of the environment, overpopulation, corporate corruption as it relates to pollution and so on. Jamie told me about them.”
“We all thought they were something along the lines of Greenpeace, but that was wrong. They are more subtle, insidious and have the financial backing of powerful people wanting to reverse the damage done to planet Earth by mankind.”
“Laudable, but what would they want Abigail Westbrooke for?” Mitch asked.
“Read the folder. A lot is what we pulled off her laptop before it was returned to her. If she has been given the means to pursue her personal hobbyhorse, then we could be facing something far worse than what we've just been through.”
Mitch looked at the thick folder on his desk. “This is going to take time to read and digest.”
“You can contact me on this number once you are up to date. Don't dismiss anything you read in that folder, Dr. Morgan. We believe that any and all of what it contains is a possibility if she is given the right resources.”
Mitch watched the man leave, the business card smooth between his fingers. He looked at it, the card having nothing more than a number printed on it.
Putting it down on his desk, he reached for the folder and drew it forward, lifting the cover to open it and started to read the first page.

Jamie knocked on the door and waited a second before opening it. Patrick had told her Mitch had asked not to be disturbed, but that had been hours ago. Now it was dark outside and time to go home.

“Mitch?” His office was only lit by an angle lamp on his desk. She reached for the overhead light switch but his voice stopped her.
“Leave it off, Jamie.” She did as he requested and then shut the office door behind her.
“It's late, are you ready to go home?” She approached his desk and sat in the chair. His face was in shadow, outside the light thrown by the lamp. “Is something wrong?”
“A great many things,” Mitch replied. “That Abigail Westbrooke is no longer in custody is the first out of the blocks...”
“I thought Abigail was with Jackson's team in South America?”
“No. She was supposed to be locked up for attempted murder, but the Feds have let her slip through their fingers.”
“Yours.”
Jamie stared at him blankly, a furrow between her brows. “Mitch, what the hell is going on?”
“Come and sit with me,” Mitch asked, getting to his feet and walking around his desk, his hand held out. Jamie took it and he led her over to the couch.
“Do you trust me?” he asked once they were seated.
“Of course I do,” she replied. “But right now you have me worried.”
“I’m sorry about that. There’s a couple of things you weren’t told about your illness all those months ago. Because of the way it affected your ability to cope, mentally, it was deemed prudent that until you came back to your full awareness you be told a cover story. We all hoped you would recover fully, then I’d be able to tell you the whole truth, but that’s only happened recently with your return to work, especially with the hybrid search and the human mutant development.”
“Oh. But I am back and it’s been months since I was ill. So tell me what really happened.”
“The night we arrived back from Boston, you were poisoned in your sleep. An aerosol containing a genetically altered snake venom was sprayed in your face so you could inhale it, and it very nearly killed you.”
Even in the gloom of his office, he could see the shock on her face. “Wh-wh-what?”
“You flatlined three times before they found the right antidote to reverse the effects. It caused near total organ failure and your brain to swell. We couldn’t know how much damage had been done, so you were put in an induced coma for a long time until you were clear of all symptoms.”
Mitch paused, just the retelling of those hellish weeks were enough to cause a lump in his throat.
“You hung in the balance for a while, but then started to recover, but something else happened to cause a setback.”
“God! What else?” Jamie asked, still trying to take is all onboard.
“You had a miscarriage.”
“Wh-what?” this time it was barely a whisper. “I was pregnant?”
“A little under a month...I’m so sorry, sweetheart.” He could see her eyes starting to tear up, his own struggling to stay dry.
“I lost our child?” Jamie stared at him, tears spilling over unheeded.
“It wasn’t your fault...” Mitch started to say, but Jamie shifted on the couch, putting space between them.
“Let me get this straight, because right now I'm only hanging on by a thread. Abigail Westbrooke, Abby, who was on Jackson's team, tried to murder me, in fact, did manage to kill me before I was given the antidote. Then, during my so-called recovery I miscarried our baby, so she was liable for attempted murder and actual murder. Do I have that right?”
“Yes.”
“And now...now you tell me that instead of being locked up somewhere in a cell and throwing away the key, she’s somehow escaped?” Her anger was palpable.
“They didn’t send her to jail, they kept her at a secure research facility, which she escaped from with help from the Shepherds.”
Jamie reared back. “The Shepherds?”
“Exactly. The ones you told me about months ago. They might also be behind the release of those hybrid animals seen in Patagonia. The research found on Abigail’s laptop seems to suggest she was working towards creating a hybrid in theory...”
“And now she's done it in practice, very successfully if those things breed quickly.”
“Quite.”
Jamie got to her feet, putting more distance between her and the couch. She paced to the window and stood there for a few moments before turning to face the room again.
“I’m going home....”
“I’ll come with you...” Mitch started to say, but Jamie cut him off.
“No. I'll send Phillip back with the car. I need...I need some time.” Without waiting for an answer or argument, she hurried out of his office, almost running. Mitch watched her go, his shoulders slumping as he lay back on the couch, his hands coming up to cover his face.
Phillip collected him an hour later. Mitch looked up from his desk. “How is she?” he asked.
“Flis is with her.”
Mitch nodded. “That’s probably for the best.” He started to put papers into his satchel, along with his tablet and notebook. “Been a hell of a day, Phillip.” He switched off the desk lamp and walked to the door.
The drive home was accomplished as quickly as possible, the road still largely empty of traffic, despite the news about the dissemination of the cure and the positive results so far. Phillip parked the car and accompanied Mitch into the lift, the two men walking the empty hallways together in silence.
At the door to the apartment, Mitch turned to the younger man.
“Thank you. I’ll call you tomorrow, but I think we’ll be taking a day off.”
“Understand, Dr. Morgan. I’ll be ready when you need me.”
Mitch swiped his card and entered, the entrance way lit, but the room beyond clothed in darkness. He carried on through the unlit room until he reached the main bedroom. There, he paused and knocked lightly on the door. Flis opened the door.
“Dr. Morgan...welcome home.”
“How is she?” he asked. Flis pulled the door open wider and gestured for him to enter. He dumped his gear on the floor and stood staring at the bed, Jamie lying under the covers with her back to the room.
“Jamie got a little worked up, so I gave her something to help take the edge off.”
“Thank you, Flis. I’ve already told Phillip we’ll be taking tomorrow off, so...”
“Sure. You have my number if you need anything. Goodnight, Dr. Morgan.”
“Goodnight, Flis.”
Mitch went about the business of getting ready for bed, moving about the room as he would normally do, using the bathroom before switching off the main room light, leaving only the bedside lamps to illuminate the room. During all of this Jamie hadn’t stirred, Mitch leaving on an undershirt and boxers before climbing into bed, taking off his glasses and switching off the light on his side. He lay on his side facing her rigid back. “Jamie?” He waited patiently and at length was rewarded by her turning on to her back to look up at him.
“Tell me everything,” she demanded, her eyes red from crying.
“The night we came back from Boston, she was hiding in the apartment. She had a scrambler so she never appeared on the security camera’s but that was found in her locker so we know how she did it. She administered a sedative to me first, then the poison to you. I didn't wake up until nearly midday the next day, giving the poison plenty of time to do its worst. You were already close to death when I tried to wake you. I called the switchboard, they sent a medical team and you were rushed to Bethesda for treatment. I was tested but obviously not affected by whatever was killing you. They had you in isolation...” He paused, the pain coming back of those anguished hours. “I saw you flatline, the first time, and thought you’d died, but somehow they brought you back.”
“How did you know it was her?” Jamie asked, her voice neutral.
“It had to be someone within the Taskforce, someone who knew where we lived, who could find out our apartment number and smart enough to get themselves in and out without being caught. We decided to set a trap...”
“We?”
“The security team, the FBI, anyone who wanted to keep me as head of the Taskforce. In those early days, you were hanging on by the thinnest of threads, your chances of surviving were slim to none. I wasn’t prepared to let whoever did this getaway or bury the evidence, so we came up with a simple ruse to flush them out. I pretended you were actually dead when I went into the office. I held a meeting in the conference room and announced that everyone would be searched and interrogated until the perpetrator found. Abigail cracked under the pressure and tried to escape. She was caught, along with all the evidence of what she’d used on you, and taken away by the FBI. Knowing what she’d used meant we now had more than a fighting chance and you responded well to treatment, but
you’d still gone a long time with the poison compromising your body, so your recovery was protracted and they put you into an induced coma.”

“What did Jackson have to say about it all?”

“He was shocked, understandably, but the FBI whisked her away before he had a chance to confront her. Probably just as well given what I know now…”

“Because she's escaped?” Jamie asked.

“No. Because she is Jackson's half-sister, something he was obviously not aware of.”

Jamie looked confused. “But surely, someone would have checked on her background, her keeper?”

“All whitewashed, possibly by Robert Oz, her father.” Mitch told her. She sighed deeply.

“What happened then?”

“They were going to bring you out of the coma. You were very frail, but they hoped that your brain had recovered sufficiently. You were off the ventilator and breathing on your own, plus everything seemed to be functioning properly. I don’t know how the pregnancy was missed, or why I never told them that you’d missed your injection and your period. I should have…” He stopped, overcome with images of what he’d seen. “There was so much blood, you were hemorrhaging. When they tested the sheets…” He stopped again, unable to go on. He drew in a shuddering breath. “Afterwards, it was decided to keep you under until you healed. When they finally brought you out of the coma you were very frail and seemed to have difficulty…you were so confused and didn’t seem to understand very much of anything, so it was decided that we’d keep things simple and say you have suffered a serious bought of pneumonia to explain away your condition and the need for you to regain your strength, hoping that along the way your brain would mend itself the way your body had done.”

“Am I damaged?” she asked, Mitch giving her a baffled look.

“Damaged?”

“Will I be able to get pregnant again or is that all gone?” her voice shook and he wanted so badly take her in his arms.

“Apart from a small tear, there was no real damage done to anything inside. They gave you a thorough physical before you left the hospital to come home and there is no reason why you can’t carry a baby to full term.”

“I don’t remember that, the physical, I mean. I really was muddled back then, wasn’t I?”

“Just for a while, but that's all in the past, now you’re just as you ever were.”

“Except I’m going to be back in her cross-hairs, a target for Abigail to take pot-shots at.”

“No way. There is absolutely no way she can repeat what she did before. All the weaknesses she exploited have been plugged and strengthened. We’re safer here than anywhere else on Earth.”

Jamie gave him a small smile. “Nowhere is safe when a crazy person is determined to hurt you. I know you believe what you say, but please admit to me, if not to yourself, that now you know she’s out there, there is nowhere safe for us. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, they say. She’ll come for you one day, Mitch and she’ll ride roughshod over anyone she perceives as in the way.”

Mitch stared at her, knowing the truth of what she said, but having nothing to refute it.

“What are you saying?” he asked.

“I’m saying…” she paused, shaking her head. “I’m saying that if we are to survive whatever she is planning for us, we need to be a lot smarter in regards protecting ourselves. Abigail Westbrooke won't want me to survive a second attempt, so she won't use the same weapon twice.”

Mitch let out a long-held breath. For a moment he had thought she was going to suggest she go away somewhere, remove herself from his life to keep herself safe, and in all conscience, he wouldn't have placed obstacles in her path, if that was what she wanted to do. Instead, she was talking about taking better precautions to prevent Abigail having a chance to try and murder her again. His relief was like a rush of adrenaline through his body, his muscles shaking as he let himself fall back onto the pillows.

“Mitch, what's the matter?” Her voice seemed to come from a long way away.

“I thought you were going to leave me...leave and never see me again.” He felt the bed covers shift as she drew closer, sitting up so she could look down into his face.

“Is there anything more I need to know, or have I had all of it now?” she asked.
“No secrets left to tell, cross my heart...” he made a motion with his finger over his chest.
“You know, I could be pregnant right now,” she murmured, lowering herself so her head settled heavily against his shoulder, his arm naturally wrapping around her back to hold her close.
“We'll do a test in the morning to find out.” He forced himself to relax, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. Jamie settled herself against his side, listening to the slightly fast beat of his heart.
“I really died?”
“Three times. I felt like I died myself each time. I don't ever want to go through that again,” Mitch muttered into her hair.
“Then we'll just have to be smarter than she is, won't we?”
“God, I love you.” Mitch couldn't bear it any longer and turned on his side to face her, wrapping both arms around her and enveloping her with his body. “Forgive me.”
Muffled as she was, she almost didn't hear his whispered request. “There's nothing to forgive. You did what you thought best at the time. Who's to say I wouldn't have made the same decision given the set of circumstances.” She snuggled closer, rubbing her face against his t-shirt covered chest.
“Just don't put me to the test anytime soon, I really don't think I could cope with any death bed scenes right now.”
“Okay.”
Sleep stole over them, their tight hold on each other never relaxing while they slept, the morning finding them still clasped together, the secrets and demons of past actions left behind to haunt the dark hours of the night.
One down, how many to go?

Chapter Summary

Mitch predicts the future, Jamie prepares for the future.

The Taskforce was being shut down. That not wholly unexpected announcement was made a week later. Reports were flooding in from around the world that the animals were returning to their normal behavior patterns, no longer attacking indiscriminately, no longer creating packs of disparate animals to harry and attack populations centers, it was over. Mitch agreed that the first phase of the mutation was over, but it was hardly time to break up the band. His arguments were listened to and promptly rejected, the Taskforce was no longer needed and the university wanted its premises back.

He expected and got a visit from the man in the very nice suit, the agent that seemed to be the go-between for those funding and overseeing the project, and those on the cutting edge.

“Dr. Morgan?”

“Wondered when you would show up?” Mitch sat back in his chair and waited for the agent to be seated.

“I imagine you are not particularly happy about the current situation?”

“Understatement of the century. I’ll agree that our work on the cure for the animals can be ticked as completed, but what about the hybrids? What about the mutated human? Those haven't gone away, there was a report of another one only this week, and the Team in South America have reported further incidents of the Razorbacks spreading further afield...”

“Razorbacks?”

“Jackson's name for the wolf hybrids...it was deemed as good as any.” Mitch shrugged. “So what's going to happen to that research?”

The man in front of him steepled his fingers. “You are quite right, those two issues have not, as you say, gone away. As you know we have concluded, based on the information downloaded from her laptop, that Abigail Westbrooke is behind this release of the hybrids, but so far we have been unsuccessful in tracking down her base of operations.” He indicated the room with a wave of his hand. “When all of this is disbanded, we want to keep you on, plus a small selection of people, handpicked by yourself, to carry on the research into these ongoing anomalies.”

Mitch narrowed his eyes at the agent. “What are you not telling me?”

“That's not what I said. There's something else, something that's got you in a twitch...”

“Dr. Morgan, I am only here today to ask you to consider continuing your work in regards the hybrids – Razorbacks – and the human variants. Do you need time to consider, or can I have your answer now?”

Mitch looked at the agent, seeing nothing in his poker face to tell him what was up.

“I'll head up your new team. You know perfectly well I could no more walk away than fly to the moon. We've only just started on studying what is happening to the specimens we currently have.”

“Good. Then I will get the ball rolling to find your new premises and a new home.”

“Not going to tell me anything, huh?” Mitch got to his feet, the agent doing likewise. “I'll email the arrangements if you'll compile the list of personnel.” The man held out his hand and Mitch shook it. The two men stared at each other for a moment, then the agent dropped his eyes and turned to leave. When he reached the door, he turned and smiled.

“Congratulations, by the way, on the happy event.”

Mitch scowled at the man. “No one knows about that, how the hell...?”
“Please. You really have to ask that question?” The agent shut the door quietly behind him, leaving Mitch standing behind his desk, quietly seething. His aide, Patrick, opened the door and stuck his head in.

“Need me for anything?”

Mitch waved him in.

“They're packing up the shop, Patrick. I need a comprehensive breakdown of the team that has been working on the hybrid problem, and the team working on the human problem, as soon as possible.”

Jamie had received the email and was compiling her own list, albeit a short one, of who she'd want to take with her to the new facility. Her part of the operation had only ever been a staff of two, herself included, but Jo was airforce, and Jamie wasn't sure that she would be allowed, or want to stay seconded to the new set up, wherever that ended up. As if conjured just because she was being thought of, Jo knocked on the door and entered the office.

“Hey.”

Jamie looked up. “You must be clairvoyant, I was about to call you.”

Jo sat down. “So you've heard?”

“That the place is being shut down? Yeah. I got the memo.”

The airman fidgetted a bit then drew in a steadying breath. “I was going to ask if you would be wanting me to accompany you?”

Jamie looked up. “Do you want to be part of the new team? It won't be quite so frenetic or large as what we've had to work with these past months.”

Jo waved her hands in the air. “That's not exactly a bad thing. I've been told by my commanding officer that if you need to keep me on, it can be arranged. They understand that the crisis is over, as far as curing the animals, but that there are some side issues that need to be resolved before anyone can completely be assured it's all over.”

Jamie opened her eyes wide. “So is that a yes?”

Jo smiled. “Yes, that's a yes.”

“Great. Mitch didn't know when the move would take place, but I guess we can start packing this office up. I'm not getting rid of one iota of information, so it all has to go with us. If you can organize some packing boxes, we'll make a start today.”

Jo jumped to her feet and gave Jamie a crisp salute. “Right away, Ma'am.”

Later in the day, Jamie had the unwelcome news that Flis was going to be stood down in her role, while Phillip would remain as their driver, once the final shift was done.

“But I don't want you to go!” Jamie stated. “With Abigail on the loose, I need more protection, not less.”

“And I agree with you,” said Flis, “But I don't write the orders. I'm sure that your new security team will take good care of you both.”

Jamie looked at her with a shocked expression. “How can you know that, we haven't told anyone?”

Flis looked taken aback, then glanced briefly down at Jamie's abdomen. “You're pregnant.”

“You didn't know? But...but you said 'both of us'.”

Flis shook her head. “I was meaning you and Mitch...not...you and the baby.”

Jamie covered her face with her hands. “I'm such an idiot. I don't know what I was thinking...”

Flis gently led her over to the couch to sit down, then sat beside her. “You're not an idiot, although I should mention that it's probably not a secret to everyone.”

Jamie dropped her hands and looked at her friend, for that was how she saw the woman who had started out as her nutritionist/security guard. “Are we that closely under surveillance?”

Flis nodded. “The price you pay for all this.” She indicated the room, the apartment, their lives for the past five months. Jamie looked at her.

“I kinda expected that, but...never mind, it doesn't matter now. We just thought we'd keep it to ourselves a little longer, given what happened last time.”

Flis looked at her with compassion. “It wasn't your fault, Jamie. It could have happened even despite
all the trauma you went through, it's just something that happens. There's no reason to suppose you won't carry this child without any complications at all.”

Jamie gave a small laugh. “That's what Mitch says. I guess I should believe it, if you both say the same thing.”

“Look. Even though the big issue of the animals attacking has been resolved, you and Mitch are still very important people, and I am sure that your new security team will take the very best care of all of you.”

Jamie reached over and covered her friend’s hand with her own. “I'll miss you. It's been nice to have someone, a girlfriend to talk to and laugh with.”

Flis patted her hand and smiled. “And this has been a dream assignment. I'll be sorry when it ends.”

Jamie laughed. “At the rate we're packing up at the office, it'll be sooner rather than later.”

Flis gave her a wry look. “Do you know where you'll be heading next?”

Jamie shook her head. “Not a clue. Even Mitch doesn't know the answer to that question.”

Mitch heard the familiar bloop of the skype and clicked the button, bringing up the screen.

“Hey, Jackson. Everyone okay?”

“Hi, Mitch. Everyone still has the requisite number of limbs so we're all fine here. Got your message. What's the story for us?”

“How are you situated down there?” Mitch asked.

Jackson cast a glance around the room. “Not bad, could be better, but we've made do with worse. Still no news of their origins, but there are more reported sightings, which is worrying.”

Mitch nodded. “Until we close down the Taskforce and initiate the next phase, I don't have a lot to tell you, except keep out of trouble and report anything you think we need to know. How's everyone coping?”

Jackson let out a sigh. “Chloe had to go back to Paris. Something about needing to deliver her report in person, possibly to discuss reassignment. She'll let me know. Abe...well Abe is Abe. Dariela and Logan are taking it as business as usual. One minute we're chasing hybrids, the next bored and waiting for the next sighting. Any news about Abigail?”

Mitch shook his head. “Only rumors, nothing concrete. We're looking into the source possibly being an offshore island, of which there are hundreds off the Chilean coast, but with no road access, the only way we'd be able to investigate is by air or sea. This is an incredible country with mind-boggling mountains and alpine environments, but access is ridiculously limited. You might like to ask your tame FBI guy if you can have access to satellite imagery to find this particular needle in this haystack.”

“I'll ask. Would certainly save you guys some legwork. With the downscale, we've become research and report until things become clearer. Also, need to find out how much impact these new creatures are having on the local wildlife and environment. Should be right up your alley.”

“We'll do our best. Don't forget about us down here!”

“Never.” Mitch grinned, getting an answering grin and wave from Jackson before the screen shut down.

Jamie was still sitting up in bed, her laptop open when Mitch got home. He dumped his stuff on the floor just inside the room and walked over to her side of the bed. Jamie flicked back the covers to allow him to sit down, his hand reaching up to loosen the tie about his neck.

“Long day?” Jamie murmured, setting aside her laptop and moving forward to help him take off the tie over his head, sitting cross-legged beside him.

“The longest. Glad to be home.” He leaned sideways for a kiss, Jamie placing her hands on his stubbled cheeks as they traded soft pecks, affectionate and gentle. When he pulled back he dipped his head to lean down further until his head was level with her still flat belly. There he pressed his face just above her silky pajama bottoms and placed kisses over the whole area of her exposed middle. Jamie cradled his head, combing through his hair while his hands rested on her hips. When
he sat up again they traded tender kisses, Mitch deepening the embrace until they were both breathless.
Jamie rested her forehead against his, licking her lips while they drew breath.
“Flis knows,” she stated faintly.
“Huh?” Mitch was busy undoing his shirt, his brain entirely focused on how to get himself out of his clothes in the shortest possible time.
“Flis knew I was pregnant.”
Jamie stopped moving, only one shoe removed. “How? No, forget I said that. I had a visit from our man in black, he knew too. Sends his congratulations.”
Mitch smiled and continued his disrobing. “Flis won't breathe a word.”
Jamie looked down at her hands. “I'll miss not having her around. It's been nice to have another woman to talk to, outside of work.”
Mitch shucked his trousers before reaching for his socks. “Never really did the girlfriend thing?”
She shook her head. “I was kinda caught up in stuff. Too ambitious, I guess.”
Mitch was down to just his boxers. “I don't have a wide circle of male friends either, so we're both pretty much in the same boat. You'll still have Jo.”
Jamie smiled. “I will. She's been a huge help, I really would have missed her input, she's been invaluable.”
As if only just noticing that Mitch was mostly naked, Jamie looked confused then laughed out loud when Mitch waggled his eyebrows at her.
“Do you remember what I said about the effect of being close to a pregnant woman has on me?”
Mitch leered, Jamie letting out a squeal when he reached for her, scrambling across the bed only to be caught around the waist and flipped over onto her back. Mitch quickly took advantage and dived on top of her to keep her in place, careful to keep his weight off her, his groin finding its happy place between her pajama-clad thighs.
“Enough shop talk, woman. I have an needs that need taking care of.”
Jamie giggled at his exaggerated accent and expressions. “Well, la, sir, I'm not sure little 'ol innocent me is woman enough to take care of such a demanding, autocratic bully.”
“Never a bully, only a devoted slave to your sexual mastery...” He couldn't keep going and dissolved into laughter. “God, did anyone really talk like that?”
Jamie reached up to stroke his face. “Less talk, more action...”
“Yes, ma'am.” Lowering his head, he captured her lips in a devouring kiss, heat rising from wherever they touched, the clothing still between them providing tormenting friction, his erection pressing against her core as they moved together.
“Too many clothes,” Jamie whispered against his cheek, pressing kisses along his jaw and down his neck.
Before long they were skin to skin, heat blooming everywhere, her body welcoming his so that they melded together seamlessly, rocking gently as if borne on the sea, lips and tongues speaking the language of love while hips and pelvis worked to ramp up their desire.
“You are so beautiful,” Mitch murmured, staring down into her flushed face as his lower body kept up a relentless, teasing pace. Jamie stared back at him dreamily, biting her already plump lips.
“And you are driving me mad. Fuck me, Mitch, fuck me like I know you can, make me scream.”
“Only had to ask...” He gave her a suddenly forceful thrust, then pulled out altogether. Rolling her over onto her front, he hooked his hands under her hips and pulled her up so she was on her knees, her face pressed into the covers. Positioning himself between her spread legs, he plunged back in making her moan at the sudden fullness, her hands fisting in the cover while he worked behind her, filling her to overflowing and fucking her just as she asked.

Over a period of a week, the offices they occupied became less and less populated with staff, a few people leaving each day until only the hardcore of those transitioning to the new research center was left. None of the departing staff knew where those remaining were going to be, the secrecy
demanded from those left behind much stricter than before. There was a concern that once people stopped worrying about animal attacks, they’d start to question the morality of what the team was doing with the remaining research subjects, in particular, the human mutations. No credit for the cure would be granted to any one person, much to Jamie's disgust as she thought Mitch should have been lauded for his part in it, instead the overall name The Taskforce was used to negate any requests for interviews or presidential notice. Formal statements were issued and nothing else. No medals, no certificates, no awards. Apart from those that participated, no one outside the Taskforce knew who had taken part, except those so far up the food chain they were practically a law unto themselves. Mitch shrugged off the loss of recognition for his achievements, he was more concerned at the nagging feeling that the averting the animal rebellion was only the tip of the iceberg, with much worse to come.

The final day arrived and the last of the computers and personal gear were packed, awaiting shipping. Mitch and Jamie weren't even at the offices when they were finally returned to the university, no sign in the rooms or on the walls of what had taken place there. It had all been 'sanitized' by the security team. At the apartment they took a last look around before shutting the door and taking the lift down to the basement garage. Phillip loaded their last bits of luggage in the trunk, then got behind the wheel. He was to remain with the Morgans as their driver and personal security in the new premises, but he was as much in the dark about where it was as they were. He had a destination to reach and once there, would receive further instructions. It was all very cloak and dagger. The weather suited their combined mood, the rain sluicing over the roads in an unending downpour, the windscreen wipers working overtime to keep the view forward clear. Jamie and Mitch stared out the same side window, his arm about her shoulders as she leaned into his side. Within an hour they were at the rendezvous and Phillip was given a large envelope which he promptly handed over to his passengers in the back seat.

“Where to, Dr. Morgan?” he asked, driving the car back onto the main road, still heading north. Mitch tore open the envelope, tipping the contents onto the seat between him and Jamie. “That's it.”

“Destination?” Phillip asked. Jamie had the map open and was looking at the area circled in green. “Ithaca, New York state,” she told him. Mitch was reading the letter, skimming over it before re-reading it more slowly.

“Of course, Cornell University.”

Phillip was programming their destination into the GPS. “Any specific address I need to know about?” he asked.

Mitch read the address off the letter. “Five hundred and sixteen Dryden Road. Place called Fairview Manor.”

“Right. Gonna be a six-hour trip, folks, given the weather. Yell out, if you need to stop for anything.”

“Thanks, Phillip, will do.” Mitch turned to Jamie who was looking over the security badges. She held them up and waggled them. “Looks like we'll be using the facilities at Cornell for our research base.”

Mitch took the one with his photo. “Hmm. Makes sense. The college of veterinary medicine would have everything we could possibly need to progress our study of the Razorbacks, and also trace the progression of mutation from the animal transmission to our human subject.”

“Uh-huh,” Jamie grunted. “Have you ever been there?”

“Nope. Doesn't mean I didn't look into going there when I was many decades younger.” He tucked the security badge into his jacket pocket. “It's a sweet campus and the surrounding area is well served for recreation. Beautiful in the autumn, and not half bad in the spring. I understand the Cornell Botanic Gardens are worth a visit, along with the Arboretum and wild-flower gardens.”

Jamie looked at him, impressed. “You did do your homework.”

“It was one of my top five choices, but in the end it didn't happen that way.” Mitch sent her a tight
smile and she dropped the topic, giving his arm a rub to let him know she understood.

They halted briefly for comfort stops and to pick up food and drinks, once to get petrol. The day passed slowly, both his passengers dozing, the weather outside the car not giving up on soaking everyone and everything. Traffic was noticeably heavier in the area closest to Washington, but as they headed further north and used the lesser highways, the traffic thinned and they had a clear run straight through to Ithaca.

They left the interstate at Whitney Point and used some of the county roads that wound through the chocolate box villages to get on the state road, west seventy-nine, winding its way through lush countryside, heavily covered with deciduous woodlands, dotted with photogenic farm buildings and silos. The further along the seventy-nine they traveled the more they had the road to themselves. The long stretches of low hills and dense vegetation were broken up with hamlets of picturesque doll houses, some looking ready to fall apart, others looking brand new, smartly painted and flying the flag proudly. Some houses looked like they'd stepped out of history long past, part of the original settlement of the area in the eighteenth century. Huge Dutch barns reflected the settlers origins, sprawling buildings sometimes four storeys high with numerous additions over the years as families and farming grew. All of them nestled in the endless green-clad hills and deep ponds that dotted the landscape. All too soon the big country turned into suburbia, Phillip taking a side road to join up with Dryden road, the houses now closer together and well maintained, the leafy suburb of East Ithaca within easy commute for anyone working at the University or city center. They passed the Cornell Equestrian center and squash courts, the presence of the name and teaching establishment encompassing the whole area. When they turned off into Maple Drive they passed the huge Methodist cemetery, the other side of the road revealing views across to the main campus. Within minutes Phillip was pulling up outside a two-storey brick building with the unlikely moniker of 'Fairview Manor'.

“We're in apartment two-ten,” Jamie stated, checking the letter for the details. “The next driveway will take you around the back to the entrance to the underground parking.” Phillip tooled the saloon down the requisite driveway and followed the signage, pulling up before an impressive set of gates where a security guard waited, behind glass, to check their credentials. “Welcome to Fairview, Dr. Morgan,” the guard intoned, waving them through with the level of frightening competence they'd come to expect from the organization behind the Taskforce. Mitch looked upwards and since they'd pulled up in front of the building he'd already counted a dozen camera’s, some discreet, others blatantly on show. The basement carpark was brightly lit and Phillip found their parking space easily. Glad to stretch their legs, they all climbed out, Phillip going to the trunk to get their luggage.

The lift, several car parks over from them, pinged open and a woman stepped out, her high heels clacking on the concrete floor as she approached them, smiling broadly. “Welcome to Fairview, Dr. Morgan. You made good time. My name is Sandra and I'm here to take you to your apartment and get you settled in.” She signaled for Phillip to follow and led the way back to the lift. All four plus luggage could fit comfortably in the lift, the short ascent depositing them on the second floor.

“This way, please.” Sandra minced her way to a door down a long corridor some distance from the lift and pulled a security card out of one of her jacket pockets, the door opening wide to allow them to enter. Sandra started her spiel.

“This way you have your laundry and wet room, to the right the kitchen opening out onto the dining room. Ahead is the sitting room, the windows are mirrored and bulletproof. All windows and doors are alarmed, done automatically when you advise the switchboard you are retiring. Off the sitting room is the master suite, comprising bedroom with walk-in, ensuite and office. The premises are monitored twenty-four-seven when you are away, windows, doors, ducts and any other egress similarly monitored. There are no cameras in the ensuite or bedroom, but there are heat sensors. The walk-in doubles as a panic room if needed, and is fire, flood and bomb proof. Communications are available inside, of course. There is a safe in the walk-in behind the mirror. Your phone is directly
connected to the switchboard, you have wi-fi internet access, no limits, plus the kitchen is fully
stocked. Any shopping requirements are made via the switchboard and delivered to your apartment.
Your driver will be available to be summoned either through your mobile, the switchboard or a panic
button, of which there are several situated in every room. The roof of the building is similarly
monitored and patrolled.” She turned to smile at her new charges. “You're safer here than in the
White House.” She waited for her audience to make the appropriate noises in response to her joke,
then carried on. “Full instructions on the use of the security system, the numbers for you to call and
how to work the remotes are all here on the kitchen bench, I do recommend you take the time to read
through them and familiarise yourself with the setup.”
Mitch cleared his throat. “Thank you, Sandra. I'm sure you have everything covered.”
Sandra beamed at Mitch, the wattage turned down when she smiled at Jamie, and completely absent
when she nodded to Phillip.
“I do hope you enjoy your stay at Fairview Manor.” With consummate flair, she exited the apartment
with a flourish, the door snicking shut behind her. The three left behind looked at each other then
burst out laughing, a release of tension after the long journey and a sense of the ridiculous with
Sandra's performance.
“I'm not sure whether to be hugely comforted or insanely jealous,” Jamie laughed.
Phillip tried to wipe the smile off his face, unsuccessfully. “I'll go now and find my new digs. I
expect there is an itinerary among the paperwork she left, so I'll see you tomorrow at the designated
time. Goodnight Dr. Morgan, Jamie?”
“Goodnight, Phillip,” Jamie smiled at the young man, Mitch giving him a wave before he left the
same way Sandra had.
“Then there were two,” Mitch muttered. “Wanna explore?”
“You mean you weren't taking notes when Sandra explained it all?” Jamie joked, linking her arm
with his. They approached the windows and admired the view. They were facing out the back of the
building and had glimpses of the spires and towers that formed some of Cornell's well-known
buildings. In between was a forest parkland with what they later found out was the Cascadilla Creek
running through it. As they explored they found that the window in the bedroom looked out over a
leafy courtyard hidden at the center of the manor, a charming feature that allowed the residents to sit
or stroll, picnic or just enjoy the green space in complete privacy. As the apartment windows were
mirrored, no one could look in on them, substantial curtains available to provide privacy at night.
“Wow.” Was Jamie's verdict on the walk-in wardrobe and ensuite. Mitch took a flying leap to land
on the bed, his eyes closing on a satisfied smile, leaving Jamie to explore.
“Does it have a bath?” he called out, eyes still closed, his hands folded over his chest.
“Does it even? I think this one is called a Cleopatra bath, complete with steps and candles.”
“Cool. I'll let you have your wicked way with me in it once I recover sufficient strength to get off this
bed.”
Jamie stood in the doorway of the bathroom and grinned. Kicking off her shoes she took a short run
and a flying leap to land next to him, the bed barely registering her weight, and only slightly jostling
Mitch.
“I do hope this latest research takes an awful lot of time to be completed...” she murmured, her face
buried in one of the multiple pillows now scattered over the bed. Mitch sighed.
“Can't promise, but it's likely to be several months.”
“You realize I'm going to have completely unrealistic expectations when it comes to finding
somewhere permanent for us to live.”
“You and me both, sweetheart. You and me both.”

The itinerary stipulated that Mitch visit the University ahead of Jamie, unusual but not unexpected.
Phillip collected him at the preset time and left Jamie to luxuriate in the bed until late in the morning,
when she decided to investigate the bathroom in more detail, spending quite a bit of time playing
with the multi-head shower with its various options of pressure and direction. Done playing, she
went to the kitchen and read through all the paperwork while she ate a late brunch and tried out the
expensive looking coffee machine. Reading through the literature about the building and its facilities, she noted there was a wing dedicated to all things exercise including a small pool that had jets so you could swim against them. Feeling like a complete tourist, she went to investigate, taking only her room key with her. Traipsing down the long corridor to the opposite end to their suite, she found the entrance to the gym and went inside. Near the door was a reception desk manned by a young woman who looked up as she approached.

“Good morning, Mrs. Morgan how can I help you?”
Refusing to be surprised at being recognized, Jamie leant on the high reception counter top.

“About the pool?”

“One of our popular attractions. We have a selection of swimsuits available for you to try on, and a range of towels. Once you have made your selection, they are yours to keep. We have showers with a full range of complementary shampoos, and a sauna if so desired.”

“Wow. Okay, let’s start with a swimsuit.”

The water was warm and she slipped into the pool without discomfort. The receptionist came over to show her how to work the jets and then left her alone. Jamie spent a few moments getting the settings right then started to swim, finding a rhythm that suited her. Having not swum in over a year her work out was understandably short, but she enjoyed letting the water support her, her muscles remembering the familiar strokes. When she’d entered the gym there’s been no one else using it, but by the time she switched off the jets and just wallowed in the water, there was a man using one of the weight lifting machines further down the room. She felt a little alarmed, but a quick glance at the receptionist reassured her that whoever he was, he was known and allowed to be there. Given his physique, age and absorption in his workout she assumed, rightly or wrongly, that he was possibly a security person using some free time to keep in shape. Feeling shy at being seen in her new swimsuit which, despite being relatively conservative, clung to her like a second skin, she stayed in the pool longer than she intended, hoping the man would leave so she could climb out and skip to the showers without being seen. She continued to do leisurely laps or just floated in the water until a voice broke into her peace.

“Sorry to disturb you, but I was wondering if you would be using the jets again?”

Jamie reacted to the male voice so close to where she was in the pool by jerking away as quickly as possible to the opposite side, her eyes wide and startled.

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“Sorry to disturb you, but I was wondering if you would be using the jets again?”

Jamie reacted to the male voice so close to where she was in the pool by jerking away as quickly as possible to the opposite side, her eyes wide and startled. The man who had been previously working out was crouched on the side of the pool, his expression unchanged despite her extreme reaction to hearing him speak.

“Sorry,” Jamie tried to catch her breath, her heart hammering in her chest. “Sorry, no I've finished in the pool, I was just...um...”

“Then you don’t mind if I get in and adjust the jets?” he asked.

Jamie shook her head. “Go right ahead, I was getting out anyway.” Keeping him in sight, she scooted along the edge of the pool to the steps, while he slid into the water, his back to her and made his way to where the buttons to modify the jets were placed. While his back was turned, Jamie quickly wrapped the large towel around her and made a hasty retreat, berating herself for her ridiculous reaction to someone who had done nothing more threatening than ask to use the pool. She made use of the shower-come-changing rooms and quickly exited the gym, the young woman at the desk bidding her goodbye as pleasantly as she’d welcomed her.

Walking back down the corridor with her damp swimsuit wrapped up in the towel, Jamie smiled at her stupid reaction, still smiling when she entered the apartment.

Mitch stared around the laboratory his specialist team was to occupy and grinned. Their human specimen was installed in his specially designed environment, his behavior since capture had incrementally been modified so that at least he no longer flung his waste at anyone who came too close, making studying him a might more tolerable. Nothing in the room was breakable, the lights concealed behind thick paneling, the glass walls shatterproof. His caregivers had managed, through food training similar to what they’d use on a great ape, to get him to use the facilities, his elevated
aggression tempered with sedatives in his food and water. When it was argued that it was unethical to treat him like an animal, the sedatives were left out of his food and water for twenty-four hours, the results spectacular in their violence and physical destruction before gas was released to calm him down again. In his natural state, he was as much a risk to himself as he was to anyone who approached. The decision to keep him semi-sedated was as much for his welfare as for the research team. Progress on his mutation was the primary focus, regular bloodwork and physical examinations measuring the changes to his exterior while CT scans marked the internal changes taking place. Even in his doped up docile state, he was too unpredictable to allow anyone inside the room with him. So the team working on this project measured and reported any and all changes to his physiological condition, all the time looking at a way to reverse what had happened.

His tour of where the hybrid was being studied was shorter, due to the lack of live specimens, although Jackson was working on that. His team was tracking a particular pack of the Razorbacks with a view to catching a live one, but the creatures were proving more elusive and cunning than originally thought. If they did get close enough to dart one, the others simply grabbed their unconscious pack member and dragged them away, keeping Jackson and the rest at bay until the injured member was concealed. The same applied to whether the pack member darted was a full grown adult or one of the many pups running beside their mothers. A fallen pup was simply picked up by whoever was closest and carried off without the adult barely pausing in their stride. From what little they had deduced while watching the packs, was that the pups were nurtured by everyone, any of the nursing mothers making room for whichever pup wanted a suckle, regardless of whether it was one of her litter or not. Same with any meat, those pups old enough were given the first mouthful of a fresh kill, the youngest being the first to feed, unlike most pack animals where the alphas ate first, the rest in descending order of status with the pups bottom of the list. This egalitarian arrangement meant the pups grew very fast, filling out on their mother's rich milk and the choices bits of meat and offal. Their growth rate, already accelerated, meant the time between pup to adult was shortened by several months, plus the breeding age of the new females seemed to occur at a much younger age than most wild dog or wolf packs. Jackson had done the maths – at the current rate of reproduction the one pack they were studying would quadruple in size by the end of the year, all the time moving steadily north, the only apparent barrier to their spreading into the United States in short order being the Panama canal. And this was just one pack, there was evidence that other packs were being steadily released all along the Chilean coast, the landscape mostly made up of National parks. The effect they would have on the native animal populations was equated, according to Jackson, to the effect the Conquistadors had on the Incan's. Devastation.

Although Mitch would still be the nominal head of department in the new set up, he would also have an opportunity to get in amongst the scientist and do some testing and experimenting of his own, both with the hybrids and the human mutations. In addition to those that had transferred from the former Taskforce, his good friend from San Francisco, Jim Cassady, was finally going to join the team, the geneticist keen to explore both cases. Jamie was to have her own office, with Jo as her only staff, where she would largely replicate what she did for the Taskforce, researching and creating maps to indicate locations of hybrid sightings and where reports of the human, or phase two mutations were appearing. Security was tight inside and outside the labs, Jamie particularly aware of the potential for Abigail to try and attack her again, her food all taken from the apartment, along with any liquids she imbibed during the day. She also wore a newly developed ultraslim kevlar vest, designed for her proportions, that she could wear under her ordinary day clothes and sufficient to protect her from a penetrating gunshot or knife blade to her torso. She also started to take self-defense lessons at the apartment gym. She had posed the question to Phillip about learning to defend herself, and he had wholeheartedly encouraged it, with Mitch's approval, so that they spent an hour a day in the gym – the first half hour on general fitness and muscle building, the second on methods to thwart an attack on her from every possible angle. As it happened the man she’d seen that day, when she’d gone swimming, was often in the gym at the same time and offered a few pointers that Phillip
approved off and Jamie threw herself into with gusto. After a month of intense training, she had to call a halt to the exercise regime, her pregnancy starting to make itself known and causing her to deal with all day nausea as her hormones juggled with the changes in her body and the new life growing inside. Phillip encouraged her not to give up on the gym workout altogether, but to concentrate on muscle toning and general fitness, all low impact so as to not put too much strain on her body. Swimming became the exercise of choice and she spent as much time there as possible. Before long she was a few days off reaching the end of her first trimester bringing with it a need to find a doctor to take care of her prenatal health care. As luck would have it the apartment building had an in-house Doctor, Jamie answering the knock on the apartment door and finding him standing there.

“Um...hello?”

“Mrs. Morgan, I'm Doctor Simon Taylor, and I believe you are in need of my services?” He held out his hand and smiled broadly.

“Why would I need a doctor?” Jamie fired back.

“Because you are coming to the end of your first twelve weeks and need an antenatal check-up?” He withdrew his neglected hand and pulled out a security card for her to inspect. Jamie looked at it then handed it back.

“You'd better come in.” She held the door for him and closed it behind him. “I just need to do something...” She left him in the lounge and made a dash for the bedroom, grabbing the phone, a voice greeting her when she put it to her ear.

“Hello, Mrs. Morgan. How may I help you?”

“I have a Dr. Simon Tayler here in the apartment. About six foot, blond, green eyes and about forty.”

“That sounds like Dr. Taylor. Is there a problem?”

“He's on his own. Doesn't he have a nurse?”

“I can arrange for a member of staff to accompany you while he's there?”

“Please.”

“All sorted. Anything else you need?”

“No, thank you.” She replaced the phone in its cradle and left the bedroom. Dr. Taylor was standing staring out of the window, admiring the view. He turned around when she entered.

“Um...I just had to...” she stopped when a knock sounded at the apartment door. “I'll just get that.” She opened the front door to see a young woman on the other side, wearing a watered down version of Sandra's smart suit.

“Hello, I'm Carol.”

“Hi, Carol. I'm Jamie.” The young woman entered, Dr. Taylor walking forward to meet her.

“Hey, Carol.”

“Dr. Taylor.”

Jamie approached, her hands twisting together. “So what now?”

“I'd like to do an external exam. Would you be more comfortable in the lounge or the bedroom?”

After half an hour the doctor had drawn blood, palpitated her abdomen, taken her blood pressure, her pulse, listened to her heart and done a dip-test on her urine. At the start he'd pulled out a folder from his bag, now he sat on the side of the bed and wrote up his notes after removing his latex gloves. Jamie sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

“How are you coping with the morning sickness?” he asked.

“I wish it was only the morning, more like all day nausea.”

“Any vomiting?”

“Nope. I find crackers and cup-a-soups help with the sickness.”

“The nausea is just your body sorting itself out to nurture your child. This is your second pregnancy?”

“Um...yeah. I lost my first child early on when I was...very ill.”

The doctor nodded. “That's not unusual. Doesn't mean you can't carry this child to term. You're young enough, blood pressure is fine and you're a healthy weight. Don't over exercise, sleep when
you're tired, eat when you're hungry and if you notice any spotting or cramps, any pain at all, you call me day or night.” He handed her a card. “If there's anything that crops up in the blood work I'll inform you immediately. Otherwise, keep up the good work and I'll schedule an ultrasound for next week. Will Dr. Morgan want to attend?”

“Yeah, Mitch will want to be there...” she bit her lip, hoping that she was telling the truth.

Doctor Taylor smiled. “Okay, well, we're all done here.” He looked across at Carol, briefly, who had been sitting on a borrowed dining chair just inside the room. He looked back at his patient “If you have any concerns or questions, write them down and ask me next week. Okay?”

Jamie nodded. “I'll do that.”

She followed them out and shut the apartment door behind them, immeasurably relieved. For a brief moment, she held her hands over her barely rounded belly, imagining the child growing inside.

Mitch came home later, full of excitement. “Jamie?”

“In the bedroom!” she called back. Mitch entered the room, his face animated. “Guess what?”

Jamie put her laptop aside and drew herself up against the headboard. “No idea.”

“Jackson and Abe caught a live one, at long last!” He sat on the end of the bed and pulled off his shoes. “I have no idea how they pulled it off, but they're coming back with a live specimen. Should arrive back in about three days. An airforce cargo plane is flying down to pick them up.”

“That's really good news.”

“The best. We've only been able to go so far with the samples taken from the dead hybrid. A live one will answer so many more questions, even better if it's a pregnant female. Jackson couldn't specify as they didn't have the right cocktail to knock it out to check the sex.”

“I imagine the hybrid team is excited.”

Mitch grinned. “They were wondering how they were going to fill their time. How's your day been?”

“Oh, not much. Had a visit from the in-house doctor...”

Mitch froze, halfway through unbuttoning his shirt sleeves. “What happened? Is there something wrong?” he twisted to see her better.

“Nothing wrong, Mitch. I mentioned only the other day I should start to look for a pre-natal doctor, remember? Well, apparently whoever is keeping tabs on us decided it was time and sent along Dr. Simon Taylor to check me out.”

Mitch's eyebrow climbed above his glasses frame. “He what?”

Jamie reviewed what she'd just said and giggled. “Not like that. He gave me an external exam. I wasn't on my own, housekeeping sent along a staff member, Carol, to keep things above board.”

Mitch visibly relaxed. “Anything we need to be concerned about?”

Jamie shook her head. “He said everything seems fine, and there's no reason why I can't carry to full term.” She waited for Mitch to comment. When he didn't she sent him a look. “You can say it, I won't take offense.”

Mitch was peeling off his shirt. “I told you so...”

“He wants to book an ultrasound for next week. He asked if you would want to come, I said you would?”

Mitch noted her slight hesitation. “Of course I want to be there. Nothing is more important than you and our child. Believe that, if nothing else.”

Jamie stretched out her hand and he took it, pressing the soft palm against his lips in a lingering kiss. “Hey, other good news is that Jim will be arriving this week to join our merry band.” He toed off his socks and dropped his trousers, kicking them to join his other clothes heaped beside the chest-of-drawers. Now only in his undershirt and boxers, he gravitated to his side of the bed and took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes. “It'll be good to see Jim again. Man, I'm tired.”

Jamie got up to switch off the overhead light. “Want anything from the kitchen?”

“Nope. Ate at the office.”

Jamie went to the keypad just inside the bedroom door and punched in the code to alert security they were turning in for the night, then padded back to the bed. Rearranging her pillows, she lay on her
side facing Mitch. He did likewise until they were facing each other, the covers thrown back.
“I missed not having you there at the office,” he said. “Jo's been busy with the unpacking, so
everything should be set up for you to start whenever you're ready.”
“What's going to happen to the hybrids, I mean ultimately?” Jamie asked.
Mitch frowned. “A question the team was asking at the roundtable, just today.” He let out a sigh. “At
this time we're just studying how it's been made, what it consists of, and if there is any way it can be
reversed or possibly sterilized, other than by surgery.”
Jamie looked at him with a puzzled expression. “Sterilised?”
“If this hybrid it allowed to breed unchecked it could reach unmanageable numbers in a very short
time. This is not some endangered species we're talking about, this is a manufactured creature that
didn't evolve naturally but was made in a test tube using bits of other animals. It could become a
dominant predator on any continent. Right now it is trying to take over South America, soon it could
find a way into the North American continent and populate all points in between, from coast to coast.
This animal is like an aggressive weed, that if left unchecked could spell the end for many of our
endangered mammals, let along the effect they would have on domestic stocks and don't forget
people. We've yet to learn the effect of a hybrid bite on a human. The dead specimen had venom-
tipped spines and we suspect the pronounced canine fangs were also poisoned, but we have yet to
find out. I'm hoping a live specimen will answer most of the outstanding questions we have about
how it all works. The one answer it can't solve is why? Why create such a dangerous and
uncontrollable animal? What purpose is there in allowing it free rein to decimate and disrupt the
entire food chain?”
“Wow. That's a lot of questions.” Jamie reached out to stroke her fingers over his cheek, dragging
her fingertips against the stubble roughening his skin. “Shame you can't capture Abigail and get her
to answer them for you.”
“Believe me, that would solve a whole host of problems to have access to the source. We have her
initial notes from her laptop, but those were the early stages with some baseline experiments. She
obviously is being resourced by someone with deep pockets, we're assuming these Shepherds are
behind her for some reason only known to themselves.”
Jamie lifted one shoulder. “Maybe instead of checking into the hybrid whereabouts, I should look
into the Shepherd organization. If we could get our hands on a member, they might know something
that could blow this all wide open.”
“Great minds think alike...I spoke to our man in black and he's negotiating to get you access to
military grade satellite imagery, to aid in the search to find where the Shepherds might be hiding their
base, which in turn is probably where the hybrids are originating from.”
“Ergo, where Abigail Westbrooke is located as well.” Jamie finished.
“Quite.” Mitch stared at her for a moment, his eyes heavy-lidded but warm and full of emotion.
“Have I told you lately how smart and beautiful you are?”
“Probably, but I never tire of hearing it. Have I told you today that I love you?”
“You tell me all the time, and not always in words.” He leaned forward and placed a soft kiss on her
lips, his fingers tucking a strand of coppery hair behind her ear. “But it's always nice to hear the
words...”
Jamie moved forward until they were pressed together, chest to chest, arms wrapped around each
other, lips trading soft kisses and murmured words of love and appreciation. Despite his best
intentions, weariness got the better of him and Mitch fell asleep in her arms, his head heavy against
her neck. Snagging the covers with her foot, she dragged them over them both, shifting to get
comfortable, a warm and relaxed Mitch pressed close to her heart.

Mitch stared at the black and white, grainy image currently occupying a wooden frame propped up
on his desk. Having been there when it was taken he could pick out the details where, to anyone
else, it would have looked like nothing at all. It was a screenshot of his child, of his and Jamie's son or
daughter. Dr. Taylor had been pleased with the measurements taken, showing that everything was
growing normally with no signs of problems with the placenta or umbilical, the tiny flutter of
movement indicating the heart beating, supplemented when the doctor placed a mic over Jamie's abdomen to pick up the faint but steady whooshing noise of the baby's heart. He had found himself overly emotional during the whole procedure, probably because he missed out on a lot of the antenatal stuff that Audra had done while he was away from home and she was pregnant with Clementine. Not this time. This time he was going to be a part of everything. Jamie just beamed her way through the whole process, staring at the monitor with rapt attention, turning to look at him every now and then, reaching up to wipe away his happy tears before returning to stare at her baby. The doctor gave them a printout and recording of the session, glad that he had nothing untoward to report.

Now Mitch stared at the photo and marveled that he'd been given a second chance, not only with love but with a new life as well. In a little under six months he was going to be a dad – again. For that reason alone, he couldn't wipe the broad smile off his face. He picked up his mobile and made a call. It rang a few times then it was picked up.

“Dad?”
“Hi, Clem. Whatcha doin’?”
“Just about to take Henry for a walk.”
“Great. Um...I wondered if we could talk for a bit before you do.”
“Sure. Whatcha want to talk about?”
“Well. You know that Jamie and I are together, I told you about all that.”
“Yeah. So?”
“Um...well, I wanted to let you know that before the end of the year, you're going to have a half-brother or sister.”

The silence on the other end of the line stretched and he winced. “Did you hear what I said, Clem?”
“I did, Dad. Jamie is pregnant. Does Mum know?”
“No, only you and I. I'm not saying you can't tell her, but she's not going to be too happy about the news.”
“No. She won't. I don't think I'll tell her. Will I be able to come and stay and see the baby when it's born?”
“I'm sure that can be arranged. I would have done something about that before now, but with the shift to a new place, and I'm so busy at the lab, the timing has been all off.”
“That's okay, I understand. With the animals cured, the schools are getting back online, so I'll be busy with catching up for the next few months anyway.”
“We'll sort something out closer to time, sweetheart. I'll certainly talk to you before then, anyway.”
“Okay. I'd better go, Henry is making a fuss.”
“Give him a pat for me. Love you, Clem.”
“Love you too, Dad. Let Jamie know I hope she and the baby are fine too.”
“I'll pass that along. Bye now.”
“Bye, Dad.” He listened to the dial tone for a second or two before shutting off the connection.

Blowing out a breath, he congratulated himself that the call had gone as well as could be expected.

Another week trickled by and the new, live hybrid arrived and along with it, Jackson, Abe, Dariela and Logan. Chloe was due to fly in from Paris next week, then the team would take a well-earned break after being debriefed and all their information added to the collective store of knowledge. Jim Cassady also finally put in an appearance, diving straight in when he got his first look at the human mutation, his appetite whetted to winkle out the secrets hidden in the evolved man's DNA. The live hybrid was hard to manage at first, several previous concoctions having to be rejected and a new combination found to not only settle the animal but knock it out without harming it, allowing for the more comprehensive examination to follow.

Mitch was in there, boots and all, the hybrid team working cohesively together to solve the riddle of the creatures and find a way to control or inhibit them before they overran the entire American continent, north and south. Jackson and Abe's observations on behavior and relationships within the packs was supplemented by Logan and Dariela's reports concerning the pack's tactics and cunning,
their hunting behavior and working together as a whole. It all added to the overall picture they were creating of the animal, the most in-depth study of any mammal to have been done for a very long time. The difference being that this creature had been created in a laboratory, not evolved in nature. The ultimate goal was to find a weakness that could be exploited while not putting any other species at risk. Attrition was an obvious solution, but at the rate the hybrids were breeding and spreading, attrition wouldn't achieve much in the long run. Something else was needed, something specific to their breed. Mitch was scheduled to fly to DC to present an in-depth analysis to an American health symposium, with the outcome to have some ideas for limiting and eventually eradicating the hybrids. In the meantime, new packs were being reported invading territory up and down the coastlines of Argentina and Chile and always moving steadily northwards as if driven by some biological imperative.

Jamie was pleased to see Dariela again, the normally taciturn Ranger spending some of her downtime in their office, helping Jo track the progress of the Hybrids from the sources and contacts they'd made in Patagonia. Dariela was also keen to add her help with the satellite photographs that were waiting to be inspected, the search for the Shepherd's base as much of a priority as anything else. News was trickling out of Chile about hybrid sightings, also from Argentina, as far north as Santa Rosa. Few of the reports were making the national news elsewhere, but enough were getting through, aided and abetted by the internet, to raise awareness of their existence. Whispers were starting to do the rounds of a modified version being created by the Noah Initiative to use an alteration of their TX gas to specifically wipe out the hybrids before they reached the border States. This threw up violent arguments from both sides, not least from the South American governments concerned about the effect the gas drop would have on their domestic animals and wildlife. Having been thwarted in his efforts to action the Noah objective against the world's animals, General Andrew Davies now pressed to make his option the only feasible defense against the potential hybrid invasion from the south. To counter this hysteria was largely the reason Mitch was going to present their findings, as well as, hopefully, a plan to limit or eradicate the creatures forthwith. As in all things, time was of the essence. Knowing the limits of the former scientist, now general, Mitch wondered how the militia group was able, without access to the hybrids themselves, to modify their TX fourteen gas to target only one animal group. Either they were syphoning off his team's research via a mole in the organisation, or they had their own tame scientist who had insider information on the hybrids, potentially a former Shepherd who had defected, or the Shepherds themselves, a direct partnership between Davies and the rogue group, of which Abigail was potentially a member. In a warped sort of logic, it made sense. By drumming up subversive support for the gas drop, the Shepherd could control what the gas actually did, what effect it could have on anything they chose to target. Davie's wasn't a good enough scientist to know what his cohorts were up to, and the Shepherds, by aiding Abigail in her crackpot development of the hybrids, obviously had some sort of large-scale agenda.

The problem being, no one knew what it was. Whatever it ultimately turned out to be, Mitch had a fair idea it wouldn't bode well for anyone, anywhere.
Mitch stood in the foyer of the conference center and just let the crowds eddy around him. His satchel was heavy on his shoulder, weighed down by his tablet and journal, but he ignored that, happy to remain anonymous, lost among the milling crowds. Clumps of people formed then broke up, a large group of uniformed personnel entering the crowded foyer and cutting through the people with scant regard for what they were doing, or who they were talking to before being interrupted. Mitch twisted his lips in a parody of a smile. He recognized the man striding self-importantly across the marble flooring. General Andrew Davies, the high poobah himself, promotor of the Noah Objective in all its varied and adaptable forms, the latest supposedly designed to target only the hybrid breed. Davies and his entourage were set to sweep past Mitch without pause, but then Davies turned his head and signaled for his followers to halt.

“Mitchell Morgan. What a long time it's been, ten years?”

Mitch watched the man's slow approach. “Longer, I believe, but who's keeping track? And it's Doctor Morgan.”

Davies made a face as if he was impressed. “You finally wrote something that was approved. Congratulations.” Davies looked around the conference foyer. “Are you meeting someone here? I have to admit I'm surprised to see you, security is pretty tight, invitation-only I believe.”

Mitch smiled thinly. “Actually I'm giving a talk later today, so I think my security clearance is all taken care of. I believe the talk is invitation only, as well.”

The General narrowed his eyes. “What possible subject could you have to talk about that would be of the remotest interest to this gathering?”

Mitch waved an airy hand. “Obviously someone thought I had something to say. I'd say, 'see you there', but I believe you are presenting to a different audience, so you're not the attendee list either. Instead, I'll wish you luck with persuading your potential converts your 'Noah' project is worth backing. I'll be interested to hear the science behind it explained as much as the next person.”

Davies scowled. “Oh, I'll be there to hear your little talk. I hope they are polite enough to keep their laughter to a minimum.”

Mitch maintained his faintly satirical smile until Davies stalked off, his coterie of aides jogging to keep up with his furious stride.

“Doctor Morgan?” a voice inquired, dragging Mitch's attention away from the departing General. “Yes?” He focused on the person standing in front of him. They had a security badge on their lapel.

“I'm here to provide you with your security clearance badge and escort you to the first of your meetings scheduled this morning. If you'll come this way?”

“Sure. Lead on.” Pinning the plastic badge to his jacket, he followed after his escort.

Off to the side, General Andrew Davies watched as Mitch followed an official-looking flunky up the stairs to whatever he was here for. The conference rooms were all on the ground floor, the giant ballroom being set up for the afternoon's symposium. Why Mitch Morgan, of all people, was being led up to a private meeting on an upper floor was a mystery he'd like to have an answer to.

Jamie heard the bloop of the skype and ran around her desk, practically falling into her chair before pressing the button to activate the screen. Mitch's face appeared and she smiled broadly at him.

“Hey, you, how's it going?”

Mitch grinned back. It looked like he was sitting in a large food hall, people milling around in the
background. “Just completed the first round of meetings with the movers and shakers. Not sure yet what impression, if any, I made, but they let me finish, so I take that as a positive.”
“I imagine they were secretly impressed with how much information you and the team have accumulated.”
Mitch gave her a crooked smile. “They didn't look like they were very impressed, more pained and impassive.”
“Well, your big moment will come when you present to the bigger audience. That's bound to provoke a response and lots of questions.”
“I sure wish you were here with me.”
“I will be...sort of. Remember? I'll be watching a direct feed from the conference room, courtesy of our friendly man-in-black,” Jamie teased. “So we'll all be there in spirit.”
“I'll be thinking of you,” Mitch said softly.
“As will I,” Jamie shot back. “Do you think you'll have to stay beyond the week?”
“No idea. Bumped into General Davies this morning...”
Jamie leaned forward. “Did he speak to you? What did he say?”
“He tried to make out he was the big cheese around here, but I didn't bother to enlighten him.”
“Will you get a chance to see what they're proposing with the Noah Objective take two?”
“I will. I'll probably get a recording as well. I'm keen to know where he's getting his information about the hybrids.”
Jamie looked away from the screen for a moment, then turned back. “Hey, gotta go. I'll catch up with you tonight.”
“Look forward to it. Love you.”

The software blooped and he shut down his screen, a smile still playing around his lips. He dry washed his face and looked around the food hall, wondering if he should get something to eat, or wait until after the presentation, when his nerve will have settled down. He made to get up, but suddenly a woman sat down in the chair opposite. The hair was blond, which threw him for a moment, then recognition kicked in and he sat down heavily.

“Abigail.”
The woman addressed had certainly gone to extraordinary lengths not to be recognized, her hair color the most obvious, her brows also dyed, but there was no mistaking the dark, heavily lashed eyes pinning him in his place, nor the generous mouth currently curled up into a triumphant smile. “Doctor Morgan...Mitch...” she drawled, leaning forward and resting her chin on her hand, elbow resting on the table top. “What a pleasure to see you here...”
“For you, maybe, but not for me.” He turned his head to look for anyone wearing a security uniform but he drew a blank. Twisting around he found her regarding him with a heavy-lidded stare and a seductive smile on her lips.
“Looking for someone? I assure you that even if you manage to snag a security guard, my cover story is ironclad, as is my security clearance. It's probably higher than yours!” She gave a giggle that made the hairs on Mitch's neck stand up. “By the way, how is the little woman?”
Mitch snarled. “Don't you mention her fucking name, don't talk about her, don't even think about her.”
“Or what?” Abigail blinked at him, wide-eyed. “Are you having fun trying to figure out what makes my pets tick? I assume you're still working on the first series? They were fun to create and let loose, so easy to train.”
Mitch narrowed his eyes at her. “First series? What's that supposed to mean?”
“It is amazing what one can do with the right incentive and resources to draw upon. My pets were only the start, a distraction to keep you busy while I worked to bring forth the jewels of my collection.”
Mitch stared at her, his mind working. Losing his temper wouldn't profit anyone, she was here and an opportunity to get some answers. “If I ask you a question, would you answer it truthfully?”
Abigail regarded him narrowly. “What is buzzing about in that busy brain of yours?” Mitch sat back in his chair and forcibly relaxed his shoulders, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m curious. No one creates a creature, a mix up of different DNA, a cross-species hybrid, for no reason at all. I don’t really know you, but I’m curious to understand why you did it?”

Abigail sat up, tugging at her tailored jacket and smoothing her hands over her torso, preening. “My, my, the great Doctor Morgan wants to have a rational conversation with me? How sweet. Unfortunately the why’s and wherefore’s are not for you to know. Of course, if you were to join me and become my scientific partner, well, you’d be able to find out every little thing you ever wanted to know. Everything,” she purred.

Mitch stared back at her, his expression giving nothing away. “That’s never going to happen. By introducing your pets you have created a devastating ecological disaster. By not giving up your information about how to stop them, that makes you an environmental terrorist.” He suddenly stood up and started shouting for security. Just as quickly Abigail stood up and pulled a syringe out of her pocket and jabbed it into Mitch’s neck. She saw people in uniform running towards her, the people in the food hall scattering before them. Spinning around she started to walk quickly away, mixing with the people evacuating the open space. Mitch was still on his feet, his hand pressed up against his neck but before the first security guard reached him he started to crumple to the floor. Abigail ducked into the ladies restroom, ripping the wig off her head, as well as the wig-net keeping her natural hair contained. Both were discarded into the rubbish bin, then she took off her jacket and reversed it, changing the color, the same with her skirt. Finally, she darkened her brows and dashed a dark red lipstick over her mouth, the different components transforming her, the final touch a pair of glasses to complete her new ensemble. Then she walked out into the chaos. Medical staff were milling around the table she and Mitch had been sitting at, the security guards rounding people up and taking brief descriptions of what happened and who was involved. Abigail herself was asked the same questions, her responses fooling the guards to let her go, their search for a blond in a chocolate brown suit thwarted by a wavy-haired brunette with glasses in a blue suit with black trim. With a last glance at the crowd around Mitch, Abigail left the food hall, and ultimately the building, the first stage of her plan completed.

Jamie sat at her desk and waited impatiently for the conference, and Mitch’s presentation, to start. It was already half an hour past the time he was scheduled to speak and she was starting to get anxious. Jo entered the office and walked around the desk.

“Still nothing?” she asked. Jamie shook her head.

“No, not a thing...oh wait, someone is finally coming on to speak...” Both women stared at the screen and listened.

“Ladies and Gentlemen we are sorry for the delay. Our first speaker, unfortunately, is unable to be present due to a sudden illness. In his place we will have the other speakers as detailed in your program, starting with the second speaker – Dr. Welon Singh of the Richardson Institute....” Jamie slammed the lid of the laptop down and jumped to her feet.

“Where’s that agent’s phone number?”

Mitch jerked awake, his eyes blinking open to a world out of focus. A hand appeared with his glasses which he grabbed and put them on. Looking up at the person who was standing beside his bed, he saw his favorite FBI agent. Mitch swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, his head spinning for a moment. He gripped the side of the mattress to steady himself then looked up at the agent.

“Did you get her?” The agent shook his head. “She managed to leave the building before we could shut it down.”

“Dammit. We were expecting this and she still managed to escape.” Mitch groaned and covered his face with his hands for a moment. “How long was I out?”

“About an hour or so, and before you ask, we have no idea what she injected you with.”

“Dammit. I need to call Jamie, she’ll be wondering what the hell happened to me...”
The agent cleared his throat. “Already done. She was on the phone to me when you were a no-show at the talks.”
“**You didn't tell her about this, I hope, she has enough to worry about...**”
The agent shook his head. “Just advised her they'd been a change of plans and you were to speak tomorrow instead.”
“Thank you.” His head significantly clearer, Mitch got slowly to his feet. “I'm guessing this is my hotel room for the night?”
“You gear was all moved here. Better security and less chance Abigail can get inside.”
Mitch let out a laugh. “I wouldn't take bets on that. Anyway, I think she'd already done what she came here to do.”
“What was what?” the agent asked.
“See me, of course. I imagine she thought my curiosity about what she'd been doing would mean I'd remain silent, just to find out what I could. I didn't and I won't, so that part of the plan has failed.”
“And the injection?”
Mitch shrugged, rubbing his neck. “A distraction to keep security busy while she made her escape.”
“Possibly. Or something to keep you out of the picture?”
“If it was, it didn't work. I'm up and about and none the worse for wear.” Mitch fired back, stalking across the room and back. “I am famished...”
“Room service. Don't need to give her opportunities. I'll leave you now and return in the morning. Sleep well, Doctor Morgan.”
Mitch nodded and waited for the agent to leave before sitting back down on the side of the bed. He'd put up a good front, but in truth, his head was pounding and he felt a little nauseous. A flask of water sat on the bedside table and he gulped down half of it before putting it aside. Feeling tired, despite his previous unscheduled nap, he lay down and closed his eyes, only intending to rest for a moment.

Jamie sat at home, in the apartment and fretted. She's spoken to the FBI agent, certainly, and had her fears laid to rest, somewhat, but hadn't actually spoken to Mitch since his call that morning. The agent had been scarce on details, only assuring her that nothing was wrong, that Mitch would be giving his presentation the following day, and not to worry. She hated being patronized, but despite calling and leaving messages, so far Mitch hadn't been in contact. Tired and upset, she pulled the covers up to her ears and prepared for a horrible night.

Mitch woke the next morning with a clear head but a mouth that rivaled the Sahara for dryness. Sheding his clothes, which he'd slept in, he took a shower and shaved, glad the headache was gone along with the nausea. Getting dressed he hurried out the room, the satchel over his shoulder, and headed downstairs to find something for breakfast. He was ravenous and made a fair headway into everything that was on offer, as well as several cups of coffee. His appetite appeased, he headed for the conference information desk to find out exactly when his presentation was due. Despite the shower, his skin felt tight and itchy, his clothes not fitting which was irrational, but that was how it felt. To take his mind off things, he entered the ballroom to do a run through of his presentation, spending the next hour checking that everything worked as it should. As he was the first speaker, which he should have been the day before, he was able to leave everything set up and ready. Now he just had to wile away an hour before kick off. Sitting at the back of the conference room he pulled out his tablet and dialed up Skype, it was time he talked to Jamie.

Having been up since early, Jamie pounced on the laptop as soon as the familiar chimes sounded.
“**Mitch?**”
“Hey, sorry about yesterday...”
“What happened? They said it was an illness?”
Mitch smiled reassuringly. “Nothing major, must have been something I ate. I'm scheduled to start my talk in about half an hour, so you'll be able to see with your own eyes I'm all okay.”
“I tried to call you last night...”
“Yeah, sorry about that, I was pretty wiped out. I'll make it up to you when I get home.”
“I'm just glad you're fine now. I can't wait to see you back here again, I miss you.”
“Miss you too, sweetheart. I'll be back before you know it.” He looked around and saw people
starting to drift in and find their seats. “Nearly showtime. I've gotta go.”
“Okay. I'll be watching. Good luck. Love you.”
“Love you, too.” He cut the connection and got up, making his way down the aisle to the stage and
then behind the backdrop to await his call to appear for his talk. He absently scratched at his chest
while he waited, then smoothed his shirt down when the announcer called his name.

Jamie watched the live feed, pleased to see Mitch looking well and delivering his lecture with
aplomb. The audience was held in rapt attention until the end, then the questions started and Mitch
answered them all as fully as he could. Ultimately the discussion turned to ways to slow down or halt
the advance of the hybrids into the states, Mitch jokingly suggesting a very big fence to keep them
out, the idea not entirely dismissed. In the end, the talk went well and Mitch was able to pack up to a
creditable round of applause, several important looking people coming up to speak to him afterward
as the audience slipped away to have a morning break before the next speaker. The live feed cut off
minutes later, Jamie left with the impression that it went well and Mitch was in his element, among
his peers and holding forth on a subject he knew better than anyone.

After the talk, Mitch found himself in demand with several smaller groups of people, his idea of a
fence or wall to hold back the hybrids, thrown out at the spur of the moment, taking root and being
seriously talked about. Being a scientist, not an architect or builder, Mitch could only answer
questions in regards the impact the hybrids were having on South America, and how soon it was
predicted before they reached the southern border with Mexico. To those questions, Mitch could
only present the evidence and probably predictions of pack movements based on their behavior to
date. Still, it was enough to provoke some intent discussions about border security and the feasibility
of creating such a barrier. One of his meetings was with a contingent from Brazil and other South
American countries, all concerned about their economies and the impact the hybrids would have on
their cattle and sheep livestock. Mitch could only repeat what he'd already told them, presenting the
facts and predictions giving different probably outcomes. After his sixth conference, he was ready to
drop, his head pounding and his skin feeling hot and inflamed. When the last meeting broke up he
fled to his hotel room, glad for some peace and quiet. Preparing to take a shower he shrugged off his
jacket and reached for his shirt buttons, only to stare in disbelief at the blood spotting his shirt front.
Alarmed, he ripped off the shirt to reveal his skin, red and inflamed with score marks from his nails
and blood oozing from the scratches. Taking off the rest of his clothes, he stared down at the angry
red skin that seemed to cover him. Going into the bathroom, he inspected himself front and back and
noted that whatever was affecting him was system-wide, from his shoulders down to his ankles and
all points in-between.
“Damn you, Abigail. What the fuck did you do?”
The pounding in his head was getting worse, his vision blurring as he swayed. He thought he heard a
knock at the hotel room door, but it was too late, his vision greyed and he felt himself fall sideways,
the tiled floor rushing up to meet him, his glasses breaking on impact.

Jamie was getting ready to leave her office for the day when the call came through. Jo had already
left, and she momentarily debated whether to let it ring, but at the last moment, pick up the phone.
“Jamie Morgan,” she said into the phone, her mind not really on the call.
“Listen very carefully, Jamie, can you do that?” the female voice purred down the phone.
“Who is this?”
“Are you prepared to listen, or are you happy to let Mitch die?”
“Wh-what?”
“I have a list of instructions for you to follow. Get a notepad and pen...” the voice instructed her, as if
talking to a child. Jamie scrambled for both and sat down.
“What are your instructions?”
“I need you to ditch the security and take a cab to the address I’ll give you. Can you do that?”
Jamie stared at the phone for a moment, then put it back to her ear. “I’ll do my best...”
“You best?” the voice hissed. “You’ll have to do better than that, bitch, if Mitch isn’t to suffer for your stupidity!”
“I can do it, of course I can...what's wrong with Mitch?” Jamie felt a cold lump form in her stomach.
“Please, what's happening to Mitch?”
“Not your circus, not your monkeys. Concentrate and write down exactly what I tell you.”
Jamie wrote quickly as the voice on the phone gave her a list of instructions.
“...or maybe I should say that Mitch is living on borrowed time, so don't dilly-dally or he might run out of it all together,” the hateful voice jeered. Jamie stared at the list.
Jamie stared at the middle of her desktop, before grabbing her bag and coat and rushing out of the office.

Agent Rush smoothed his hand down his silk tie and stared through the glass window at the man in the hospital bed. He was hooked up to several drips, his torso naked but also connected to several bits of monitoring equipment. The patient's skin was blotchy and covered in weeping tears that leached thin trickles of his lifeblood into the bandaging and bed covers. When he'd been discovered naked and unconscious on the bathroom floor, the CDC had been called and the room sealed, the patient placed in isolation until a diagnosis was formed. He was still in isolation, but no longer considered infectious, whatever he was suffering from put down to the needle stuck in his neck by Abigail Westbrooke the previous day. What the substance had been was up for debate, but the effect it was having on the man in the bed was putting his life severely at risk. When the patient had finally surfaced, they’d had to sedate him instantly as he tried to tear his own skin off, screaming while he did it. They had tried to contact his bondswoman, but Jamie Morgan seemed to have dropped off the planet, security unable to find her, even tracking the cab she took, but from where she was dropped off the trail went cold. Her last phone call had obviously been recorded, but it turned out to be encrypted and came back as gibberish. Even the list of instructions she’d left for them to follow turned up with nothing, the agents assuming that whoever had given her the initial list, had changed it after she left the cab. And all on his watch. Not an auspicious start to his day.

A parcel was hand-delivered to the CDC marked attention Mitch Morgan's medical team. When opened it revealed a short note and a vial of liquid. It was the antidote to whatever Mitch was suffering from. The medical team tested it and pronounced it safe to try, the compound delivered into his bloodstream and almost instantly showing results. Under the mystified gaze of the nurses and doctors, the lesions started to heal and his skin lost the blotchy discolorations, within fifteen minutes, his body looked normal, reflected by the monitor's output as well. Almost disbelieving at the rapid rate of recovery, they could only film it for future reference, their patient starting to come out of his unconscious state only thirty minutes after the antidote was administered, despite the fact he was supposed to be under sedation. When Mitch finally opened his eyes he was met with the sight of his favorite FBI agent leaning over him.
“Nice suit,” Mitch slurred.
“Welcome back. Again.” Agent Rush smiled thinly. “I hope this is the last time I have to keep watch over your hospital bed.”
“Not my fault, blame the bad guys.” Mitch glanced past the agent to the room beyond. “Jamie?”
Agent Rush stared down at the bed covers, avoiding Mitch's gaze. “We have a problem.”
Mitch stared up at the agent, then made to get up, looking around for his glasses. A set of alarms instantly started to wail when Mitch ripped off the sticky pads stuck all over him. “Where are my glasses?”
“You broke the ones you were wearing. I found your spare pair.” He held out the frames, Mitch putting them on gratefully. A nurse entered the room, tutting over the machines, switching them off one by one and bringing peace. While she continued to divest him of the remaining monitoring pads, Mitch sat on the side of the bed, the sheet about his waist.

“What the problem with Jamie?” Mitch asked.

“She's missing. It would appear that someone contacted her and gave her instructions to avoid the usual security measure, and she's now in the wind.”

“That bitch, Abigail, she engineered all of this...fuck. Now she has Jamie and my child.” Mitch covered his face briefly with his hands. The nurse had finally freed him of all the medical paraphernalia and he looked around the room. “Am I free to go?”

The nurse and the agent exchanged a look. “From what I can tell, you are one hundred percent recovered from whatever Abigail injected you with.” Agent Rush told him.

“Then get me my clothes and get out of my way,” Mitch snarled, getting off the bed and dropping the sheet to pool around his feet.

“You might like to curb the attitude and let me help.”

Agent Rush glared at Mitch with impatience. “Then you might as well sign her death warrant. If this is the Shepherds, they just want you to stop working on the project. Okay, we'll publically take you off it, kidnappers appeased, Jamie returned. If this is a personal vendetta by Abigail Westbrooke, in some twisted way wanting to get rid of the opposition and have you for herself, then Jamie is at real risk of being terminated once you give in to her demands. You can't possibly do this on your own, you need resources that as a private citizen you are simply not privy to.”

Mitch was concentrating on finishing getting dressed, forcing his feet into his shoes even as he buttoned up his shirt, leaving it hanging out and his cuffs undone. Grabbing his jacket he got off the side of the bed and faced the Agent, standing toe-to-toe.

Rush could see the swirl of emotions tearing at the man in front of him, the rage simmering under a grim determination.

“Let me help you,” Rush pleaded. “Let me get you set up with the equipment to track any call that comes into your mobile or apartment phone, use what we have available to track down Abigail. Jamie has already narrowed down many of the leads so far, let's get feet on the ground and see what pans out. Let's get ahead of this crazy bitch.”

Mitch stared at the agent, searching the man's face for any hint that he wasn't just blowing smoke.

“You really mean that...” Mitch said softly. “Why?”

Agent Rush gave him a twisted smile. “You saw the reaction to your lecture. People listened to what you had to say, they responded to the way you presented it. They wanted to talk to you because they believed what you said. You are a valuable man, and unlike many, I don't think that the animal crisis is over just because you cured the defiant pupil mutation. I think, and many others do too, that the introduction of the hybrids, both human and animal are just the start of something that will eventually overtake the world and change it beyond all recognition. We need you, Mitch. But, if the woman
you are bonded to is taken out of your life, temporarily or permanently, then you will be lost to the world. Dramatic? Yes. You could say I've made a study of you, Mitch Morgan, and I know emphatically that if anything happens to that woman, to Jamie, you won't recover and our best asset in the upcoming battle for the planet will be useless.”

Mitch stared back in surprise, an eyebrow rising above his glasses. “I'm touched.” The sarcasm in those two words hung heavily between them. “But you are correct on one count. If Jamie and our child are not returned to me one hundred percent healthy, I will step away for good and let the planet burn. Even thinking of her in the hands of that megalomaniac bitch-with-a-God-complex is enough to make me want to tear the world apart to find her. So yes, I guess it is in your best interest to help me find my girl, for all our sakes.”

Jamie stared around at the room she'd been put in and shivered. She's followed the instructions as given until she stepped out of the cab at the designated place. Then she was bundled into a van, a hood over her head and zip ties around her wrists. Listening closely she discerned it was three woman who had captured her, none of them sounding like the voice on the phone. She suspected that had been Abigail, using a voice distorter. She had pleaded with her captors for any news about Mitch, but they had ignored her and she suspected they knew nothing about Mitch or his welfare. She had to hope that Abigail cared enough about Mitch to keep him alive, the threat just to get her, Jamie, to do what she was told. Before they'd left her to lay on the thin mattress, her captors had carefully searched her for any electronic devices, jewellery or pins that might indicate a tracking or listening device. That done, they shut her up in the back and all three climbed into the cab, leaving her alone with her thoughts and worries. She tried to be strong and keep her wits about her to try and figure out what direction they were going, but with the windows blacked out and nothing to help her, she soon gave up, the tears so close to the surface breaking through and soaking the bag covering her head. At some stage, despite everything and probably because of the rocking of the van, she dozed off, only waking when the sliding door was jerked open and light flooded the rear compartment. Hands reached for her and manhandled her out of the van, her legs shaky for a moment before she stiffened her knees to keep herself upright. The bag was completely opaque, but she could see a little sliver of the ground through the opening, which appeared to be a brick pathway with weeds growing through the cracks. The hands holding her on either side, shuffled her up some stairs then into a large open area, the floor dusty and being kicked up by their footsteps, making her cough. At length they went through another door, then another, down some more steps and into a room. The hands holding her arms let go and she swung around, hearing the women leave her, a door slamming shut with an ominous finality behind her. As she appeared to be alone she reached up and tore off the hood, her hair covering her face until she brushed it back. Turning slowly, she perused her new environment which appeared to be a larger than usual prison cell with a bed, table and single chair, toilet with sink built in and a window high up in one wall letting in light and air. She couldn't tell if the light and air were directly beyond the wall or being ducted in, it was too high to see. She took a few moments to bite through the plastic zip ties, moaning as the sensation of blood returning caused a couple of minutes of exquisite pain. She looked at her left hand and mourned the loss of her bond ring, taken with her other jewellery when she was searched. Light in the room came from a single bulb encased in a metal cage, as well as from beyond the tiny door grill that looked out onto a corridor with nothing but a wall to look at a few feet opposite. They'd left her with all her clothes including boots and jacket, Jamie thankful as the temperature in the cell was not very warm and the bed had no sheets or blankets to help in that department either. Feeling thirsty, she went to the sink which was thankfully spotless, and turned on the tap. The water ran clear and she cupped her hands to drink her fill. Her thirst satisfied she lay down on the bed and tried to relax. Of course, she'd assumed it was Abigail that had spoken to her on the phone, and held her captive now, but she wasn't a hundred percent sure. Maybe Reiden had finally got fed up with her campaign to bring them down and decided to just get rid of her and throw away the key. The more she thought about it, the more unlikely it was Reiden behind her kidnapping. Whoever had given her the precise instructions, knew more about the security set up at Cornell than anyone had a right to. And even if they questioned the
cabby, he could only tell them he'd dropped her off where he did, and she'd disappeared from there. The only comfort she could draw was she still had her specially designed Kevlar vest under her shirt, the women who conveyed her to her present location had not taken that away from her, which at first surprised her, but upon reflection suggested they didn't consider it worth going to the trouble of stripping it off her. At least it supplied another layer to keep out the cold as she huddled into her jacket and pulled her knees up to retain her body heat and protect her abdomen with the life growing inside her.

Abigail watched the woman on the monitor and wondered anew what Mitch saw in the girl. She had no style, no wit, no figure and no spark. Mind you, that was probably why said girl was still alive. Having nothing that could really rival Abigail, she was discarded as a non-entity with only one card in her hand – Mitch Morgan. She switched her attention to another screen, a red blip on that indicating where her quarry was after being released from the hospital. Now that his system had been flooded with nanites she had the perfect way of knowing exactly where he was at any given time. She also had a way of controlling him once he was within her sphere of influence. She turned back to regard the girl, noting that she was huddled on the bed, probably cold and hungry. Time to feed the animals.

Jamie started out of the light doze she'd fallen into despite the less than hospitable surroundings. Someone was outside her door, the hatch under the now-closed grill opening so that a tray could be pushed through. Another hatch at the bottom of the door was also opened and several blankets shoved through. Jamie climbed off the bed and approached the door.

“Abigail? Is that you? Please...tell me if Mitch is alright? Please?” She couldn't see or hear anything, but she felt that someone was still on the other side of the door. “Please...just tell me he's alright...please.” She begged shamelessly, hoping that the woman on the other side felt an ounce of pity.

“He'll live, but he won't find you. No one will find you...so enjoy what comforts you can.” The voice hissed the spiteful words but Jamie didn't care, the only words she heard or cared about were 'he'll live'.

“Thank you,” she whispered back, gathering up the tray and taking it to the table before returning for the blankets, wrapping one around her and dumping the others on the bed. The tray held a variety of fresh items, fruit, salad and bread rolls, along with a bottle of juice. An improvement on what she'd expected – stale bread and water. Despite being held captive, she couldn't stop the smile from curving her mouth, if her incarceration meant that Mitch was alive and well, it was a small price to pay. She could stop worrying about him and concentrate on nurturing the life in her womb, making sure that despite the current unhappy circumstances their child was still alive and given all it needed to stay so. After she finished off the contents of the tray, she lay back down on the bed and wrapped herself in the blankets, the combination of warmth and food sending her to sleep in short order.

Jo, Dariela, Jackson, Abe, Mitch and Agent Rush stood around the large map table reviewing the latest information Jamie had cobbled together from her contacts around the world on multiple forums, some of them even on the darknet. Logan had been dispatched to pick up Chloe from the airport, her return to the team delayed another week by some crisis at her headquarters. Jackson was in a twitter to see her again and would have gone himself but the current emergency needed his expertise more than Logan's.

“We know she narrowed down the islands suitable to house a complex from the number of chartered planes flying the area, plus the boat activity around some of the islands. Backed up by reports from fisherman we have a fair idea of the Shepherd's possible location.” Mitch pointed to the islands circled in red. “We also know, through a back-track through bank records, that Abigail Westbrooke is a wealthy woman, the income generated by patents on several products, formulas, whatever you want to call them, some of which were acquired at great cost by Reiden Global in the last year.” Agent Rush took over.
“Jamie also managed to track down several properties that are held under different company names, but all of them listed with Abigail as the company CEO. Several of the companies are legit, but also hold leases on buildings all around the country, any one of which could be holding Jamie.” The agent looked around at the people listening. “Because of the probable outfall, if Jamie Morgan is not found alive and well, we have been given access to call on the local police departments to check on these properties and report what they find. As a lockdown was put on all local and international airports as soon as Abigail was reported in the area, it is unlikely that she was able to smuggle Jamie out of the area by plane. Again, with the road cordons, it is highly improbable that Jamie has been taken out of state, so that at least narrows our search area.”

Mitch picked up the narrative.
“We have a battle on two or more fronts right now. We need to find Jamie. We need to track down the Shepherds base of operations in South America, the possible source of the hybrids. We need to capture Abigail Westbrooke, not only to answer for her crimes but to get information out of her about the hybrids and how to stop them. One advantage we have is in the ring I gave Jamie. There is a small tracking device embedded in it. I would be surprised if she's allowed to keep it, but if we find the ring, we may find Jamie, or who was involved in taking her. Either way, it could lead us closer to where she is.”

Agent Rush looked surprised. “You never mentioned this before?”
Mitch glanced down at his own ring, twisting it on his finger. “It's a long shot, but possibly our best starting point. If her ring is still in this state, we can find it. Her phone has a similar tracker on a permanent send setting.”

Jackson let out a short laugh. “Don't you trust her? Or are you just paranoid?” Everyone was looking at Mitch with varying expressions. Mitch lifted his head and stared them down. “I had the alterations done after she was poisoned. I trust Jamie, of course I do, I just don't trust anyone else, and my fears have been realized in the worst possible way.” He pulled over his tablet and worked on it for a few seconds. The others watched and cast glances among themselves, abashed at the depth of suffering evident in Mitch's eyes and voice. “It would seem that her personal items have been shared among those that took her.” He pointed to the tablet, everyone crowding around to stare at the small screen. “The phone is here, in motion and traveling south. The ring is here, not moving and probably sitting in a pawn shop. Who wants to go where?”

Agent Rush was already on the phone.

Abe and Jackson exchanged a glance. “We'll take the ring. What's the location?”

The next hour was a hive of activity. Jackson and Abe had left to track down the ring while Agent Rush had a team of agents from the office in Albany heading south to intercept the vehicle carrying the phone. In the meantime, Logan had returned with Chloe, the French agent brought up to speed and adding her expertise to the search both for Jamie and the Shepherds. Mitch left her with Dariela and Jo, the three woman organizing a more pinpoint search of the suspect islands to find the Shepherd hideout, while Agent Rush monitored his team pursuing the phone which was about to cross over the state line into Pennsylvania on highway eighty-six. With everyone working on an assignment, Mitch left them to it and returned to his office and shut the door. He sat at his desk and stared at the photo sitting prominently on the left-hand side. Absorbed in his thoughts he didn't notice that his computer, sitting to the right of him, had switched itself on and was being manipulated by an outside source, the screen remaining black, but showing a cursor blinking regularly in the corner. He was also unaware that the monitor's camera was also switched on and watching him.

Abigail hungrily stared at the image of Mitch Morgan, his head turned away from the computer camera, his attention all on the photo off to his left. She zoomed in the focus and narrowed her eyes as she recognized what the grainy, black and white photo actually was. “So....you got busy and decided the world needed another Morgan to add to its collection. God, this is going to be like taking candy from a baby!” She laughed at her own joke then abruptly sobered. Typing on her keyboard she sent a message to his computer.
Mitch was startled to hear a beep from his PC, knowing as he did it was supposed to be shut down. He stared at the black screen and the words scrolling across it. “Fuck!” He swiveled and moved his chair closer and started typing back.

=hey mitch hear you're looking for your baby momma=
=if you've hurt her I swear I will hunt you down and kill you=
=such violent intentions I'm glad to see you're all better now=
=fuck you, abigail, give jamie back to me now=
=i'd rather talk about a trade off and as I hold all the cards why don't I start first=
=there's nothing to trade send jamie to me unharmed and I'll leave my gun at home=
=sorry, not the sort of trade I had in mind I could just keep the breeder until she drops then I could play mummy=

Mitch felt himself grey out a little, rage making it almost impossible for him to think. He needed to be clever and emotions were just clouding everything. He took several slow, deep breaths to calm himself before typing again.

=mitch?= 
=sorry, I was just thinking about that proposition of yours the one about working as your partner is that offer still open?= 
=don't think you can trick me=
=wouldn't dream of it, abigail you've already proved yourself smarter than me, smarter than the FBI smarter than anyone I know why wouldn't I want to work with you?= 
=i did use to think you were a smart man, but then you went and married the victim not a smart move at all=
=you're right i'm a man and she came along when I hadn't had sex in a very long time you could say I was cunt struck=
=and now she's carrying your child, mitch what about that?= 
=she tricked me i thought she was on birth control turns out she managed to fool me but you were never fooled by her, were you?= 
=right again, mitch i told you ages ago she was just a victim not worthy of your attention but you didn't listen to me you bonded with her but that's not important are you willing to refute her? refute your child? and join with me?= 
=i'm not sure i'm worthy of you, abigail i've made so many mistakes you've proved that you are so much smarter than me in all things how can I compete with that? or even be worthy to work with you, let alone love you I'm sorry I was angry before I couldn't think straight=

Mitch cringed inwardly when he wrote that last line, thinking he was laying it on too thick and she'd easily see through him, but her next line proved he was on the right track.

=i want you to love me, mitch i know that once you rid yourself of the victim you'll see that I am so much better suited for you=
=i see that now i'm sorry I didn't listen to you, abigail you tried to tell me but I was stupid!=
=you were, but i'm willing to forgive you but on condition that you break the bond cast out the victim and her spawn and take me instead=
=you are too generous with me, abigail i don't deserve you or your love what can I do to prove myself worthy?= 
=give yourself into my hands=

Mitch swallowed, reaching down to slip off his ring and place it beside the picture of his child.

=i do so, willingly, eagerly see, i've taken off the ring=

He held up his hand so she could see the ring was gone.

=a good start, mitch but you will have to go further to prove you really mean what you say=
=tell me what to do and I'll do it=

Mitch mentally girded his loins for what was to come next.

=go home and wait you'll have a visitor you will let them in without making a fuss inform security beforehand so they are expecting the visitor understand?= 

=sure, abigail=
He stared at the inoffensive dots and understood completely. The computer screen went black, wiping out their conversation, even the flashing prompt was gone. Aware that the camera was possibly still on, he kept his expression neutral, placing his ring on the desk beside the ultrasound photo, which he now placed face downwards. Getting to his feet he gathered up his jacket and satchel and left his office, passing by Jamie's office but not stopping to speak to the women within. Jo looked up and saw him pass, darting out to stop him.

"Mitch?"

He turned at looked at the airman, careful to keep his expression relaxed, pleasant.

"Jo?"

"Do you want an update on our progress?"

He smiled. "I'm sure whatever you are doing is fine. I just need to go home for a bit. I'll be back later, okay?"

"Sure. We'll have Jamie home in no time, Mitch, you'll see."

"I never doubted it. See you later." He turned away, his forced smile sliding off his face as he walked to the lifts and pushed the button with unnecessary force. Once safely inside the lift car, he slumped against the wall and closed his eyes. Whatever Abigail had planned for him this coming evening, he was pretty sure it would involve him doing something that would be repugnant, distasteful and unforgivable, quite possibly against everything he held dear and a likely betrayal of his vows, official and unofficial to Jamie, as well as a betrayal of all the people he was leaving behind who even now were working to bring Jamie home. Heart heavy, knowing that whatever was to come he would do it and convincingly enough to get Abigail to release Jamie and his child, Mitch stepped out of the lift and called for his car to be brought around.

Agent Rush entered Jamie's office and acknowledged the women sitting around and taking a well-earned break.

"Ladies, any results?"

He spent the next half hour with them, going over what they'd found, what they'd managed to narrow down and what their next step would be. He passed on what Jackson and Abe had found regarding the ring, plus the report back from the police about the mobile phone. Neither report was particularly promising. The phone had been sold to the college kid via a schoolyard hustler, the ring found, as suspected, in a pawn broker's valued at a fraction of its true value, hocked by a woman with a description that could fit half the population. The phone could possibly yield some further information but it had to be handed over to the tech heads as soon as possible.

"Mitch in his office?" he asked, when all the information on both sides had been exchanged.

"Not sure. He left a little while ago to go home, but he said he'd be back. Haven't seen him yet." Jo reported.

"I'll check and see if he left a message, we were supposed to have a meeting this afternoon." Rush left the women and entered Mitch's office. Like any good agent, he visually searched the room for any indication of something wrong before fully entering the room. Seeing nothing out of place, he walked to Mitch's desk, noting right away the picture laying face down and the ring placed beside it. Instantly his hackles rose and he leaned over to pick up the ring. Something had happened and it didn't bode well for Mitch. Slipping the ring into his pocket, he put the picture back the way it should be and left the room. He poked his head into Jamie's office.

"Did Mitch seem alright when you saw him last?"

Jo looked up, her eyebrows raised. "He didn't stop in here to say goodbye, but when I taxed him, he just said he was going home for a bit. Is there something wrong?"

"I hope not. You have my number, call me if anything, and I mean anything happens around here."

"Um...okay." Jo watched him walk off hurriedly towards the lifts, his phone to his ear.

"What was that about?" Dariela asked. Jo shrugged.

"No idea."
Agent Rush first stopped at the security station to watch the footage from the same offices he'd just left. He saw Mitch enter his office and sit down, apparently focused on the small picture on his desk. Then he turned to the computer, obviously in some surprise. Then he was typing, the screen only showing text, no pictures, so obviously a conversation with someone was taking place. Then Mitch took off his ring and held it up, apparently for the webcam to see clearly, before placing it beside the photo, now turned face down on the desk. When Mitch stopped typing the screen went back to black, wiping the words typed only moments before. Then he watched Mitch get up and leave the office, get stopped by Jo, give the woman a smile before turning to the lifts, another camera angle showing Mitch looking grim as he punched the lift button as if he hated it. The lift camera showed Mitch slumped as if in defeat against the wall on the trip down before straitening up as the door opened and he walked into the carpark. Alarm bells had been tripping silently in Rush's brain, his ability to partially figure out what was going on from Mitch's clear body language. Leaving the security office he called the apartment block and spoke to Sandra, the two of them discussing what to do next. Mitch had already arrived back and left a message that he would be getting a visitor that evening and for Sandra to show her up. Rush was left in no doubt who that person would be and instructed Sandra to do just as she'd been asked. Rush then called Phillip and relayed what he knew to the driver, getting a further picture of the ride back to the apartment and Mitch's mood. Phillip described Mitch as a dead man walking, a bit extreme in Rush's opinion, but knowing who had been in touch with the man and what she was likely to demand of him, probably not a bad description. Rush knew Mitch well enough to understand that the man would do whatever it took to keep Jamie and their child safe, even if it meant that afterward, he'd possibly lose everything. Abigail wasn't doing this for money, she had only one agenda and he was currently waiting for her like a fly caught in a spiders web. Rush hoped Mitch had the balls to carry it off without killing the bitch and losing Jamie in the process.

There was nothing Rush could do now except watch the drama play out, to which end he was heading for the apartment block to monitor what happened next.
He stood with his back to the room, a tumbler of whiskey in his hand, staring out at the view with sightless eyes. He'd already had the call from security announcing his 'visitor' and he awaited the knock on the door that would sound the death knell to his future. For fuck's sake, Morgan, get a grip. Despite his preparation, his whole body jerked when that knock sounded loud on the apartment front door. Putting down the glass, he walked to the door, didn't bother to check the security feed, and flung it open. A woman stood on the other side, dressed as it heading for a night at the opera, a redhead this time, fur wrap keeping her shoulders warm, eyes sizing him up like a prime steak.

“Mitch, darling, don't keep me waiting, let me in.”

He stood aside and waved her forward, Abigail gliding past him on heels that put her on a par with him. Expensive French perfume wafted in her wake, Mitch shutting the door with the finality of a condemned man. Snap out of it, Morgan, you have a job to do.

Abigail dropped the fur wrap on the nearest armrest and turned to survey her plaything for the evening. Mitch sauntered forward and sat down, sitting at an angle and letting his arms rest along the top edge of the sofa, crossing his legs at the knee.

Abigail let herself drink him in, noting he'd shaved, recently showered and had left the top two buttons of his black shirt undone, also the sleeves were rolled up to uncover his forearms, an expensive watch on his wrist. He looked positively edible.

Abigail walked towards him, the silk of her black dress swishing ever so slightly against her thighs, the split hinting at the bare legs underneath. She sat down at the opposite end of the sofa to him, also angled so she could face him, her arm resting atop the sofa like his, their fingers almost touching.

“So, darling, you followed my request to the letter. How sensible of you.”

Mitch forced a smile to his lips. “I like a woman who knows what she wants, and tonight, whatever you want if yours for the taking.”

Abigail licked her full lips. “Do you like me as a redhead?”

Mitch flicked his gaze over her face and head. “Red looks sexy on you.”

“So pleased you approve. Now, with the pleasantries out of the way, let's get down to business. You want the baby momma released, am I right?”

Mitch nodded, resisting the urge to squeeze the breath out of the witches body. He smiled. “It would hardly prove a good start to our relationship to have her death on our conscience. She is not worth the time, let alone the bullet.

And, with her free, the authorities will leave us alone.”

Abigail let her hand rest over his, stroking circles against his skin, Mitch fighting hard not to snatch his hand away.

“Very true, darling. I like the sound of that...alone. Now, why don't you come over here and show me just how much you appreciate being alone with me.”

Mitch uncrossed his legs and moved along the cushions towards her, never breaking eye contact. With his free hand, he used it to encircle her neck, thumb resting under her jaw, lifting her chin, even as his fingers wrapped around her throat. Abigail didn't move or pull away, her ruby lips parting, dark eyes never breaking away from his. Slowly, he lowered his head and covered her mouth with his, his fingers squeezing ever so slightly, then letting go to stroke around to the back of her head to hold her in place. He felt her fingers with their long red painted nails curl themselves into his shirt front, twisting the fabric until a button popped, all the time her mouth was gliding and pressing against him, her tongue tangling and sliding over his. As kisses went, it bore no relation to the
passionate sweetness he shared with Jamie, more along the lines of the practiced technique of a consummate whore, and he'd had a few of those over the years. Keeping that image in his mind, he blanked all thoughts of Jamie from his head and kissed Abigail with a thoroughness that left her breathless. It was deep, wet and hard, apparently just the way she liked it, if her moans were any indication. When they pulled back a few inches to catch their breath, Abigail's eye glittered and she liked her lips hungrily.

“That was a nice appetizer, but I want the main course...prove yourself worthy, Mitch, prove yourself to me!”

Getting to his feet, he lifted her off the couch and carried her to the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind him. The bed was ready, with the covers pulled down and the lights low. He lowered her to the floor, letting her slide down his body, his mouth finding hers even as his fingers pushed down the straps of her dress then released the zip so the dress dropped to the floor leaving her in nothing but her expensive wig and high-heels. Holding her head between his hands, he fought not to crush her skull between his fingers, her own finding his belt and undoing it, then spending a few moments to undo the rest of his shirt buttons before moving to his pants. Thankfully his body wasn't half as conflicted as his mind and simply responded to having a naked woman pressed up against him, her fingers closing around his gratifyingly hard cock and giving him a hard stroke. Breaking the kiss he once more lifted her into his arms and carried her the short distance to the bed then laying her down. Stepping back he toed off his shoes, shrugged off his shirt and dropped his pants, underwear left off for expediencies sake. Finally, he took off his glasses and watch and laid them on the bedside table before crawling on hands and knees to where Abigail waited for him, her full breasts rising and falling rapidly as she breathed. He lowered his head and took one of her turgid nipples into his mouth, sucking strongly before letting it go with an audible pop.

“What do you want me to be for you tonight, Abigail? The tender lothario worshiping at your shrine with light kisses and whispered touches, or maybe you prefer something a bit wilder, an animal to rut with you, make you his mate, or maybe you prefer to meet the caveman who will take you and mark you and bring you pleasure before he makes you scream while he uses you. Name it and it's yours.”

Abigail was panting with anticipation, her mouth open and eyes glazed with lust. “The caveman.” Mitch gave her a feral grin, her choice suiting his murderous mood. If she wanted it rough, he could do that. With a growl and bared teeth, he pounced.

Agent Rush watched the screen with a mixture of genuine horror and all-out admiration. If he hadn't known the circumstances that had led up to what he was watching, he'd have said that Mitch was forcibly raping Abigail Westbrooke without a word of a lie. The sex was violent, selfish and yet Mitch somehow managed to avoid actually inflicting injuries on the woman, the noises she was making a testimony that she was enjoying herself to the fullest, an eager participant in her own debauchery. When it was over, the bed looked like a battleground, the combatants slain and sweaty, sprawled on the mattress, exhausted.

Mitch hide behind the arm he'd flung over his face, his throat working as he fought to swallow his gorge. His heart was slowing back to its normal beat, his skin drying as he lay on the wrinkled sheets. He tried to blank the last hour from his brain, but that was impossible. He'd delivered and more on his promise to Abigail, the woman taking his darkness and twisting it for her pleasure, his own body engaging in the rough play without missing a beat. He had almost surprised himself at his inventiveness, viciousness and downright dirty sex he'd employed to satisfy the woman currently sprawled on his bed. And yet, there wouldn't be a lingering mark on her lush body, Mitch unable to bring himself to inflict pain, other than the pleasurable kind. Maybe he was in the wrong profession and should start hiring himself out as a gigolo, satisfaction guaranteed.

Abigail stirred and rolled over to plaster herself against him, their skin sticking together, her scarlet fingers toying with his body. Somehow the red wig had managed to stay on and now the strands seemed to adhere themselves to him, binding him like chains of guilt and perversity.
“You were magnificent, darling. Everything I hoped for, and more.” She rose up on her elbow to look down at him. Mitch drew his arm down, keeping his eyes closed for the moment. Abigail drew a finger over his features, bending down to place kisses on his eyelids, his brows, his nose.

“I don’t imagine the victim has ever seen this side of you, has she?” she asked. Mitch opened his eyes making sure to keep the heat out of them.

“No. She never has.”

Abigail laughed quietly. “No, I’m not surprised. She wouldn’t know what to do with a real man.” Mitch gave her a smile as if agreeing, his fingers flexing against the sheets. “What now?” he asked. Abigail let out a sigh and pulled away from him, sitting up and crossing her legs, Indian style.

“Now we integrate you into my plans, but first, we set the victim free and you get to disappear.”

“Cool. Tell me what you need me to do.” Mitch kept his expression neutral, not reacting at all to the news about Jamie’s release.

“Get dressed. We’ll go get her together. I want her to be under no illusions, she needs to see you with me to understand that whatever she thinks she has, it’s over, done, history.”

Mitch nodded, his gaze never wavering. “Agreed.”

“To that end,” Abigail continued. “And to make a clean break, she will need to see what just happened between us.”

Mitch frowned. “Is that entirely necessary? It’s a bit cruel.”

Abigail narrowed her eyes. “Are you sympathizing with the bitch?”

Mitch shook his head, smiling to reassure her, his hand finding her naked breast and stroking the skin. “Not at all. Maybe the shock will make her lose the child and tidy up another loose end.”

Abigail stared at him for a moment. “Fuck, you can be a bastard sometimes. Get dressed, I want to get this over with so we can get out of here.”

Mitch did as instructed, feeling sick just thinking about Jamie seeing and hearing what had taken place in their bed, the things he’d said and done. He hoped, probably in vain, that she would understand that he did all this to protect her and their child, but it was a very, very faint hope. They say a picture paints a thousand words, and he’d just created an epic masterpiece of deception.

Agent Rush heard the words, almost believing himself that Mitch was the lowest form of scum, but then reality pressed in and he felt a grim appreciation for the performance Mitch was putting on. Abigail seemed to have taken it all at face value, that Mitch’s having sex with her was proof that he was totally on her side in everything. Maybe he should feel sorry for Abigail, to be so naive as to think that a man like Mitch would give up what he had with Jamie for her.

“When he asks for a copy of the tape, give him only the infrared version with sound. He doesn’t need to know about the full, technicolor version. Scrub that one and leave only the sound, no images.”

The security camera operator looked up at the agent and nodded. “Infrared and sound only. Understood.”

Mitch rang down to reception with his unusual request and was told it would be waiting for him to collect at the desk. After that, he was told by Abigail to pack a bag and take whatever he needed as he wouldn’t be coming back again. A headache was pressing against the back of his eyes and he downed some painkillers, putting the remainder in his bag. His stomach still churned so he included antacids along with anti-nausea medication, taking a dose of each to calm his insides. In the wardrobe, hidden from sight for a few moments, he opened the safe and took out one of the guns, plus ammunition, tossing that into the bag. At the same time, he wrote a hurried note which he locked inside the safe.

As a final farewell, he went over to Jamie’s side of the closet and grabbed a handful of her clothes, bringing them to his nose to smell her scent on them, inhaling deeply before letting them go. Grabbing up his bag, he left the small room, closing the doors behind him. Together they left the apartment and walked down the corridor to the lift. They met no one until they reached the reception on the ground floor, Sandra handing over a small package to Mitch, her expression professional as always, her eyes missing nothing. Outside, Mitch drew in a deep breath of the late afternoon air like a condemned man giving himself over to the guards to lead him to the
There was nothing for him to return to now, his actions would free Jamie and promise a future for their child, but unless there was a way he could put them both out of the reach of Abigail, or the bitch died, Mitch was held in a vise with no escape.

Jamie lifted her head when the door to her cell opened, her eyes taking a moment to focus then they opened wide and she threw the covers back.

“Mitch!” She launched herself at him and he caught her, holding her so tight she could hardly breathe, then he was putting her away, his expression grim.

“Mitch?” Behind him stood Abigail in the doorway, the only word for her expression was smug.

“What's happening? What's going on?” Jamie asked, backing away, not understanding why Mitch was looking at her so coldly, his hands now stuffed in his jean pockets instead of holding her.

“Mitch has secured your freedom, haven't you darling? You're free to go, Jamie Campbell.” Jamie ignored Abigail and stared at Mitch. “Is it true, are we free to go?”

“You are. I'm staying here...with Abigail.”

“Wh-what?” Jamie felt her knees start to wobble and bit her lip to steady herself. “For how long?” Abigail let out a harsh laugh. “Forever, you silly bitch. Mitch is here with me now.”

Jamie met his eyes, seeing the cold reality in them, her heart skipping a beat as she tried to rationalize the words being said to her. “But...”

Mitch moved then and grabbed her arm, dragging her forward and out of the door into the corridor. Abigail followed along behind as Mitch dragged Jamie down the hall, through several doors until they reached the outside. His fingers dug into her arm and would leave bruises, but Jamie didn't feel them, her mind numb.

“I don't understand....Mitch?” She found herself swung around and suddenly in his face. His eyes burned into hers, fierce and unflinching.

“What don't you understand? I am with Abigail now.” He enunciated clearly. “She and I had sex together in the apartment last night. Here's the proof if you don't believe me.” He pulled a small tablet out of his coat pocket and pressed a button to bring it online, then swiped the screen. Instantly an image appeared, the view from a high up looking down at two brightly colored bodies writhing together, obviously engaged physically, voices – thin and tinny but clear – calling out, the woman obviously getting into what the male outline was doing, calling his name clearly. Jamie's eyes became impossibly wider, switching from staring at the damning evidence to look up at Mitch in disbelief. Mitch swiped the screen to stop the clip and shut down the tablet.

He curled his lip when Jamie started to back away from him, shaking her head.

“Whatever suffocating figments of your imagination you thought you had with me are gone. We are nothing, you and I. Less than nothing. Now get in the car, don't say another word or I will gag you.”

He didn't wait for her to react, just wrenched the passenger side door open and pushed her onto the back seat. Behind him Abigail laughed, tossing her naturally wavy hair behind her shoulder.

“She really is rather gormless, darling. I think a demonstration is called for.”

As Jamie watched in speechless horror, Mitch went over to Abigail and drew her into his arms, one hand cupping the back of her head while he kissed her, Mitch turning them around so that he could see Jamie over Abigail's head and she could see him. He had his eyes open as he kissed Abigail, the usually warm brown gaze icy as a glacier, Jamie turning away to shut out the sight.

They dropped her off on the side of a busy road, a burner phone thrust into her hand by Mitch. For a second they stared at each other, Mitch drinking in her pale features, the trembling lower lip, and tear-drenched eyes, then he tore himself away and got back into the car. Jamie stood for a moment staring after the vehicle as it disappeared among the traffic, her brain numb, her heart shattered. Looking down at the phone in her hand she punched in a number and listened to it ring. When it was picked up she drew in a shuddering breath.

“It's Jamie....”

Agent Rush entered the hospital room and gazed at the small outline of the woman in the bed with
her back to the door. She had been conveyed straight to a secure medical center to be thoroughly checked out, the test results indicating that nothing dangerous had been ingested or done to her, her baby also fine. Physically, Jamie was no worse than when she was taken, but emotionally, she was a wreck. The doctors agreed they wanted her to stay overnight, so she'd been installed in a private room. People, once notified of her return, had been to visit. Jo had brought flowers and been enthusiastic to see Jamie looking so well despite her ordeal, careful not to mention the absence of Mitch or speak about anything to do with the Shepherds, hybrids or especially Abigail Westbrooke. At the end of the visit, Jo had hugged the younger woman, Jamie clinging to her for a long moment before they parted. Soon after, Jackson Oz and his team arrived to see her, bringing more flowers to cheer the room, filling it with inconsequential chatter, mostly about Chloe's visit to France and subsequent return. They had agreed it was probably too early to return her bond ring, so it was given to Agent Rush to care for. Now she was alone and it was time to talk to her about the future. He drew up a chair and placed it on the side she was facing. Her eyes were open and dry, but blank. “Jamie?” He waited for her to look at him. “Hey, it's been a busy day for you. I need to speak to you about several things, not least what is going on with Mitch.” Her eyes closed for a moment, her brows knotting and her mouth twisting in pain. Then she beat back the pain and opened her eyes again. “Why?” she asked simply, a wealth of hurt in the one word. “It was the only way he could get you free and guarantee you wouldn't suffer retribution from Abigail.” He spoke softly and sincerely, willing Jamie to understand. “Everything he did was to make sure you and the child were protected.” She looked at him with wounded eyes. “Did he really make love to her?” Agent Rush shook his head and a spark of hope lit up her eyes for a moment. He quickly killed it. “What they did wouldn't qualify for the term 'making love'. It was sex, pure and simple. She demanded it, he provided it. Love was never mentioned, offered or expected.” Jamie stared at him, appalled, then buried her face in the pillow, her shoulders shaking. Rush let her cry for a little bit, then plowed on. “Mitch left something for you in the safe at the apartment. We took the liberty of obtaining it, not knowing what state you would be in. Do you want to read it?” Jamie turned to face him and nodded. Rush produced the small note and handed it over. “He didn't have a lot of time, hence the few words,” he explained. Jamie read the note, then read it again, this time out loud. “I hereby pass all I own to Jamie Morgan. Keep yourself safe my love and raise our child. I am dead to you both now. Don't forget Clementine. Dr. Mitchell Morgan.” Jamie carefully folded the note and handed it back to Rush. “Is it legal?” “His personal Will backs it up, so yes, it is legal.” He held out the ring Jackson had given him. “Until you are ready to move on and form a new relationship, wear this. It still protects you.” She reached out her left hand and he slid the ring on her third finger, then she clenched her hand into a fist and tucked it against her body. “I have his ring as well. I thought you might want to wear it on a chain.” He withdrew the piece of jewelry out of his pocket and held it up so it turned slowly. “I'll wear it, to remind me.” He slid the chain over her head and she held it for a moment then tucked it inside her hospital gown. “How long?” she asked. Agent Rush didn't pretend to not understand her question. “Until he feels he can return to you without any threat hanging over your heads. Until he's learned all he needs to know about the hybrids, their creation and how to destroy them. Until she is dead. Until he can bring himself to face you again. Any and all of the above in no particular order.” A smile curved her lips at his reply. “Maybe soon, maybe never.” “Pretty much,” Rush replied, smiling back in sympathy. “Do you want me back on the team?” she asked, looking somehow brighter and more alert. Rush shook his head. “No. Sorry, but that would just be a red rag to Abigail. She has a spy, either in person or technologically, in Cornell. She sees, hears and knows exactly what we're doing and where we are at. For the time being, you need to be as far away from all of this as possible. You
need to concentrate on yourself and your child, nothing more.”
Jamie nodded slowly. “I don’t want to be on my own,” she stated. “But I don’t want to be forever looking over my shoulder either.”
“We’ll hash out the specifics after they release you from here.”
Jamie closed her eyes and Rush thought it time he left. As he walked around the end of the bed she spoke. “Thank you. I’m sorry for the things I’ve said about you in the past. I’m glad you’re on our side.”
Rush paused at the doorway, his mouth working but lost for words to reply. Finally, before he left he said. “You’re welcome.”

Jamie walked into the kitchen and stared at the calendar for a beat. It was showing the previous month and she tutted to herself before reaching up to flip it over to the new and current month. A picture of bucolic splendor greeted her, an idyllic house set in verdant green among rolling hills. She wrinkled her nose at the artwork, the calendar a gift which was meant kindly but was as far from her taste as possible. Still, it served a purpose and she looked at the various dates marked with appointments already filled in.
“Not long now, bubs.” She glanced down at her body and marveled anew at what looked like, to her, an enormous pair of breast and a very rounded, pregnant belly. That both belonged to her never failed to surprise her. The belly she could understand, but the breasts were a revelation, never having more than a handful under normal circumstances. Now she was positively voluptuous. Rubbing her hands contentedly over her baby bump, she wandered out onto the verandah and gazed out over the landscape presented for her delectation. The house was the last of a string of homes down a right of way off the Rue St Martin. Each occupied enough ground to give them privacy from each other with fences and hedges to provide extra shelter. Being the last house it had a unique outlook over a parkland sweeping down to a lake and wooded area.
The house itself was large and comfortable, bigger than she thought she needed, but then she wasn’t exactly the only one rattling around in it. The subdivision wasn’t new, so the greenery all around was mature and lush, providing a haven for a wide diversity in birds that chirruped throughout the day with their different calls to each other. The covered verandah on the ground floor was her favorite place, several chairs situated along its lengths on all sides of the house, giving her a perfect seat whatever the weather, and always sheltered from any wind direction. A couple of swing seats added to the choices available, Jamie often dozing on them during the day, and sometimes at night under a mosquito net draped over the frame. She had decorated the ornate railing with fairy lights, the pea bulbs competing with the fireflies some nights when they were looking for mates in the darkness.
Seating herself in one of the comfortable chairs, she lifted her feet onto a cushioned ottoman and stared out at the garden, a sense of peace pervading her soul.
She heard someone call her name from inside the house and responded.
“I’m on the deck!”
Her former nutritionist/caregiver when she was ill the previous year, now her companion and reinstated security guard, popped her head around the doorjamb.
“Ready for something to eat?” Flis asked, stepped forward and rubbing her hands on a t-towel flung over her shoulder to remove the flour coating her fingers.
Jamie shook her head. “Not really hungry. Junior is taking up so much room, anything more than a thimble of something and I’m full.”
Flis pouted down at her and crossed her arms over her chest. “How about an Earl Grey and a freshly baked date scone?”
Jamie tilted her head back against the headrest and smiled up at her friend. “Sounds perfect.”
Flis grinned back. “One morning tea coming up. Glad to see you have those ankles raised...”
Jamie rolled her eyes. “Nag, nag, nag, nag. Yes, Mom.”
Flis laughed and went inside, leaving her charge to enjoy the morning sun and fine day. It was still cool but would get hot later on.
Jamie had returned to her roots when looking for somewhere to live, the city of Hammond,
Louisiana providing a compromise, plus everything she was looking for, which was mostly distance. Here she could relax, breath and concentrate on herself and her child. New York state, Cornell, hybrids, and horrors were far behind her now, her only contact with the people involved through occasional skypes or emails. Otherwise, she was well and truly out of all that. She had only one important date on her calendar worth worrying about, the birth of her child. She also got infrequent updates from Agent Rush, when he remembered to send them. Sometimes she opened the emails with dread, but there was never anything in them to give her grief or remind her what had gone before. Some days she went from dawn to dusk without once hearing or speaking his name, a situation that suited her very well. Other days she could barely raise her head off the pillow for the weight of grief and heartbreak that crushed her completely. Those days still happened, but not with the frequency of before. The screen door banged and Flis appeared carrying a tray which she placed on the table by the chair, drawing another one over before settling in.

“Phillip will be down soon, he's just fixing up that shelf you wanted put up above the changing table.”

Her other watchdog was their former driver, now her man-about-the-house, keeping himself busy with odd jobs, keeping the grounds tidy, and generally being there for whatever needed doing. Both had been glad to be working together again, and Jamie had a sneaking suspicion that they enjoyed more than a purely platonic working relationship together, not that she'd caught them out being anything other than friends. She was happy for them if they chose to pursue something, just because she was such a pathetic example of how to fuck things up completely, didn't mean everyone's life was so screwed up.

Flis noticed her introspection and recognized the signs of a colossal slump if it wasn't nipped in the bud.

“Hey, I thought we could go shopping for baby stuff today, what do you say?” her breezy voice snapped Jamie out of her funk and she blinked at the cup at her elbow, picking it up and taking a sip as if on automatic pilot.

“If you like.”

Flis pushed harder. “You were saying you wanted to look at the pushchairs and prams?”

Jamie rallied and smiled. “I did. I've seen some lovely examples on Tumblr and Pinterest.”

“Right then, eat up and we'll get out before it gets too hot.” Flis got up to call for Phillip to get himself downstairs or all the tea would be gone. Jamie noticed her neglected scone and lifted it to her mouth, suddenly eager to bite into the warm, buttery offering, the prospect of finding just the perfect article for her baby lifting her spirits.

Charles Duncan, formerly known to the world as Dr. Mitchell Morgan, stared blindly at the image on the screen. She only did this to torment him, never entirely convinced of his unwavering loyalty despite the months spent in her company and in her bed. He lifted his left hand and stared at the faded mark where a ring had once rested, now lost to circumstances, never to be worn again even if he knew where it was. The fuzzy image of a heavily pregnant woman with long, red-gold hair walking into a baby store was supposed to provoke a reaction, preferably something along the lines of a sneer or witty quip about fat cows and puking infants, but today he could barely dredge up the necessary strength to carry on the game.

“Don't you agree, darling?”

He carefully schooled his features and turned to face her, a smile pulling his lips up at the corners. “I do. I'll have to take your word that this is the woman you say she is. I just don't see it myself.” That apparently was the answer she was looking for, her nails scraping over his scalp before she pressed a kiss to his crown, smoothing over the unruly, scruffy bed-hair mess he called a haircut.

“You are a beast, darling, a positive neanderthal with your chopped about hair and unshaven scruff. Just as well I like you like that. I doubt if she'd recognize you either, I know sometimes I wonder who you are.”

He listened to her speak but didn't really care what she said. His appearance matched his change of name, the professor had been replaced with the mad scientist, the brooding loner that satisfied his
partner's needs while disregarding his own, as if punishing himself for a crime no one knew about. Since his break with his former life, he had traveled the world with Abigail, spent hours in her specialist laboratories scattered throughout many countries, learnt more than he ever expected to about her motives, the hybrids, her plans for humanity and the world, and about himself and his capacity for self-abuse and self-denial. He also found he had an ability and talent at being a double agent, drip-feeding nuggets of information to his favorite FBI agent to collect and follow up on. He also developed a personality that no one who knew him before would have recognized, one that was colder, more selfish, insular, harder than anyone had ever seen before. Abigail seemed to thrive on his new persona, taking anything he was prepared to give, relishing his rough sex, indulging his choice of wearing nothing but black and growing his hair and beard so he almost permanently looked like he'd skipped shaving for a week and just got out of bed. If she suspected him of leaking information, she never mentioned it, but occasionally would produce surveillance footage, often blurry and unfocused, of a woman that looked vaguely like Jamie, progressing through her pregnancy, often accompanied by people that he recognized from his former life. In some way he was grateful for Abigail's thinly veiled jealousy, it allowed him to glimpse fuzzy images of Jamie's life, to see that she was fine and well guarded, away from anything to do with the Cornell team, and living a life of peace. It may have been intended to torment him, but instead, it brought him a measure of resolve that he had made the right choices, that what he was doing was protecting what he valued most, allowing him to keep on doing what he had to do.

His sudden disappearance from the world scene had been a nine-day wonder, the people he'd spoken too and had meetings with keen to find him again, pointing out his potential for leadership and breakthroughs in scientific knowledge regarding the hybrid issue. All of that faded away as time progressed and he never reappeared, fading away from the public consciousness making it easier to slip into his new identity and leave Mitch Morgan dead in his wake.

Sometimes, when he lay wide awake in the small hours of the night listening to the woman in the bed beside him breathe, he imagined a hundred and one ways to kill her, sometimes simple, sometimes elaborate, but in all of them she ended up dead. Every night he went through this ritual, every morning having to abandon it when she revealed some new wrinkle in her plan, some new bit of information that he hadn't known before but was vital if the whole conspiracy was to be brought down. So every night he went back to imagining when the time came, how he'd kill her and what he'd do after.

No one in his former life knew him as Charles Duncan, other than Rush. Mitch Morgan was a mystery to most, some saying he ran away from the pressures he was dealing with, some that he was a coward, was in rehab for drug or drink addiction, take your pick. Other's that he'd been killed by opposing rivals, by the Shepherds, by General Davies, by aliens, by a hybrid. Or the one he liked the best, he had been infected by the human hybrid and was locked up somewhere devolving into a mutant human. Maybe he should do that after Abigail and her bid for world domination was over, offer himself for a human guinea pig to be infected by a mutated human and chart what happened next. It would certainly be a novel way to end his life.

When thoughts of Jamie or the murder of Abigail didn't consume his nighttime musings, he thought of his daughter, Clementine. He hoped Jamie was able to explain a version of what happened so she didn't hate him all over again. Their time together had been so short, their phone calls even shorter. Abigail either didn't know about his daughter or chose not to use that particular form of torment on him, because he never had images of her dangled in front of him to test his loyalty. For that, he was deeply grateful. He hoped, no, he knew that Jamie would have done whatever she could for his daughter and her family once she was in charge of his estate, and wondered what they were doing with their new found windfall. At least Jamie and his second child would never want for anything, his long-term investments sure to bring in an income to keep them both comfortable for life. If he thought too far into the future he ended up thinking of Jamie falling in love with someone else, a faceless man who would replace her memories of Mitch Morgan, replace him in her heart. That was the keenest pain he could inflict on himself and he shamelessly brought the subject up to beat himself up with every night. It helped to reinforce the ice wall he was building around his feelings,
encapsulating them so that whatever he did since taking up with Abigail, could never touch what had
gone before or what would happen in the future with Jamie and her child. He had started to think like
that too, calling it her child, not theirs or his, but hers. When he finally allowed himself to sleep, he
dreamed of soft, dreamy blue/green eyes and silky, golden red hair that smelled of flowers and lips
that whispered his name with love.

The tv channels were full of the news that the first hybrid had been sighted in Guatemala. This final
confirmation that the hybrids were attempting to reach the United States mainland galvanised the
government into a frenetic barrier building initiative in conjunction with the Mexican President,
together choosing a hundred and fifty mile stretch of land from the Pacific, at Union Hidalgo,
Oaxaca to the Gulf of Mexico at Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz. Mexico allowed a force of engineers and
surveyors to boost their own people to map out the ground, both ends of the proposed wall starting
constructions before the plans were finalized. Mitch saw the news bulletins and laughed out loud,
knowing from his unique perspective that the South American release of the Razorbacks had been
just a step on the planned introduction of a greater range of hybrids across the entire planet. A hand
landed on his shoulder, the nails curling in to dig into his flesh under his coat.

“You are right to laugh, darling. Whatever puny obstruction they put up will be useless once our
own plans release my pets from their long sleep.”

He tilted his head back and looked up at Abigail, noting the light of fanaticism in her dark eyes, her
full lips pulled back in a manic grin of satisfaction. He suppressed a shiver that caused his hands to
jerk on the wireless mouse. As he expected, she bent at the waist and put her lips against his ear.

“Take me to bed, darling, I'm in a mood to celebrate.” Her fingers dug deeper into his shoulder and
he winced, then she let him go, Mitch pushing himself to his feet to follow her out of the small
control room, along the corridor to her private quarters. As soon as she entered she started to shed
her clothes, the leather jacket casually tossed over a chair, her hair released from its ponytail to swing
around her shoulders like glossy, dark chocolate. Mitch did the same, discarding his coat to the
floor after kicking the door shut, his half boots hitting the floor with a thump as he hurriedly
divested himself from his outerwear.

Abigail turned and walked backward to the bed, already down
to her sports bra,
her eyes heavy-lidded, her lips parted in anticipation.

Mitch did the same, discarding his t-shirt and
jumper off over his head as one, further ruffling his disordered hair, throwing the clothes haphazardly
behind him, his black jeans the only item he left on. Abigail was on the bed now, still in her
underwear but this was a familiar scenario and he waited for her at the edge of the bed, sure of what
was to follow. Perversely his body was already clearly outlined beneath the fabric of his jeans, happy
to come out and play despite its owner's self-hatred at having so little control over his libido. Abigail
knelt on the bed and reached out for his waist, tugging him forward as if he was reluctant, her teeth
biting her lips as she brushed her fingers over the swell of his cock behind the zip.

“Aren't we the eager one, darling.” She dragged her nails up his torso, raking over the clearly defined
muscles and ribs, pinching a nipple in passing. In the months he'd been with her, Mitch had lost
weight, gained muscle and was hard enough now to bear the scratches and bites Abigail frequently
inflicted upon him. He was in the best physical shape he'd been in for years, what spare time he had
spent wearing himself out on whatever was to hand, sometimes a fully equipped gym near to where
they were that week, or sometimes simply doing press ups and sit ups if going out wasn't an option.
The result was a lean physique that allowed him to perform effortlessly in whatever warped capacity
Abigail wanted.

“I think we'll bring out the lover in you, darling. Make love to me.”

Internally, Mitch squirmed. Hard, violent, selfish, greedy, all these versions of sex he could perform
without a twitch of remorse, all ways he'd never performed with someone else. But to 'make love' to
Abigail was asking too much, the feelings required to make it real almost impossible for him to
replicate. Swallowing down his roiling stomach, he smiled and took off his glasses. Blanking his
mind to whatever he'd enjoyed in the past, he reached out and ran a gentle finger down the side of
her face, his mind running through a variety of ways he could 'make love' to the woman without one
ounce of the feeling such a phrase suggested.
“Whatever you want.”

He was asleep before her, an unusual enough occurrence that she felt needed some thought before she gave into the pull of sleep for herself. She had demanded he make love to her, and for all intents and purposes, he had done just that. It was a quite believable bit of theatre to have him treat her gently, softly, pressing kisses to her flesh while his fingers stroked her to pleasure, but a quick glance in the half-light at his face, into his eyes, told her a different story. He was on auto-pilot, doing things to her that made her sigh, but which made no difference to him at all. For most of the experience, he had his beautiful brown eyes shut, his body going through the motions, his cock as erect as ever, but he might as well have been a robot, all feeling and emotion leached out of the performance like an assembly line performing a repetitive function. Yes, he made her climax, yes he reached a climax of sorts for himself, but in no way was he there with her for any second of the time. It seemed that her tame beast wasn't yet ready to give up entirely on some aspects of his past. Usually, Abigail hated the ethereal, the insipid romantic angles of sex, she preferred the raw, the powerful, the animalistic biological urge to conquer, to overpower and impregnate, to use bone and muscle to subdue and invade, forcing a response even when knowing that there was no need for force, pushing and fighting until victory and sublime fulfillment, on her part at least. Then his passions were aroused, when they battled his emotions were clearly there, on display, his anger, his rage, his impotent fury against her unforgiving bulwark, their joining like the sea battering a cliff face, potent but ultimately futile until they were both left spent and sweaty like warriors fighting to a standstill. The battle won and lost among the sheets. Those nights she always fell asleep first, her short dozes finding him still awake when she opened her eyes, her furtive looks not noticed in the shadows while he brooded on something in his head and beyond her knowledge. It was why she kept such close tabs on his former lover, taunting him with fuzzy images and blurred photos, always looking for that moment he broke down and begged her for release from his bondage to her cause, from his loyalty to Abigail.

If he ever did? That would be the day she would end his life.

Flis wiped a cloth over Jamie's brow to mop up the sweat and prevent it trickling into her eyes.
“You're doing so well, Jamie, keep breathing....breath in......hold......let it out....and pant....”

She listened to her friend's litany and tried to follow the pattern but the pain gripping her belly kept interrupting her, her head going back to dig into the pillows again as she rode out another contraction, so soon after the last. The labor was already into its second day and she could feel her strength ebbing each time her body convulsed and clamped her in a vise of pain and sweat. A static camera was set up in the corner of the room to capture the event in all its painful glory, Flis well aware that the person who should have been there, would at least have some way of being a part of it, however long it took him to get home. Flis was in love, and for her the all the world just had to be in love along with her, as well as the people around her, hence the camera. Despite the long months and longer nights, she hoped that someday Jamie would have her Mitch back and they would be a family again. That Jamie didn't agree or buy into that fantasy wasn't a surprise, Flis not sharing her own hopes but keeping them to herself.

The midwife looked up from the end of the bed and gripped Jamie's knee to get her attention. “Jamie, you're going to feel the urge to push. When you do, I want you to push with everything you have.”
“But you told me not to push!” her patient wailed, lifting her head to stare wild-eyed at the midwife. The woman shook her head. “Now I'm telling you to push, girl.”

Jamie felt the onset of the contraction and opened her mouth to cry out, feeling a strong urge to push and giving in to it this time, bearing down, her hands fisted in the sheets either side of the bed.
“That's a girl, keep pushing, pushing...I see the head, the shoulders...”
The contraction released and Jamie slumped back, panting heavily.
The midwife looked up from between her legs. “Next time, don't stop...keep pushing!”
“Shut the fuck up, you old bat, I'm doing my fucking best...”
Flis and the midwife shared an understanding look, having been witness to the extent of Jamie's
colorful vocabulary during the final trial of her labor. Jamie felt her stomach tightened and let out a blood-curdling scream, bearing down hard. The midwife was ready and caught the baby as it slipped from the warmth of its mother's womb into the cooler air of the bedroom. With deft hands, she wiped the infant free of any mucus, then clamped and cut the cord in the absence of a father to do so. Jamie lay back against the pillows, spent, her work done. Flis leaned forward to watch the midwife work, the cord neatly severed and the baby swaddled before being carried and laid on Jamie's chest. Then the woman went back to the end of the bed to await the delivery of the placenta. Jamie opened her eyes and peered blearily at the tiny infant placed on her chest, the purple face screwed up deep wrinkles like an old man, eyes tight shut.

“What is it?” she asked barely able to lift a finger to stroke against the tiny cheek.

“You have a daughter, Jamie,” the midwife told her.

Flis beamed down at the mother and child. “Congratulations, Jamie, a beautiful girl.”

After gazing down at the child, Jamie turned her face away and closed her eyes. “Take her away, please, just...remove it.”

Shocked, her attendants in the room exchanged a look, while the baby decided to finally announce its arrival into the world by letting out a thin cry that rapidly evolved into a wail of protest. Flis hurriedly picked up the baby and cradled it, cooing automatically and rocking the child in an age-old rhythm. The midwife carried on about her business, pressing down on Jamie's belly to deliver the placenta and then check for any tearing inside or out needing stitches. Finally, after placing a pad between her patient's legs to catch any fluids, the midwife closed Jamie's legs and the new mother instantly rolled onto her side, her back to where Flis stood holding the child. Loathe to end the video on a down note, Flis approached the camera and held the baby up for the lens to see and spoke.

“There you are, a beautiful, healthy girl...a little Morgan to carry on the name.” Then she kissed the baby's head and reached around to press the button to end the filming.

The midwife bustled over and took the child. “I need to do the paperwork and measurement, if you'll give me a hand?” Flis looked over at Jamie who hadn't moved and nodded. “Sure, what do you want me to do?”

Jamie awoke when the midwife shook her shoulder.

“Time to wake up, Jamie and feed your baby. She's hungry and you need to give her your first milk to protect her and help your own body heal. Sit up now and no shilly-shallying. Flis, help her to get upright while I bring the baby.”

Still befuddled with sleep, Jamie allowed herself to be hauled about without protest, finding her arms arranged around a warm bundle and cool air wafting over her bared breast before a small mouth was pushed against her engorged nipple. The baby latched on and started to suck, pulling at her breast, making Jamie yelp before the midwife pushed more of the nipple into the baby's mouth and the discomfort faded. A little bewildered, Jamie stared down at the tiniest of hands kneading the flesh above where the baby was feeding, the fingernails like pink pearls on the ends of fingers that looked translucent. Both Flis and the midwife were holding their breaths to see how Jamie reacted to having her daughter in her arms. When they saw the tears start to roll down the new mother's face they both let go their anxiety and smiled, breathing easily at last.

“T’ll be off now. I’ll be back tomorrow, so if you have any questions, ask me then. Otherwise, check the pad for anything unusual before going to sleep, make sure she eats and drinks according to the dietary plan I left you, let her feed whenever the baby is hungry and I’ve left a couple of nipple shields if things get too sore for her. Keep the first nappy that the baby messes, I'll want to check that as well.” All the instructions were being conveyed to Flis, Jamie too wrapped up in the wonder of discovering her new baby to know or care what was said or who was saying it. Flis said goodbye to the midwife and then went to tell Phillip the good news, which he would then disseminate to Jamie's circle of friends and supporters.

When she returned to the bedroom, Jamie had the baby on her other breast, managing to get the baby to latch on properly despite it being her first go by herself.

“Everything okay?” Flis asked, pulling up a chair and sitting down beside the bed. Jamie looked up
at her, tears still in evidence but eclipsed by the smile lighting up her face.
“Isn’t she the most perfect baby?”
Flis nodded and smiled broadly back. “Just perfect. Healthy pair of lungs on her as well.”
Jamie chuckled, the baby unlatching for a moment in protest. “Sorry, sorry...” Jamie cooed, putting
the baby back on the breast again.
 Jamie looked up and out the window, surprised it was still daylight. “What time is it?”
Flis looked at her watch. “About three in the afternoon. Hungry? Thirsty?”
“Tired,” Jamie replied.
She looked down and saw that the baby had drifted off to sleep, her nipple
half hanging out of its mouth. “Okay then, you’re all filled up.” Carefully she lifted the child to lay on
her shoulder, face turned towards her neck, her hand rubbing soft circles on its back to bring up any
wind. After a few moments, a very soft belch was her reward. She turned to her friend.
“Can you bring in the bassinet? She’s ready to put down now.”
Flis got up and left the room, returning in a minute with the small basket set on a wheeled base that
sat snuggly beside the bed. Inside was a simple covered mattress and blanket ready to receive the
baby, while the outside sported a deep frill to keep out any drafts. Jamie handed the baby to Flis
while she maneuvered herself to the side of the bed, then she took the baby back and laid it on the
blanket, leaving it still swaddled in the cotton sheet the midwife had used, before folding the blanket
over the sleeping infant. For a long time Jamie gazed down at the tiny scrap of humanity and felt
nothing but love for it, the feeling obliterating everything else in its intensity. Eventually, she felt the
call of nature but her legs still felt wobbly so Flis helped her to the bathroom.

The ringing of the phone disturbed the peace of the household a few days later. Flis answered it.
“Morgan household.”
“Flis it’s Clem, did she have the baby yet?”
“Hi, Clem. Yes, she did, it’s a girl, everybody well and healthy.”
“I have a sister. Wow. Can I come see her?”
“Just need to sort that out with your Mom, Clem, you know that.”
“Can I speak to Jamie?”
“Sure. Hold on, I’ll take the cordless outside.”
Flis carried the phone out onto the deck to where Jamie sat, the baby asleep in the bassinette beside
her. “Clem on the phone,” Flis told her before handing it over.
“Hi, Clem.”
“Hi, Jamie. Can I come and see the baby?”
“Woah, nice to talk to you too! Of course, I would love for you to come and see your sister, but it’s
up to your Mom. If she says yes, you’re more than welcome to stay a little while, there’s plenty of
room.”
“Cool. I know Mom was a bit....um...but she’s better now. Can you hang on while I ask her?”
“Sure. I’ll wait until you’re back.”
“Okay, back in a tick....”
Jamie listened to the sound of running feet, a dog barking and the slamming of a door. Soon she
heard the patter of feet returning.
“Jamie? You still there?”
“Yeah. What did she say?”
“She said it would be best, what with school and stuff, to make it the end of this month. Is that
okay?”
“Sounds fine to me. How long can you stay?”
“Um...Friday to Monday, so that’s four days, give or take.”
“Sounds perfect. I look forward to seeing you. Let me know your flight details when you have
them.”
“I will. Did it hurt and stuff?” Clem asked.
“A bit. But it was worth it, and you don’t remember it afterward.”
“Cool.”
The baby woke up and started to squall loudly.
“Is that her?” Clem asked.
“Yeah, that's her. I'm surprised you can't hear her even without the phone!” Jamie joked. Clem laughed.
“Yeah, sounds pretty loud. I'll let you go then. Talk to you soon. Bye, Jamie.”
“Bye, Clem. Take care.” Jamie pressed the button to end the call and set it down. Her daughter was demanding to either be fed or changed, and she didn't suffer kindly to being ignored.

Charles Duncan studied the diagram and compared it with the circuit he was creating as the last component to be added to the beacon being built on top of the building. They were in Shanghai this time, the building once owned by the Shepherds but used by Abigail for another of her sites from which to spread her insane plan to populate the world with her unique, specialized hybrids. He no longer thought of himself as Mitch anymore. Too much had been said and done, too many crimes committed and now he was an accomplice to the most wanted woman on the planet. He was probably on that same list, his communiqué's with Agent Rush having ended some months ago. He was sunk so low in iniquity he was at rock bottom. If he believed in a soul, it was now black and rotten to the core, his participation in various thefts from supposedly secure facilities, his involvement in the creation and implementation of technology to allow Abigail to fulfill her ambition, all conspired to hollow him out. Whatever was left bore no relation to the man he used to be, he was now simply Charles Duncan, a creature of Abigail Westbrooke. His sole purpose was to do her bidding, take whatever abuse she dished out, bring her as much pleasure as she demanded and still continue to live, despite the absence of a heart. That forlorn organ had been ripped out and trampled on with the latest round of Abigail's Torments, as he liked to call them. It was after a particularly torrid and athletic bout of sex, both of them out of breath and covered in bites and scratches. Like a magician, she produced a photo out of thin air and flung it at him. Knowing it was probably something to do with his former life, he grabbed his glasses and turned it over to look. If she'd plunged a dagger into his chest and twisted it, she couldn't have produced more pain and agony than that single photograph.
“What is this?” he croaked, his throat tight.
Abigail sat up and pointed at the picture. “I thought you'd like to see your two daughters together. I have others, if you care to see them?”
The photo shook in his grip, as if a breeze blew through the room. His eyes burned with unshed tears and he let go of the image as if it had pricked him. Feigning a nonchalance he was far from feeling, Duncan lay back on the pillows and crooked one arm behind his head. He fought the damning tears back and swallowed to loosen up his throat.
“Looks sickly, if you ask me.”
Abigail looked, for once, surprised by his reaction. Then she smiled. “Oh, you are good, very, very good.”
Duncan deliberately chose to misunderstand her. “I know I am, ready for round two?”
She stared into his eyes, all trace of any previous emotion wiped clean, his glittering brown eyes showing her nothing but arrogance at his own prowess. Abigail laughed. She had finally won.
“I'm ready for whatever you care to dish out, darling. Show me what'cha got!”
End Game

Chapter Summary

Mitch is raised from the dead, Jamie moves on.

The hasty building of the wall in Mexico was partially successful in that it halted the progress of the Razorbacks in their quest to reach the North American continent. By stopping them reaching further north, the hybrids turned back on themselves and proceeded to multiply into the hundreds, then the thousands, rural communities having to be evacuated or face being wiped out by the voracious and vicious predators. People were as much a source of food for the hybrids as the animals life. When the island off the Chilean coast, that had been identified as the headquarters for the Shepherds, was invaded by a combined armed forces battalion they found the compound destroyed by their own creations. No bodies were found, no one living either, but plenty of evidence of what had been done in the name of liberating the planet. Several abandoned electric-fenced compounds still held remnants of early attempts at hybridization, all of which were destroyed without pity. Only one creature was left to roam the island, the resurrected saber-toothed cat, its habitat in the high ranges of the island deemed too dangerous to pursue for eradication purposes alone. After the clearance, the island was marked off limits to everyone.

Abigail was in the last stages of preparation for unleashing her brood of monstrous hybrids onto an unsuspecting world, or so she thought. Agent Rush, in conjunction with Jackson Oz and his team, had been using the information leaked to them by Charles Duncan to track and map each of the beacons that supposedly would summon the creatures from their lair’s when the time was right. Jackson, Abe, and Logan had investigated one of the lairs and reported back about the thousands of egg sacs waiting to hatch. Samples taken showed that the embryos were all infused with a hyper-growth hormone, plus a defensive mechanism that was highly toxic to humans. If the nests, as they became known, were destroyed without taking this defensive kick-back into account, entire populations of cities could be wiped out in a single blast. The race was on again to come up with an effective antidote to the toxic spores contained in the numerous nests found around the world. The clock was ticking and time was running out. Unaware of the menace lurking below their feet, the people in the affected areas went about their business in blissful ignorance. Only a select few were in the loop about the extent of the crisis, a universal blanket on any news getting out keeping a lid on information, but it wouldn't hold for much longer. As the deadline ticked down, and no progress was made on an antidote, other alternatives were brought in to play, mainly a worldwide search for Abigail Westbrooke and Charles Duncan with a mission to eliminate either or both to halt the deployment of the hybrids.

They were running out of places to hide. Their names and sometimes vague descriptions were plastered on every news channel, in every newspaper wherever one was published, in multiple languages and across the globe. The search for the world’s two most wanted was at the top of every agency priority list, and the noose was starting to tighten. Despite the long hiatus since the last message from Duncan, Agent Rush suddenly received a cryptic message through an unusual medium, the messenger being Chloe Tousignant, the French operative working with Jackson.
“Agent Rush?” a delightfully accented female voice drew his attention away from the map he'd been scowling down at.

“Chloe? What brings you to my dark and dusty office? Is everyone alright?” Alarm bells started to ring in his head, but they subsided when the elegant Frenchwoman raised a hand.

“Everyone is fine, truly. I have something that was handed into my agency in Paris.” She held out an envelope for him to take, Rush looking at it for a moment before taking it. He opened it and drew out a crumpled and dirty piece of paper the size of an A4 sheet. It was creased and marked as if it had been dropped in a muddy puddle and run over, several times. Turning it over he couldn't stop the small gasp leaving his lips. He knew this picture, had seen the images in full color attached to an email sent from Jamie Morgan almost a year ago. What he held in his hand was a black and white, grainy photocopy of that photo showing Clementine Lewis cuddling her newborn half-sister in her arms, beaming beautifully at the camera while the baby slept peacefully.

The image, even though a photocopy, showed evidence that the original had been carefully stuck back together after being ripped apart into very small pieces, a bit like a jigsaw puzzle. Whoever had put the photo back together had made sure every bit fitted together perfectly, only leaving a line to show it had been torn at all. There was also evidence that the original was much creased, as if from being folded repeatedly and tucked somewhere safe on a regular basis. Around the outside of the photocopy was writing and numbers, Rush not bothering to read it, so struck by the implication of the image itself.

“So, he is still alive, I wasn't sure. It had been so long.”

“It took awhile to reach our offices. It was found in a puddle outside a building and was lucky not to have been screwed up and thrown away. Worse, it could have been caught up in a street sweeper and lost for good. As it was, the woman who picked it up took the time to read the message and brought it straight to the bureau.”

Rush placed the piece of paper on a separate desk and brought over an illuminated magnifying glass to peer through.

“It gives us a date and a place, but no time.”

“Maybe he wasn't sure of that himself,” Chloe suggested.

“Could be an elaborate trap,” Rush mused.

“Whatever it is, you are requested in the note, and I am to bring you with me to Brussels.”

Rush looked up at the French agent. “Then let's get this show on the road.”

“Oh, hurry up, Flis, come and look...she's doing it!” Jamie's excited voice drew Flis to the doorway to watch the youngest member of the household attempt to walk a few steps, her mother holding on to her chubby fingers while tiny feet lifted up and down in a march step, face wreathed in smiles.

“Well done, Melanie, what a good girl!” Flis joined in praising the child, little Mel beaming up at her family, ignoring the drool dripping off her chin onto the bib put there to catch it. Jamie let her daughter attempt a few more steps before scooping her up and giving her a cuddle, Melanie Morgan chortling into her mother's shoulder, tiny hands grabbing hanks of red hair in her excitement.

“Help, I'm going to be bald before you're finished!” Jamie laughed, tilting her head to pull her hair out of the pudgy digits. Denied her favorite plaything, Mel stuffed her knuckles into her mouth instead to chew on, coating her hands and arms with the inevitable drool.

Sitting down, Jamie placed her daughter on her lap, the youngster immediately attempting to stand up on her mother's thighs, bare feet digging tiny toes into the jeans covering said legs.

“I guess we'll be kissing goodbye to those days when you could put her down and she stayed there,” Flis sighed, making faces at Mel to make her laugh.

“That option flew out the door when she started to crawl.” Jamie looked at the mesh covering the railings bordering the covered deck, the fairy lights long gone to make way for a safe play area that little Mel couldn't escape from. “Who knew they could move that fast on their bottom, let alone on their hands and knees?”
Mel spotted one of her favorite toys and strained to be put down, making gurgling noises that apparently her mother understood as plainly as English.

“Here you go, Pet.”

Finding herself within reach of her goal, Melanie bottom shuffled over to the toy and picked it up, promptly stuffing that into her mouth instead of her own fingers. The baby already had an impressive set of tiny front teeth, top, and bottom, but it was the precursor to her incisors erupting that was causing the trouble this time.

“I'll get her a rusk,” Flis said before ducking back indoors.

Jamie gazed adoringly at her child, noting the changes, wishing back the days when Mel was small and helpless and wanted nothing more than to eat and sleep. There was no mistaking she was Jamie's child, having the same red-gold hair with the ends curling, fair skin and elfin face, but the eyes were all Mitch, chocolate brown with flecks of gold and dark lashes. Mel had yet to say her first word, but could happily babble her baby-speak for hours. She was a source of endless delight and entertainment to her carers, her mother besotted with her as only first time mothers can be. Jamie worried about her lack of speaking words, but was reassured by the pediatrician that Melanie would speak when she was ready, her baby babble indicating the child understood many of the words spoken to her, she just had her own schedule of when she'd choose to start speaking words anyone could understand. Jamie could usually make out what she wanted, but anyone else was stumped. Even Flis has trouble sometimes figuring out what Mel was asking for, working it out by trial and error most of the time. Jamie still breastfed daily, and Mel would sometimes ask for a comfort feed if she was tired, or her gums were tender. Between feeds she explored the world of food with Flis, discovering new tastes and textures every day. Laughter was commonplace at mealtimes when Mel made her opinion on the taste of the day being either to her delight or her disgust with facial expressions that were very reminiscent of Mitch.

Jamie was gradually coming to terms with the heartbreak of losing Mitch, her heart healing slowly but surely, her world now focused on their daughter, every day revealing a new trait, a new gesture or expression to confuse and confound her. She had decided on the name in keeping with what Mitch had once told her about the Morgan tradition of calling each firstborn with a name starting with 'M'. His father was called Max, he was called Morgan, and so on. Now Melanie had been added to the list, the name in full being Melanie May Morgan, the May being Jamie's grandmother's name, and her mother's middle name. Yes, it was a lot of M's but it all flowed together and sounded like a little ripple of music to her mind, so it stuck. Clementine had approved, glad that Jamie hadn't tried to emulate her own name with something ridiculous and long-winded. The pre-teen just adored her little half-sister, her brief visit just after Mel was born spent cuddling and carrying the baby around the house as much as possible, an album-full of photos taken to commemorate the moment and for Clem to pin up in her room once she got home. Several were sent to their friends via email, one or two enlarged to be placed in frames and hung on the wall.

Clem had been down twice more and took great pleasure in rolling about the floor or crawling around on hands and knees, Mel happy to have a playmate down at her level, endlessly fascinated by the new face that spent so much time with her.

On Saturday mornings, when the farmer's market was in full swing, Jamie, Flis, Phillip, and Mel were a regular sight, the two tall security personnel holding hands as they followed the wandering path of Jamie and the pram, then later pushchair, the contrasts in height and coloring causing much speculation. It was easy to match mother and baby, Jamie's slight figure and distinctive hair echoed by the pretty infant sporting a head of curls under the bonnet or later, sunhat that she wore. Phillip usually ended up loaded down with carry-bags while Flis carried the basket and any extra bundles he couldn't manage. Jamie was left to handle the pushchair, stopping often for someone wanting to admire her baby, then a quick chat before moving forward again. The store holders and locals had seen mother and child, with her ever-present escort, for nearly a year now and treated them all as one of their number, despite not having an exact handle on the small family's dynamic. To that end Jamie heard her name called from her favorite stalls, the owners keen to attract her attention because it was seen that she didn't pinch pennies, preferring quality goods and frequently bought in bulk to last the
whole week. That said, Jamie always worked to a list drawn up the night before between Flis and herself, the meals planned ahead including what was in season that week.

In this bucolic and gentle way life carried on, Jamie's patterned after the wants and needs of her growing child, all else consigned to the past.

Agent Rush blew on his hands and stamped his feet to bring some feeling back into his cold appendages. The reason for the colder atmosphere had nothing to do with the weather and all to do with being inside a covered market that sold acres of fruit and veggies, flowers and fish to both commercial and non-commercial customers from the early morning to late at night. He was standing in the Place Peter Benoît Market, in the district of Neder-Over-Heembeek. The market had opened at four-thirty in the morning and stayed open until eight at night. At sometime during that period Charles Duncan would be somewhere within the market. Rush just had to find him. It was now after six in the morning and the chilly temperatures needed to keep the flowers and fruit fresh were eating into the tips of his fingers and end of his nose. He was covered from head to toe in surveillance equipment, from the tracker he'd swallowed to a micro camera in a button and earpiece in his left ear.

Depending on what happened at the meeting with Duncan, Rush would either let him go, go with him or have him arrested.

Agents were positioned both inside and out, ready to move on his say so, even a couple of snipers positioned to keep watch for any trouble, their orders not to shoot unless expressly ordered.

Rush continued his slow amble around the market, inspecting the goods on display, marveling at the variety of fruit. His earpiece buzzed. “He's here.”

The unknown voice didn't tell him from which direction, so he continued his slow progress, senses on alert. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a dark figure step up to the next stall along. Lifting his head, Rush saw a tall man, clothed all in black, dark, wild hair hanging to below his collar, black whiskers covering his face, glasses perched on a bruised, recently broken nose. The man turned his head and pinned the agent with expressionless brown eyes behind dark-rimmed glasses.

“Duncan.” Rush greeted him.

“Still have a taste for a nice suit.” The man he'd known as Dr. Morgan, now Charles Duncan responded. His voice sounded hoarse as if he had a cold, his features gaunt and hard.

“What can I do for you?” Rush asked, jamming his hands into his pockets. If Mitch's friends could see him now, they'd be hard-pressed to recognize the man before them.

“I'm turning myself in. I'm unarmed, no gun, no knife. I do have some pen-drives, but that's all.” Rush didn't give any reaction to the news. “How accommodating of you. Saves me having to chase rumors of you all around the world. The bureau will be pleased. Why now?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does to me. We figured the only time you'd come in from the cold was if Abigail was dead.”

“She is. I killed her,” Duncan stated, not a flicker of emotion on his face.

Rush raised an eyebrow. “Then why all this cloak and dagger? Why not just walk into the nearest police station?”

Duncan turned his head away for a moment. “Because Abigail isn't...wasn't the only enemy plotting the downfall of the human race. We were just the ones most well known, most publicised. You'd be surprised at some of the conspirators wanting to clean house and start fresh.”

“Like who?” Rush asked.

“Nah ah. Get me somewhere safe and you can debrief me all you like, but until then, I'm keeping what I know as insurance.” As if feeling the cross-hairs trained on his back, Duncan glanced up at the roof, then around the bustling hall with its buyers and traders all vying for the best price. Having established he was there to give himself up, several FBI and Interpol agents were closing in on their position. Suddenly a shot reverberated around the open space, Rush pulling Duncan down into a crouch, the agents running towards them.

“Stop firing, whoever it is, cease fire!” Rush shouted, looking around to see if anyone was hurt. The
sound of a wet cough drew his attention to Duncan, the man looking down at his hand that was now liberally splattered with blood. As if in slow motion, Duncan fell over onto his side, eyes wide open but seeing little with blood trickling out from between his lips.

“Oh, my God, call an ambulance!” Rush shouted, pulling open Duncan’s coat to find the bullet wound.

For Duncan, the world narrowed down to a pinprick of light, the air bubbling wetly in his lungs, mouth filling with the thick, metallic taste of blood as he tried to breathe, the noise around him fading into a buzz and then nothing.

Agent Rush turned to the next page of the substantial report into what had been contained on the pen-drives Charles Duncan had held in his pocket, thankfully undamaged by the gunshot that punctured his lung and almost killed him. No one had noticed the extra sniper on the roof, no one questioned his right to be there, as he wore the same uniform as the others, even using the same weapon as the official snipers. Obviously, someone had found out or followed Duncan to the meeting with orders to assassinate him. An inch or two and they would have succeeded. As it was, the man currently laying in an induced coma with a machine breathing for him would recover, but it would take time. The bullet had gone right through, just missing his spine, shattering his shoulder blade and tunneling through the right lung to emerge from his chest wall, between a rib, its force spent, and lodging inside his thick wool coat. He'd died twice on the operating table, surviving only by the talents of his surgeons and medical staff. Now they just had to pull him through any secondary infections, nurse him back to a full recovery, then lock him up and throw away the key.

Rush swallowed down a desire to curse in several colorful languages, the irony playing out that if he’d only done the same when given the opportunity with Abigail Westbrooke, all the heartache that had followed could have been avoided. Somehow, he knew that Charles Duncan would welcome the punishment meted out, an atonement for all that he'd done in the nearly two years past. He'd probably wonder why they went to all the trouble to patch him up. Why not let him die and be done with it? Fortunately for him, not everyone held such a bleak assessment of his worth.

Abigail Westbrooke's body had eventually turned up a week later, found bloated and floating in a side canal under a wharf. The autopsy had revealed she'd died a violent death, primarily from being throttled with a belt or scarf, plus her body presented numerous other injuries resulting from a vicious beating or possible torture. She had also been three weeks pregnant. Whether she would have been aware of the pregnancy that early on, or for that matter whoever had killed and/or beaten her, was moot. A DNA test conclusively proved it wasn't Duncan's.

The information Duncan had passed on was enough to find and destroy each and every nest Abigail had carefully created. The formula to neutralize the deadly spores was also contained. The scientists at Cornell were whipping up several batches of the antidote right now for distribution around the world, while teams were being trained how to place explosives for the total annihilation of the hybrid threat. A similar antidote was also detailed that could help reverse the effects of the mutations affecting human hybrids. The science was not complete, but there was enough to advance the current studies by leaps and bounds. In an encrypted file was the information about the other interested parties piggy-backing Abigails initiative for their own ends. In a collaborative operation, the CIA, FBI, Interpol and every other covert agency around the world were given the information pertinent to their country and expected to purge those companies and people named. The news channels were awash with reports of people in high positions being arrested or found dead from suicide or assassination from all around the world, including several surprises in the US Senate, Congress and White House staff.

Meanwhile, the instigator of the upheaval lay wasted and unresponsive in a hospital room, guarded twenty-four hours, attended only by a rotation of hospital staff and visited by one. Rush had read the report on Duncan's physical condition compared to his last physical on record, his dramatic weight loss, the numerous old and new scars inflicted by fingernails, teeth, and fists, the
bulked up muscles, broken nose (now reset) and general presentation of recent neglect. It was as far from the state he'd last seen Mitch Morgan in as possible. If his mental and emotional condition was anywhere near to his current physical one, it was going to be a hard slog to prise Mitch Morgan out from behind his alter ego, Charles Duncan. Mitch Morgan had a life waiting for him to return to, he had a new daughter to connect with, a life to rebuild. Whether he could or should try and rekindle his relationship with his abandoned bondswoman, was up for debate. He still had two children that bore his genes, that benefitted from his largesse, that both needed a living and loving father in their lives. Whether he could be induced to fight for the future remained to be seen. That anyone had a future was entirely due to his efforts and self-sacrifice. In a just world, he would be lauded as the hero of the hour, but justice was blind in all sorts of ways, and it was more likely he'd be blamed for conspiring with Abigail Westbrooke, even possibly murdering her, than blessed for saving the world from a hybrid apocalypse.

Flis chewed on the edge of her thumb and listened to the news report. It was another rehash of previous stories revolving around the capture of an internationally wanted criminal, Charles Duncan, who had been shot in a sting operation in Brussels. His accomplice and lover, Abigail Westbrooke had been found floating in a canal, the cause of her demise too graphic to detail on primetime news. Several prominent politicians in different countries were being imprisoned, arrested or discovered dead, suspected suicides to avoid scandal. All the information leading to the discovery of corruption, dirty dealings and plots was laid at the feet of the faceless Charles Duncan, presumably still too ill to face the press or stand trial. For those that knew who Charles Duncan really was, it was like waiting for the axe to drop, for the whole ugly mess to land on their doorstep at any moment. Jamie made no secret that her last name was Morgan, but most only presumed that her husband was dead, not masquerading as a wanted felon associated with the woman who had wanted to destroy the world with her manufactured hybrids, and which he had quite possibly murdered.

Jamie had seen some of the news bulletins, but as there was no image of what Charles Duncan looked like, she had no idea the man was her former keeper and love of her life, father of her child. She was more interested in her toddler who was just getting the hang of walking and starting to speak her first words at last.

The phone rang and Flis jumped. She grabbed the cordless and lifted it to her ear.

“Morgan residence.”

“Rush here, Flis. How is everyone?”

Flis felt her heart rate start to calm down. “Agent Rush, lovely to hear from you.”

“Everyone keeping well, I hope? How is Melanie? Running the place yet?”

“Pretty much. Jamie is well, she...ah, she has an admirer.”

“Not surprisingly. More surprising is how long it's taken for anyone to take notice.”

“Yes. Well, she's been a bit preoccupied. Melanie is walking...just. She has two top, two bottom teeth, and her first word was puss.”

“Puss? Really? What happened to Momma?”

“We had a stray wander in and adopt us, so that has been the cause of much excitement and she couldn't seem to get her lips around cat, so it's called Puss.”

Agent Rush chuckled down the phone. Flis bit her lip then asked the question.

“How is he?”

“Not in the best of shape, whichever way you look at it. They're keeping him under for a while longer to give his lung a chance to heal fully, then they'll gradually bring him out and the head games will start.”

“What do you want me to tell Jamie? Anything?”

“At this stage, there is nothing to tell. What does she tell anyone who asks?”

“Not a lot, hardly anything really. But it's assumed by most that she is a widow.”

“Fair enough. I'll keep you posted about progress. Give Jamie my best regards.”
“Will do.” Flis put the phone back on its cradle and turned to lean against the wall. Out on the porch, the sound of laughter was punctuated with voices, Jamie’s, Melanie’s baby babble, and a deeper, male voice that belonged to a neighbor of theirs who was starting to become a regular visitor, and possibly a determined suitor for Jamie’s hand, heart and all points in-between. There was nothing wrong with the man, he was only a few years older than her, good-looking, made her laugh, and had brought a sparkle back into her eyes. But he wasn’t Mitch, and Flis knew better than anyone how many nights Jamie still spent soaking her pillow in maudlin remembrance of her lost love. Melanie, as she grew, was a constant reminder of her father, her eyes so achingly familiar it was hard sometimes to look at her and not see Mitch staring back at you. That in itself wasn’t a bad thing, but it spelled doom to anyone wanting to make Jamie fall in love with them when Mitch’s daughter was a constant reminder of what had been before.

Heaving a sigh and pinning a smile on her face, Flis picked up the tray she’d been preparing and carried it outside to where her friend and the man, who would like to be more than a friend, were discussing going to a local shindig together.

Agent Rush stood by the bed and watched the man sleeping in it. Mitch had been finally brought out of the coma, and now slept unaided, but had yet to return to full consciousness enough for questioning. While his body healed, the world had got on with what it did, the news media frenzy over the unmasking of several global conspiracies was now at the stage of coming before special commission and courts to be judged and found wanting. Charles Duncan was mentioned less and less frequently with nothing to feed on, no information, not even an image of the elusive villain to stoke the fires. Commentators started to downplay how serious the hybrid apocalypse had really been, despite the evidence of the hybrid barrier in Mexico and the chaotic turmoil happening in South America.

Out of the spotlight of the media, meetings were held at a top level, reviewing the life of Dr. Mitch Morgan, weighing up his crimes against his contributions, and his ultimate part in bringing down those that wanted to profit from the decimation of the planet. The most horrific of those, and one that was kept well out of the news was the gas proposed to be released by the Shepherds, using General Andrew Davies and the Noah Objective to mask the release of a modified chemical agent that would have seen the sterilisation of all human beings on the planet, while leaving the animals, who it was intended to impact, unharmed and unaltered. Discovering that particular development and neutralizing it was sufficient in itself to grant Dr. Morgan a free pass and right all his former wrongs. When it was also brought to light his unselfish sacrifice to protect his family from Abigail’s spite, it further exonerated him from future persecution and opened the door for him to make a miraculous return to public life, no stain on his character or reputation. It was also unilaterally decided to let the persona of Charles Duncan officially die due to his wounds by sending out a media release to that effect, killing off that line of future inquiry and freeing Mitch Morgan for the future.

Now all Rush had to do was convince the man himself to accept that he had a chance to restart his life, and possibly regain his family. Learning that Jamie had someone interested in her might even help to motivate Dr. Morgan to fight for what was his, not just fall on his sword.

In all events, nothing could happen until the wretched man woke up.

Jamie laughed at something that Luke was telling her, his blue eyes, the color of the sky, meeting hers with a warmth that washed over her and sent shivers down her spine. Luke was a near neighbor who also owned a farm on the outskirts of town, growing salad greens under glass and running a few horses on the side. He had seen Jamie at the Farmer’s Market and instantly struck up a conversation when she visited his stall there, eventually buying a substantial amount of his fresh greens. Every week that she visited he pursued their acquaintance until he plucked up the courage to ask her out on a date, that first time actually spent at her house meeting her child and enjoying time together. He had
been drawn to her, he told her, by several things, not only her face and figure, but the gentle air of sadness that seemed to appear at odd times, plus the bond ring on her finger and the odd couple that she lived with, neither of whom were related to her. Jamie had laughed at that, telling him a fiction about Flis and Phillip helping her share the costs and provide company in the big house. Some of it was the truth, the company bit at least, so she didn't feel too bad not giving him all the details. As for the ring, she let him think she was a widow, the truth too murky and uncertain to be easily explained. It was nice to talk to someone completely unassociated with anything she'd done in the past, his courtly flattery and kind attention a balm and succor to her ego, boosting her confidence and giving her something else to look forward too. They went to local shows and exhibitions, went to the local bar and enjoyed the music, even went dancing a time or two. Occasionally she felt a twinge of guilt that she was teasing the poor man and leading him on, but she was enjoying his company too much to bring it all to a messy end with honest revelations. They'd exchanged a kiss or two, which was pleasant but undemanding, Luke not pressing her for more, but content to let her set the pace, apparently not put off by her lacklustre response to his overtures. Melanie seemed to like the new face, gurgling happily whenever Jamie handed her over for Luke to carry, his rough farmers hands regular inspected by the toddler when he helped her walk, his face also inspected if she was sitting on his lap. He was patient and had a ready smile that was very attractive. In point of fact, if Jamie was completely honest, Luke was almost the perfect package to step into the role so obviously open and ready to be filled in her life. It was only when she looked into her daughter's eyes and saw Mitch, that her house of cards fell down and buried her. She had studiously avoided all mention of him since he'd left her on the side of the road with nothing but a cell phone. She didn't ask if anyone knew where he was, or what he was doing. Abigail's name came up frequently in news items and overheard conversations, but never his name. She knew later about the name Charles Duncan, but no one had informed her that he was one and the same with Mitch, so she didn't know, never made the connection. Mitch had just left, cut all ties with the people he knew and disappeared. He was dead but there was no body, no burial, no death notice to put an end date on his life. He'd signed his estate over to her as if there was, the bank and his financial advisor confirmed it, but he never tried to access it ever again. He hadn't been in touch with his daughter or her family either. Jamie hadn't been able to tell Clem anything other than the plain fact that her father had suddenly gone and no one knew where, why or for how long. When the full extent of Mitch's financial situation was made clear to her, Jamie immediately organised a substantial sum of money be put aside for Clem's future, to be administered by Audra with provision for the parents to live off the interest, providing an income until Clem was old enough to take over her financial independence. With that taken care of, Jamie set about finding somewhere to restart a life for herself and her child. Because of the continual threat of Abigail, Flis and Phillip became her watchdogs, as well as her companions and friends. In their new household, Mitch was never referred to, never named or spoken. She wore her ring on her finger, and his ring hung around her neck, the only concession that she made to acknowledge his existence, but if the ring was mentioned, it was firmly placed among past items, like an inherited vase or handed down tablecloth, having no emotional attachment at all. Only Flis knew how flimsy her patchwork repairs to her heart really were. Such was the way she survived until her baby was born, after that her heart was too full of love for her child to make room for anything else. Melanie made everything make sense again, Jamie had a purpose, a reason to love again, her child banishing the darkness to the furthermost point it could go.

Mitch stared up at the ceiling and started to count the dots in the decorative panel again. The volume of the heart monitor had been muted, much to his relief, the constant beeping driving him demented. His induced coma meant he'd missed most of the horrible side of recovering from the gunshot. His wounds were nearly all healed, leaving behind impressive scars, front, and back. Even his broken nose was no longer painful from being broken a second time to reset it straight. The bruising was
gone, as was his overgrowth of beard and long hair. He hadn't asked for a mirror, he knew he looked less like Charles Duncan now and more like his former self, but cosmetic improvements didn't wipe out what he'd become inside. Clean shaven cheeks didn't repair a shredded soul any more than a tidy haircut restored a mangled heart. No amount of personal grooming could erase the memories of what he'd done. And even if they helped, he only had to close his eyes to bring up a million memories to flay himself with. If he had to draw a picture to represent how he felt about himself, it would be a simple sheet of black paper with nothing on it, a dark maw of hopelessness with his name on the back of it. Wallowing in his slough of despond, he didn't hear the door to his room open and the man approach his bed, it was only when the shadow fell over him that he turned his head to see his visitor.

Agent Rush looked down at the man in the bed and smiled. “Well, you look a hell of a lot better than the last time I saw you. Welcome back to the world of the living, Mitch.”
Mitch grimaced. “Don't call me that.”
Rush didn't stop grinning. “Not call you Mitch? Why not, that's your name? The only name anyone will call you from now on.”
A look of surprise crossed the patient's face before resuming its former expressionless mien. “I'm not him, I'm Charles Duncan, world's most wanted.”
Rush rocked on his heels. “Not anymore. Charles Duncan was killed, assassinated with a single sniper shot at a flower market in Brussels. So, you can't be him, you're not dead.”
Mitch lifted the corner of his mouth in a sneer. “Funny. What about all the things, all the crimes I committed while I was with Abigail? You can't tell me they've all been swept under the rug.”
Rush pulled over a chair and sat down. “Didn't need to be. Anything you may think constitutes a crime, was amply mitigated by the circumstances of your taking up with Abigail and the information you smuggled to me, plus on the hard drives you handed over.” Rush leaned forward. “There is not one agency in the world that considers what you did in anything but the light of heroic self-sacrifice. You saved the world, Mitch. You're the savior of the human race!”
“Fuck off,” Mitch growled, turning his face away.
Agent Rush sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “It's no good. Charles Duncan is dead, long live Mitch Morgan.”
Mitch mumbled something and Rush had to lean forward again to hear him. When he made out the words he sat back.
“Rubbish. Even admitting to killing Abigail Westbrooke won't resurrect Duncan in anyone's eyes. The media never had an image to work with, so have no idea what he looked like. They do know that Dr. Mitch Morgan was instrumental in finding a cure for the original animal mutation, the defiant pupil. Anyone who was at the seminar and heard you speak knows Dr. Morgan was a man to be respected, who had a sterling reputation in the scientific community and was regarded highly by people in positions of power. Apart from the mystery of why you disappeared for the best part of two years, there's not a person alive with a bad thing to say about Mitch Morgan.”
Mitch had listened with his head turned away, his eye burning with unshed tears, his sorely neglected heart hearing only the possibility of hope in the words. He swallowed hard, beating down the hope, hammering it back into its corner.
“You forget that I abandoned her...I abandoned Jamie and our child. I slept with the enemy, committed adultery, even have proof. I don't somehow think she'll regard all that in the light of heroic self-sacrifice. Do you? She won't want her daughter to be touched by a murderer.”
Rush rested his elbows on his knees. “Yes, about that. How did you kill Abigail, Mitch?”
Mitch stared up at him, eyes black with remembered horror and guilt. “I wrapped my hands about her throat and strangled her. Then I carried her body to the canal and tipped her in.”
“Hmmm. Yes, she was strangled, you got that right, but not by your hands. And yes, she did show up a week later in a canal, but you didn't put her there, you were already out of the picture. Care to try again?”
Rush watched as Mitch processed what he'd said, the man's fingers pleating the edge of the sheet as
he tried to come up with actions to fit the facts.
“It's no good, Mitch. You may have wanted to commit murder, but you didn't and thoughts are not facts. Whatever you might think you are, you can cross 'murderer' off your list of self-recriminations.”
Mitch stopped his fidgeting and glared up at the Agent. “I still fucked the woman, did things with her, to her that would label me a sexual predator, a rapist...”
Rush shook his head. “You forget, I have seen the original tape of the first time you had sex with her. Despite everything you did, or appeared to do, you left her completely unmarked and unharmed. I've also seen your medical file and seen the marks you bear from her teeth and claws. If anyone was abused, it was you.”
Mitch covered his face with his arm after taking off his glasses. “It's no good, Rush, you can't make it clean and tidy. You don't know what I did. I am, and always will be the villain.”
Rush snorted. “Only if you choose to be. Would you have gone with her if you had a choice? If she hadn't already tried to kill the woman you loved, if she didn't threaten again the same woman who then carried your child? Would you have really given up all you had with Jamie just to go and fuck Abigail Westbrooke? Would you?”
“LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!” Mitch roared, his face showing the depth of grief and rage tearing him apart. He reared up in the bed and turned his back on Rush, bringing his legs to the edge of the bed in an attempt to get away. He had to find somewhere to hide, to nurse his pain, to fan the flames that struggled to burn against the hope seeping into him. Rush was already moving around the bed and managed to catch Mitch before his impact the hard floor, his legs buckling after too long without use.
“Gotta learn to walk before trying to run. You've been in this bed a long time, Mitch,” Rush told him, manhandling him back into bed.
“Go away, and don't come back,” Mitch tried to put some force into the command, but it came out more as a weak protest than a forceful imperative. Rush returned to his seat.
“If you refuse to discard your mantle of self-pity, if you prefer to wallow in your perceived villainy, then you'll probably only get to see your new daughter after Jamie remarries, which will be sooner, rather than later. You've been away long enough, Mitch. You won back the world, now go win back Jamie and the delightful Melanie.”
“She called her, Melanie?” Mitch asked, surprised.
“Melanie May Morgan. Has a certain ring to it. Oh, and I can give this back to you now. I had our photo techs work on it, and it's almost as good as the original.” Rush handed over a piece of photographic grade paper, a color print of the image they'd found in one of his pockets, the remnant so creased from repeated viewings it was unsalvageable. Instead, Rush had printed off his own copy from the email sent so long ago, and presented that to Mitch instead, making up the little fiction to avoid any hint of jealousy or resentment.
Mitch took the reprint of his two daughters and stared down at it, his face reflecting his feelings as clearly as a mirror. “Thank you for this. It was very precious to me.”
“You don’t have to settle for a photograph, Mitch. The real, living breathing children are out there just waiting for their father to return, in Clem’s case. Melanie has yet to call anyone Dad.”
Mitch looked up at the FBI agent. “Damn, but you make it hard to hold on to it.”
Rush understood what he was saying. “Then let it go. Put the last two years into the past. The world is not entirely done with you yet, we still have a huge problem with South America and the hybrids running rampant there, plus the human mutations need further work to cure them. What you've given us will advance the science, but we still need someone to take it further, the difference being we can do this in the open, no more cloak and dagger.”
Mitch was back to staring at the photograph. “That would be nice.” He reached over to place the picture on the bedside table before turning back and sitting up. “How long before I can get out of here?”
Flis and Phillip were given a heads up, but agreed not to let on or interfere with the status quo. As much as they wanted a happy ending for Jamie and Mitch, it would take time and patience. No date was given as to when Mitch would be back on his feet, only that he was making progress and was keen to see Melanie. Rush let slip that Mitch still didn't hold much hope that Jamie would forgive him, only hoped he'd have a chance to get to know his daughter. Flis rolled her eyes at that remark but held her own counsel. Phillip, wisely, said nothing.

Melanie was toddling quite confidently, still falling down now and then, but gaining experience and encouraged by the adults around her to try all sorts of modes of transport, including rolling down slopes, riding on brightly colored push-cars and galloping her rocking horse for miles. It was during one of the occasions when it was the day for rolling down the slope that Jamie looked up, still laughing after following Melanie down to the bottom, that he was there. He looked like that first time she'd seen him when he'd tripped over her in the dark corner booth, only now it was daylight and he was standing some distance away, just watching them, his hands jammed in his jeans pockets, sunlight reflecting off his glasses. Melanie was already starting back up the slope, on hands and feet, bottom up in the air as she chortled to herself, occasionally calling back to her Momma to encourage her to move. Jamie snapped out of her daze and hurried after her child, Mitch not moving as they approached the top of the slope where he stood. She was suddenly conscious of her disheveled state, her hair full of grass and leaves, her blouse pulled about and her pale blue jeans stained and grubby. Melanie had paused in her climb to stare at the stranger, her fingers finding her mouth, red gold curls dancing about her head in the slight breeze providing some relief from the heat. Jamie stood behind her daughter and similar stared at the man, noting the changes two years had wrought on him. His t-shirt under the open, plaid short-sleeved shirt, seemed to be painted on him, he'd lost weight, was leaner, his jawline and cheekbones more prominent.

“Hey.” His voice sounded rougher, lower but his eyes hadn't changed.
“Hey,” Jamie replied, twisting her long hair back into a knot.
“He,” Melanie echoed around her fingers, both Jamie and Mitch looking down at her. Mitch slowly lowered himself into a crouch to bring himself down to her level.
“Hello, Melanie.” Mitch held out his hand and the child looked at it for a moment, then up at her mother, who nodded. “Go ahead, Mel, he won't hurt you.”

Encouraged by her mother's smile, the child placed her tiny hand against Mitch's palm. He slowly closed his hand around the delicate digits, careful not to apply any pressure or frighten her.
“You looked like you were having fun,” Mitch said, smiling tentatively. Melanie reached out to touch his face, pressing her grubby free hand against his mouth, then over his nose, against his glasses before pulling away. She briefly checked with her mother before turning her attention back to the stranger.

“Mel,” Melanie announced herself, pulling her hand out of his and reaching over to wrap her arms around Jamie's legs, suddenly shy. Jamie reached down and picked Mel up, settling her on her hip. Mitch rose up and faced them both, his expression cautious as if a wrong move would set off an explosion. Jamie looked at him for a long moment, then turned to Mel. “Ready for a juice?”
“Ju', ju'!” Melanie echoed, bouncing in her arms.
“Juice it is.” Jamie walked past Mitch, who turned to follow, the three of them making their way through the garden to the covered verandah at the back of the house. Flis was already there with a tray of glasses and a jug of juice, her face wreathed in smiles.
“Nice to see you, Dr. Morgan, better, I hope?” Flis asked, ignoring Jamie's surprised look.
“All better. Glad to see you taking care of things, Flis. Phillip around?” Mitch asked.
“Working on the car at the moment, out front. He'll be in for lunch later,” Flis told him, before taking herself off into the house.

Jamie had poured some of the juice into a sippy cup for Melanie, the child having her own chair to sit in, a miniature of the adult-sized wicker chairs. She then poured two glasses before sitting down
herself. Mitch took the only other chair, the table and jug between them and him. Jamie took a gulp of her drink to free up her dry throat, noting the way Mitch couldn't take his eyes off his child, watching her handle the sippy cup. He suddenly looked over at her and caught her staring.

“I love the name you gave her. It's as beautiful as she is.”

Jamie ducked her head. “I remembered what you said about firstborns having names starting with ‘M’. I know you missed out with Clem, but I thought I'd start it again with Mel.”

“It was a lovely choice. And the 'May’?”

“My grandmother's first name, and my mother's middle name,” Jamie explained. Mitch nodded. “Perfect.” They sat and drank the juice, Mitch watching the child, Jamie watching Mitch.

Jamie cleared her throat. “I heard that Abigail died, several months ago.” She swallowed hard. “I'm sorry for your loss.”

Mitch looked over at her, his expression suddenly grim. “There was no loss for me, and don't be sorry she's dead. She only ever meant you harm, given half a chance, and never stopped keeping tabs on you. She was rotten to the core and took delight in the mischief and grief she caused.”

Jamie stared at him. “Then...then why? Where have you been, Mitch?”

Mitch turned away and stared into his glass. “I didn't come here to cause you pain or harass you, Jamie, I just wanted to see you and see Melanie. I thought we might come to an arrangement where I could see her occasionally...or something like that.”

“An arrangement. I see...” Jamie repeated quietly. “Are you staying somewhere locally?”

Mitch nodded. “A motel in town.”

Melanie had finished her juice and jumped from her chair to put her cup on the table. She then walked over to where Mitch was sitting and raised her arms. “Up.”

Leaning forward, Mitch picked her up and sat her sideways on his lap so she was facing her mother across the table. Mel instantly reached for his glass, but he put it beyond her reach. He then picked her sippy cup and offered it to her again. Mel instantly scrunched up her face, making him laugh. “That's a no for the sippy cup, then.”

Mel turned her head to look at his face, reaching up again to touch his glasses. Mitch wrapped her questing fingers in his and gently pulled them away from his eyewear. “No,” he said firmly. Mel looking at him for a moment, then nodding. “No,” she repeated, grinning and showing off her few tiny teeth. Mitch released her fingers and she pulled them back, suddenly spotting the buttons on his shirt and deciding to push some of the buttons through the button holes, pulling it across his chest.

After watching the first few seconds, Jamie had quickly relaxed back into her chair, reminding herself that this wasn't the first time Mitch had handled a small child. Having done and undone several of the buttons, most in the wrong buttonholes, Mel clambered down off his lap and wandered over to the basket of toys left out for her amusement. Mitch spent a couple of seconds sorting out his shirt buttons before turning towards Jamie, surprising a broad smile on her face.

“Sorry,” she said. “I should have warned you about her button fixation.” Jamie indicated her own clothes that had no button anywhere.

Mitch smiled. “Not a problem.”

Jamie fiddled with her glass. “Have you been to see Clementine?”

“I've spoken to her on the phone and by Skype. I'll go up and see her sometime soon. She told me something of the visits she's had with you. In fact, several I understand.”

“Yeah. She was so keen to see the baby, and she's so good with Mel. She's really taken to having a half-sister, despite the age difference.”

“She certainly loves you, and Melanie. Thank you for everything you've done for Clem and her family.”

“Nothing that you wouldn't have done yourself, if you'd been here.” Jamie shot back, some heat in the last few words.

Mitch stared down at his hands. “There was no other way.”

A silence grew between them, Melanie babbling away to herself with her toys, one inevitably finding its way into her mouth. Mitch suddenly got to his feet and rubbed his hands down his jean covered...
thighs.
“Id better go. I only meant to stop by...”
Jamie jumped to her feet, anxious and uncertain. “Stay for lunch!” she blurted out. “I mean, if you
don’t have anywhere you need to be. Phillip will be in then, and Flis always makes more than we all
can eat...”
Mitch looked at her, his hands jammed back in his jeans pockets, his shoulder hunched. “You don’t
have to...”
Melanie chose that moment to let out a cry because she’d managed to hit her own fingers instead of
the block she was trying to hammer into the wrong hole on the shape-box toy. Jamie instantly turned
to see to her, Mitch watching as fingers were kissed better and tears wiped away before Jamie picked
Mel up and turned back to him.
“I know I don’t have to, Mitch. If you don’t want to stay, I’m not forcing you.”
“I know, and I’d like to spend a little more time with...everyone.” He looked down at his boots, not
wanting her to see the pathetic hope that burned in his eyes. Having seen them both, he felt sick at
the thought of having to walk away. Jamie looked so beautiful, and little Mel was just perfect. As
Jamie brushed past him to enter the house a voice hailed from the garden and they all turned to see
the newcomer approach. Luke jumped the stairs and went straight to Jamie and Mel, giving Jamie a
long kiss on the lips before snaffling Mel’s nose and kissing the child on the cheek, making her
giggle and scrunch her face up.
Mitch stood to the side like a statue, taking in the obvious familiarity between the three, the easy
affection between Jamie and the man close to her own age, and his ease with Melanie. Jamie was
turning an interesting shade of pink, refusing to look at Mitch while Luke lifted Mel from her arms
and walked into the house, obviously expecting to be included in lunch. Jamie bit her lower lip and
tucked her hands into the back pockets of her jeans before turning to face Mitch.
“Um...that was Luke, he’s a neighbor and...er...friend. I’m sorry, I forgot I invited him to have lunch
with us...” Jamie shuffled her feet, not sure how Mitch would react.
He felt as if someone had thrown a bucket of icy water over him, the chills shivering down his spine,
encasing him in ice, numbing all feeling.
“He seems nice. I’m glad you found someone to...that is, I’m glad you have a friend.” He suddenly
moved towards the stairs leading off the deck. “Look, you don’t want me here now, I’ll...how about I
call back tomorrow. When’s a good time to see Mel?”
“Mitch you don’t have to...”
He scrunched up his face. “Yeah. I think I do. It was great to see you, Jamie. I’ll drop by tomorrow
and visit with Mel...er...before I leave.”
Jamie stared at him. “You’re leaving? But you only just...I mean...why are you leaving?”
He stared back at her, his eyes drinking in her features, his lips parting on a shuddering sigh. “We’ll
talk tomorrow, sweetheart, okay?” He winced as the endearment slipped off his tongue, Jamie’s eyes
opening wider on hearing it. He turned away and ran down the steps, lifting his hand to wave
goodbye, almost fleeing as he rounded the side of the house and out of sight.
Jamie stood at the top of the stairs, her fingers held to her mouth as if to hold in calling him back. She
jumped when Luke came up behind her and wrapped an arm around her waist. “You going to stand
out here all day? Lunch is on the table and Mel is chewing the cutlery.”
Jamie allowed herself to be pulled into the house, still dazed at the speed of events over the last few
minutes. Flis had been expecting to see Jamie and Mitch enter together, but only saw Luke and
Jamie, no sign of Mitch. From the stunned look on her face, Flis could only guess what had
happened. Grabbing hold of Jamie’s arm, Flis made up an excuse she needed her help, and dragged
her friend out of the room and across the hall.
“Where’s Mitch?” Flis asked.
Jamie blinked up at her. “He’s leaving again.”
“Who? Mitch?”
“He said he’ll be back tomorrow to see Mel before he leaves. He only just got here, why is he
leaving?” Jamie looked genuinely confused, and Flis had to shake her to get her to concentrate.
"Did he say where he was staying?" Flis asked. Jamie looked at her and shook her head. Flis cursed, and turned away, staring out of the window of the small side room they were standing in. Beyond the net curtain, she would see Phillip talking with someone.

"He hasn't gone, he's talking to Phillip. Go out there and stop him!" Flis ordered her. Jamie gaped at her.

"What?"

Flis grabbed her arms again. "Mitch is out there talking to Phillip. He hasn't left yet. Go out there and convince him to stay for lunch, hell to stay forever, whichever works."

Jamie found herself bundled out of the room, down the hall and out the front door, Flis slamming the door shut behind her.

The noise drew the attention of the two men talking beside the cars. Jamie fumbled for the handle of the door behind her to make a quick exit, but Flis had locked it, barring her escape. Mitch was staring at her, waiting for her to move. Phillip cast a shrewd glance between the two of them and decided to beat a retreat, saying he had to wash up.

"See you inside," Phillip said, clapping Mitch on the shoulder.

"I'm not staying," Mitch retorted faintly, his eyes still fixed on Jamie standing on the porch. Phillip just snorted and left the scene, shaking his head.

Jamie licked her suddenly dry lips and slowly walked down the few steps to the path, then across the grass to the driveway where Mitch still stood. Dappled sunlight patterned the ground as she drew closer, Mitch watching her intently, a hungry look in his eyes that sent shivers of long-neglected desire skittering down her nerves. She stopped with still a gap of a foot between them.

"Why are you here?" he asked. Jamie smiled.

"I want to know why you're leaving," she stated, an upwelling of confidence giving her courage.

"You were going to stay for lunch. What changed your mind?"

Mitch let out a short laugh, more bitter than humorous. "No one likes to be a spare wheel."

Jamie tilted her head. "What do you think is going on here?"

Mitch looked over at the house. "I think you have a nice life here, an opportunity to start over with a nice man who obviously...." He swallowed, his mouth twisting. "Who's obviously in love with you."

"His name is Luke, and yes he is a very nice man. I'll have to take your word for how he feels about me, because he's never said anything to me."

Mitch shook his head and grimaced. "Yet. He hasn't said anything yet. Give him an ounce of encouragement and you'll be walking down the aisle by the weekend."

Jamie crossed her arms over her chest. "You can see all that? Wow, maybe you should hire yourself out as a matchmaker."

Mitch glared at her, his hands gravitating to his hips. "What's that supposed to mean? He kissed you, for fuck's sake."

Jamie gave a little smile. "He did, didn't he? He's actually quite a good kisser...."

Mitch let out a low growl of frustration, his brows drawn together in a furious frown, then just as suddenly he realized how misplaced his jealousy was and blanked his expression, relaxing his hands from the fists they'd become.

"I'm glad you've found someone to love, Jamie, I really am. It's easy to see he loves you, and he gets on well with Mel, he'll make a good father for her."

Jamie looked taken aback by his sudden surrender, his expression unreadable and his eyes expressionless where moments before she would have sworn he'd been jealous.

"She has a father already, thank you," Jamie spat, feeling anger start to fizz inside her.

Mitch misunderstood her and winced visibly. "I'm sure he'll be a better father than I ever could be."

Jamie goggled at him. "What a stupid thing to say! How could he possibly be a better father than the one she already has?"

Mitch frowned at her. "But if you love him...?"

Jamie fisted her hands on her hips. "You are the only one who keeps insisting that he loves me. Luke hasn't said a word, and I've never even brought the subject up. Do you want me to be in love with him?"
“NO!” Mitch shouted, thoroughly pissed off. “And I don't like him kissing you either!”
“Talk about dog in the manger,” Jamie railed at him. “You don't want him kissing me, but you don't
want to kiss me either, so where does that leave me?”
“I never said I didn't want to kiss you, I just don't want you kissing him!” He stepped forward just as
she did, both of them breathing heavily, both glaring at the other, hands fisted at their sides,
frustration pulsing off them.
Jamie had a second of warning, a flash of something in his eyes before Mitch closed the distance
between them and covered her mouth with his own, his arms folding around her and holding her in
place. Wriggling her arms free she threw them around his neck and held on, giving back as hard as
she could, his hands holding her flush against his body, not giving her a chance to break away even
if she'd wanted to.

Luke wandered over to stand beside Flis who was watching from the kitchen window. “He's not
dead then?”
couple still closely engaged in their reunion on the front lawn.
“Mitch Morgan, huh? Didn't he have something to do with curing the animals?” Luke asked.
“The very same,” Flis confirmed. “He's quite famous.”
Luke contemplated the short red-head and the tall dark man kissing her passionately. “Tell Jamie, I'll
see her at the markets. I think I'll go now, don't want to disturb them.”
Luke flicked her a bittersweet smile. “Thought I'd struck the jackpot this time. Guess my timing was
off.” He heaved a sigh and turned away from the window. “Thanks for lunch, Flis.”
Flis remained by the window, shamelessly watching. Phillip entered with Melanie in his arms, her
head resting on his shoulder, half asleep.
“Luke just left. He's not coming back, is he.”
Flis shook her head. “Nope.” Phillip peered out the window at the lovers still meshed together.
“I'm going to put Melanie down for her nap. They look like they might be out there for awhile.”
“Yeah. Probably. I'll come up with you. Feel in need of a bit of a nap myself.” Flis waggled her
eyebrows at him and winked.
Phillip laughed and led the way out of the room towards the stairs.

Mitch held her face between his hands, pressing butterfly kisses over her nose and eyes, her cheeks
and forehead all the time murmuring to her about how sorry he was, how much he loved her, while
Jamie stroked her hands over his head and through his hair whispering back how much she'd missed
him and he was never to leave her again. Shaking with the force of their emotions, they pulled back
and stared at each other.
“I want to stay here, but I don't know if that's too sudden, if you need time...”
Jamie didn't know whether to laugh or cry, scream or plead, she only knew that she didn't want him
to leave again. “I couldn't bear it if you left me again, not for a minute. We've lost so much time, I
don't want another second to go by without you.” She reached up to kiss him again, his words lost in
the wet depths of her mouth, his body on fire after so long without her sweetness and life. They
parted briefly, Mitch hugging her tight against him, her arms around him holding him close. He
pressed his cheek to her hair and breathed her in.
“I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart, nowhere at all.”

When they finally drifted back to the house, hand in hand, they found it empty and quiet. Lunch had
been cleared away, the kitchen tidy. Jamie drew him up the stairs to the nursery where their precious
child slept peacefully, red-gold curls tumbled around her head, her thumb firmly plugged between
her lips. They left the nursery behind and Jamie took him to her room, shutting the door behind them.
“We have about an hour before she wakes up from her nap,” Jamie told him, indicating the monitor
beside the bed.
“It'll take a lifetime for me to show you how I feel about you...” Mitch started to say, only for Jamie to cut him off with a kiss.
“You have sixty minutes. Make it count.” She gave him a cheeky grin and pulled her blouse off over her head.
“Wow,” Mitch exclaimed, staring at the bounty before him. Shrugging off his jacket he then tore off the plaid shirt, quickly followed by the t-shirt. Jamie was watching and had a wow moment of her own.
“Good, Lord.” She scraped her short nails over his toned torso. Mitch instantly shivered, dragging her forward for a kiss, his fingers unraveling the knot holding her hair back so that is cascaded over his hands and down her back.
“Beautiful, just beautiful,” he murmured, kissing along her jaw, down her throat and over her shoulders, lowering her bra straps as he went. Jamie was working on his belt and zipper, Mitch kicking off his boots, both of them shimmying out of their jeans and underwear before falling on the bed, a tangle of arms and legs. Mitch ditched his glasses, which fell off the side of the bed to the carpet, his socks soon following as did Jamie's. Free of all barriers between them, they paused to gaze at each other with hungry, loving eyes. Jamie had an unbidden question in her eyes and Mitch answered it for her.
“I always used a condom. Jamie, I never once told her I loved her or had any feelings for her at all. She understood that. I also never 'made love' to her. She wanted me to, but I couldn't. In a way I think she respected me for that.” He drew in a deep breath, his hand stroking over the side of her face and head, tenderly mapping the face he’d always wanted to see, but had to put aside to perform at all.
“I would understand if you're disgusted with me and would prefer not to...” Jamie pinched his lips shut to stop him talking.
“I know why you did what you did, I worked that out a long time ago for myself. I didn't like it then, still don't like it now, but she's dead. I'm not, and neither are you if that gun barrel poking me in the thigh is anything to go by.” She reached under the pillow above her head and drew out a long chain. She unhooked it and took off the ring it carried. Tossing the chain over the side of the bed, she held up the ring. Wordlessly, Mitch held out his left hand for her to put the ring on it, the welcome feel and weight making him clench his hand into a fist.
Jamie started to speak. “Mitchell Morgan, I take you as my bonded husband, to love and to cherish, in good times and bad, forever and ever, unto death.”
Mitch drew her left hand over and threaded his left hand with hers on one of the pillows behind their heads. “I, Mitchell Morgan, take you, Jamie Morgan to be the love of my life, the woman I adore and the mother of my current and future children, forever and ever, unto death.”
Jamie smiled serenely up at him. “Now kiss me and let's get on to the good stuff.”
Mitch chuckled at her impatient expression. “You really did miss me, didn't you.”
“You're wasting time, Mitch. We now have forty-five minutes and counting.”
“That's my girl.”

End of Winning Back The World.

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