

Chapter 1

“Goodbye John.” The griever said, touching my forehead to theirs as they left. It had been a long day, there must’ve been a large accident or something. That’s what usually caused a rush like this. A large number of people didn’t get the opportunity to say their final words to a loved one before they passed, and needed me to duplicate their appearance so they could have a chance to give a proper farewell.

I took a few breaths to clear my head, confirmed with Ryan that this griever had been the last one, and slipped back into my normal appearance. Only, I couldn’t. Everything still seemed fluid. My nose kept changing its mind about what size it wanted to be. My hair shifted between various shades of brown and black. Even my eyes danced from one color to the next. They couldn’t even agree on one color between the two of them. I looked like a Husky with different colored eyes.

A mirror didn’t help. It only seemed to illustrate my problem, allowing me to look on with growing dismay as my facial features seemed to change faster than the numbers on a slot machine.

Facebook, I had a Facebook. There must be a picture of me on there somewhere. I log into my profile and am greeted with Ryan’s face on my profile. It was a joke at the time. ‘ha ha, look Ryan. I’m you!’. It didn’t seem so funny now. I open up my past profile pictures and find that every single one is me playing a joke. Even my tagged photos all look like different people.

Some are promotional from work, others are just me goofing around and showing off for my friends. I think some might be me, but there are too many different faces all tagged as me to even begin to sort out which is the real me.

I snap my phone shut. This can’t be real. How can I not remember? I always remembered. I tried to do it by muscle memory. ‘Okay, work is done, griever leaves. I confirm with Ryan that I’m done, and I.....’ Nothing, the face I slip into is not even human. ‘Come on, one more time, work is done. I confirm with Ryan and.....’ I’m still thinking about Husky eyes, and give myself a dog’s face.

‘I’ve got a date tonight. How will she even know it’s me? Oh wait, maybe I sent her a face pic.’ I scan through my phone again, hoping that I’ve sent somebody a photo of my face, only to come up empty handed again. She just now sent me a face pic so I could identify her tonight. That added to the pressure, now I had to find a way to send one back or risk looking very rude.

I’m starting to panic now. ‘Is there no record of my face anywhere? Driver’s license, of course, I had to take a proper photo for a driver’s license.’ Feeling a sense of relief well up inside me I pull out my wallet and extract my driver’s license.

My stomach feels like it's going to fall out when instead of a photo I see. *Government licensed shape shifter, appearance variable*. I forgot that because my face could be anyone's they had told me I didn't need to take a photo.

I start to crumble into a ball. If even the government doesn't have a photo of me, then there really is no hope.

"Hey Jason." Ryan calls out to me from the next room. "Buddy I know you're off for the day but we've got one more. Are you up for one last griever?"

I rise to my feet. Ryan has already displayed a photo of the loved one on the monitors. Underneath her face is my personal motto. *It's not my face that matters, but the person behind it*. I had almost forgotten. It is not my nose or my eyes that make me who I am. It's my heart and soul, and those never change.

"Absolutely Ryan, it's not trouble at all. Send the griever in."

I rapidly scanned the file Ryan attached with the deceased's photo. It detailed her physical appearance so I could duplicate it, and gave a brief bio on the person coming to grieve. Our research team was fantastic about deciphering information concerning the relationship between the griever and the departed. Many of them were retired law enforcement who could find out a lot about someone without having to badger them for information. It allowed me to know as much as possible about the whole situation without the griever having to be pestered a lot about the obviously delicate subject of the departed.

The griever was a twenty something female, just out of college, and the departed was her roommate. That fact stung me. I knew that meant she was going to be heading back to an empty apartment for the next few weeks, or maybe even next few months.

I examined the scan of her friend and used a mirror to insure I exactly duplicated her features. The griever would be coming in any second, so I absorbed the last few details about how the two had known each other through a collegiate sports team, and shared aspirations to be gym teachers.

One of the researchers managed to find a few sound bites of the departed, and I begin an audio loop of her in my earpiece so I can begin to formulate a way to duplicate her voice. Having her vocal chords certainly helps, but there's more to speech than just physical structure. The voice is like any instrument. You can't just have the equipment; you have to know how to play it as well. Thankfully, this was my job, and I am something of a master at duplicating vocal patterns as long as I can have a few sound bites to work from. The doorknob on my office door began to turn. I checked my appearance one last time as the door opens and the young lady walks in.

Oddly enough, Ryan doesn't send me any photos of the griever. It usually doesn't matter because I'm not going to duplicate their appearance. It's no more important for me to know the appearance of the griever than it is for an employer to know the appearance of someone they're interviewing. That is, unless the person they're interviewing just happens to be the same person they're going on a date with later.

When a shape shifter gets surprised they have a tendency to rapidly shift through different appearances. I'm very grateful that I've been doing this since high school and have developed the professionalism necessary to maintain my appearance even under extreme emotional duress.

"Hey." She says. I can't think of what to say, but I know how to look, and this isn't about me saying anything anyway. They're not here because they want to pretend their loved one is still alive. They're here to say goodbye. So usually I just listen, and adopt a much practiced expression of hope and understanding. I've been told by some of the people who trained me that it's a bit like one of those movies where the protagonist is dying, but doesn't want anyone to be sad. Right before they go they show you this expression that says 'it's going to be okay'. That's what I aim for, and expressing that very specific emotion is now almost second nature for me.

She's still standing in the doorway, so I gesture to the seat in front of me. I walk out from behind my desk and sit in another chair facing the one I've indicated she should take.

This can be an understandably awkward situation, and I typically have to guide the griever through the first few steps. It's all about body language, and patience. They're here to talk, and I'm here to listen.

She shuffles her feet for a bit, glancing nervously at me like she thinks I might bite, but I just keep making gentle eye contact and waiting. I lean back in the chair to communicate my ease to her.

The young lady scrounges up the courage and comes over to sit across from me. She doesn't say anything right away, but that's normal. She may have planned something out in her head in advance, but this is just like giving someone important news in real life. Once you're actually sitting in front of someone you have to have a hard conversation with, everything you planned on saying tends to go out the window.

"I watered your cactus." She finally says. I twitch my lips ever so slightly outwards to indicate the hint of a smile. She takes this little bit of active listening as permission to continue. "It's silly I know. I'm not even sure you're supposed to water cactuses, cacti, whatever you call them. How ridiculous is that? I don't even know the plural for it and I'm trying to take care of it." She snorts a little, finding humor in the ridiculousness of it. I can hear that there's starting to be some excess mucus building up in her nose from her tear ducts funneling moisture to her nostrils. "It's just like when you would go to Europe you know? I would take care of your stuff

for when you get back. Which is stupid. I mean, because you're not coming back." Her eyes are starting to go red now.

I lean in to the conversation, folding my hands so that they rest just a few inches from hers. "It's like if I just keep acting like you're going to come back then you will, and I know you're not, but I still feel like you're going to. Like if I just keep trying to show you that I care then one day I'll look up and you'll come walking through the door, shouting 'sup' to me as you hang up your volleyball gear. Just like you did in college." She wipes away her first tear. "You remember college? Man we were bad, but we had so much fun. I still remember how you spiked the coach's coffee with a ghost pepper. He turned so red, and boy did you run laps." She laughs a bit again as she wipes away the second tear.

"I just wanted to have more memories like that with you. You were only 23. We were supposed to go to Ireland together, and give embarrassing speeches at each other's weddings." There's a steady stream of tears now, and her sentences are punctuated with heavy breathing and snorting sounds as she tries to hold back the mucus that is now starting to come out of her nose.

"I miss you so much." Her voice cracks on the last word. I take her hands in mine and maintain a firm but gentle pressure as the waterworks really start to flow. She slumps forward and I touch my forehead to hers. There's some small corner of my brain that starts using the physical contact to stir up some unprofessional feelings, but my need to be here for her squashes it. I'm here for her, not for me.

It's several seconds before she can calm down enough to continue. I just keep maintaining that steady supportive pressure through her hands as we have our heads pressed together.

"And I know we're going to have part soon. I mean, I guess that's the point of this. So we can part ways on friendlier terms?" She pulls her head back so she can make eye contact. The impact that her outpouring of emotion has had on her makeup is substantial, but I keep that supportive gaze on her eyes as she finishes her thought.

"I want you to know that I've always thought of you as a sister, and I'm going to make sure that your memory makes me stronger, that it makes all of us stronger. You won't be forgotten Sarah. I promise. I'll carry your memory." She snorts again, thinking of something funny, but still crying as she thinks of it. "Even when I'm too old and sick to remember it myself. I'll make other people remember it for me and tell me about you." She kisses me on the forehead.

"I'll miss you Sarah. I loved you like my own sister, and I'll always remember you." She touches my cheek and takes a big shuddering breath.

I touch her cheek back and say, in Sarah's voice. "Thank you."

We sit for several long moments like that. I have one hand on her cheek, the other is holding her hand, and I'm looking at her while she's staring at my shoes. Her breathing is agitated, like she's trying to catch her breath, but it slowly returns to normal.

After her breathing steadies she releases the hand that's holding mine and removes my other hand from her face. I fold my hands in front of me as she begins to compose herself. She becomes aware of how wet her face is, and begins wiping it with her hands, and producing handkerchiefs to clean herself up.

There's a glass of water nearby for such occasions. She takes a few sips and pats herself down with the handkerchief one more time.

Finally, she makes eye contact again. Her eyes look like she's been pepper sprayed, but no tears are coming. "Goodbye Sarah." She says. A final tear rolls down her cheek as she bends over to kiss me on the forehead one more time.

She stands up and straightens her clothes out, observing all the moist spots. She hasn't composed herself enough to be embarrassed by the wet spots, and she shouldn't be embarrassed anyway. Our waiting room is perpetually full of people who are a bit of a mess.

The girl, whose name I still don't know, walks to the door. She turns the knob, and as she opens it, turns back. I'm still maintaining my appearance and my supportive facial expression.

"Thank you." She says, this time I know she's addressing me, and not her friend. I don't respond verbally, but just give a slight nod of my head to indicate to her that I understand before she closes the door.

I exhale loudly, thankful that the walls are soundproof. "What are the odds?" I ask the ceiling. "I should go buy a lottery ticket or something." I slip into Ryan's appearance subconsciously. I'm thinking about how she must be thanking Ryan and me for our work.

"Well, I guess this means I'm not taking her to see that new Nicholas Sparks movie." I inform my furniture. I had already read the reviews. He managed to kill off all three protagonists in this one.

Then it really hits me. "The date!" I exclaim. I've only got two hours to prepare, and I'm going to be stuck in this office for the next twenty minutes to give Ryan time to gracefully clear the waiting room. Clients always felt weird about seeing me afterwards, it stalled out the grieving process somewhat if they saw me as someone other than the person they had lost. So I had to wait until Ryan had a chance to clear everyone out.

I dash over to my computer and start fumbling through the file on this girl I would be taking out later today, desperately trying to find a date that would work. One of her other friends

had set us up, but hadn't given me much information about her, so I knew very little about this girl.

Volleyball was clearly out. Come to think of it, they probably did a lot of sports together in college. Best to steer clear of any kind of athletic activity. They were doing reruns of 'The Land Before Time' at the local mom and pop movie theater. That was definitely out. Matter of fact, it was a depressing time for movies in general. Best to just skip the movie portion of the date.

Dinner somewhere? That was too cliché, this girl needed something special. I was going to be the first real social interaction she had after dealing with the death of her friend, I really had to go all out for her. If not because I wanted to see her, then just because she really needed to have a good time right now.

It had to be something really far out there, something that would completely get her mind off things. Something that she had never done before and couldn't possibly be something that she and her friend had ever done together. Video games were too common, so they were out. TV and movies were definitely out, way too normal. Rock climbing was too athletic, dancing was definitely something that she and Sarah had done together at some point. Girls liked doing that kind of thing.

I mentally go through every date that I've ever had seen middle school. Every prom, every dance, every football game, every social, every time I have ever showed a girl how to enjoy life, and I come up short. Nothing seems to work.

Then I suddenly remember something me and my guy friends used to do in high school. It was dumb. For sure it was dumb, entirely juvenile. But maybe that's just what she needed right now. I started to smile a little. There was also no way she had done this with her friend.

I checked my watch; it was almost time for me to make my exit. When Ryan opens the door I take off like a shot, shouting some hurried explanation over my shoulder as I race for the stairs. There's no time to lose. I've got a few stops to make, and a whole lot of rubber bands to purchase.

I hectically dash through several stores to pick up what I need. I'm so preoccupied that my face starts flipping features at one of the checkouts. I don't notice until I see that the cashier is looking at me like I'm a ghost. She's reaching for the phone to call security when I pull out my wallet.

"Ma'am, it's okay. I'm a certified shifter. See, this is my license." She takes the card and flips it over, shuddering as she does so.

“There’s nothing to worry about. I’m just going to finish checking out and I’ll be on my way.” With a trembling hand she passes back the license to me. Shifters aren’t very common, and usually people only hear about us if they’ve been referred from a therapist.

“Well, um, could you uh, just um.” She fumbled with some of my purchases as she gawked at me. “Pick one?” She finally asked.

Feeling very unprofessional I put a hand to my face to help myself concentrate. I became aware of the unfortunate fact that I still didn’t know what my face was supposed to look like, and I was going to have to have a face for her.

Normally I went with people from the office when choosing a face. They were basically family to me, and if anyone mistook me for one of them my mates at the office didn’t mind. Or I could just pretend to be one of them, but that was not going to work today. I was going to meet with someone who would have to associate a face with me and no one else.

“Sorry, yes, just hang on a second.” I tell the cashier as I pull out my phone. I need to concentrate. I need to find a face to model and find it quick.

A celebrity was my first thought. They’re all good looking, so that would probably score me some points, but there was the obvious flaw of celebrities being easily recognizable, and I think the whole ‘well isn’t that a strange coincidence’ line would wear thin after a while. It had to be someone decent looking and somebody neither I nor she would know.

Reddit! Perfect, I would go on /r/fitness, scroll through a few pages to find somebody without much karma, and look for a pic. He would probably be good looking, and in all probability I would never meet him.

I begin furiously searching for a post with a pic of the OP when the cashier asks. “How were you going to pay for this?” I didn’t buy much and I’ve just been standing here, one hand on my face, holding up the line for some time now.

I finally happen upon the perfect post. He’s about my age, attractive, and I can honestly say I’ve never met him before. He looked vaguely Australian, at least he had the hat for it, so as a yank I was probably pretty safe.

There’s a good face pic in his pull-up tutorial. I quickly memorize his face, forward the page to my gmail for future reference, and adopt my new face.

The cashier is gawking again. Even knowing what she was going to see, she still didn’t quite believe it.

I'm tempted to become a cat to really mess with her, but I restrain myself. The cashier doesn't say the typical 'thank you for coming here, you have this many reward points'. So I just wish her well, and be on my way.

I have to call the girl to let her know the change of plans. We had arranged for dinner and a movie over text, and that was no longer going to happen. I came up with a lame excuse for not going to see the movie and just told her to meet me at a popular nearby park. There was no hint of sorrow in her voice, and she was very understanding about the change of venue.

Good, everything was going to plan so far.

I just barely have enough time to get home, change, make sure I've got the facial features down so they won't slip while I'm on the date, and dash right back out the door.

My arrival at the park only precedes hers by a few minutes, and I've only just laid everything out when she walks up.

"Hey?" She waves as she gets closer. "Am I supposed to be meeting you?" She asks. I fidget with one of the items I've laid out, and then stand up to return her wave.

"If you're supposed to be meeting the most dashing handsome man on the east coast, then yes." I say.

She laughs. "No actually I'm supposed to be meeting the world's humblest man for dinner."

"That's me." I exclaim, pointing a thumb at my chest. "World's humblest and most handsome man at your service." I give a little bow and then stretch out a hand to shake hers. "I'm Jason, glad to meet you." I want to bite my tongue as soon as the words are out.

I shouldn't have used my name. She knows that the shifter she just met was a Jason. I've given myself away.

"Jason." She says, shaking my hand. "Nice to meet you. I'm Jennifer." She looks momentarily like she's remembering something from a dream she had. "That's funny. I think I just met a Jason earlier."

"I'd love to meet the chap." I say, fumbling for something to distract her. 'I've got to misdirect her. I've got to misdirect her'. I glance behind me and realize I've laid out the perfect distraction.

“But unless he’s got a few hundred rubber bands and a watermelon I think you’ll find I’m much more interesting company.” I step to the side and gesture at the almost 700 rubber bands and the small sized watermelon I’ve laid out.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” She says, putting her fists on her hips in disbelief. “What on earth are you going to do with several hundred rubber bands and a watermelon?” She asks. I mentally congratulate myself on my distraction. “Make a giant slingshot?”

“Better.” I say, sitting down and patting the seat next to me. She obediently sits down, staring fixedly at the watermelon as if expecting it to suddenly turn into a carriage. “We’re going to make a bomb.”

She tried to stand up when I say the word bomb, but I anticipate this, and catch her elbow.

“Oh come on you big baby, it won’t be that bad.” I could sense she didn’t really want to leave because she sat back down quickly. “Here, it’s easy. You just take a couple rubber bands.” I picked up a few to demonstrate.

“Stretch them out, and then wrap them around the watermelon.” The rubber bands twanged into place around the middle of the melon making a slight thumping sound.

“See? Easy as pie.” I shove a few rubber bands her direction. She picks up two rubber bands and just like I showed her, twangs them into place around the large green fruit.

“Not so bad.” She says, gaining a measure of confidence.

“Not yet.” I smile maliciously at her, before she can think about that too much I pick up another four bands and slide them into place around the middle of the melon. “9.” I count off. She picks up another two.

“Eleven.” She says after wrapping them around the melon. Soon we get caught up in a contest of who could put the most rubber bands around the melon. We’re shoving each other out of the way in an effort to put the most on.

“100.” I intone. She doesn’t even blink, just putting on more and more bands.

“200.” I count off after several more minutes. She starts to slow down a bit. “Is this dangerous?” She asks. “203.”

“You can’t ask that now. 207. We’re already over 200 rubber bands in!”

“210.” She replies. “Seriously though, is this going to hurt?” She asks.

“214. You’re slowing down chica, and you’ll be fine.” She’s still somewhat boisterous as we continue to create our own little WMD, until we get to about 300.

“303.” I count off.

“No really, that’s like a lot of rubber bands. Have you done this before?” She asks, forgetting to count off.

“Have you ever lived before? 310.” She tries to pull back a bit, but we are just starting to get to the point where it’s fun.

“Coward! Be ye woman or be ye melon! 314.” I pass the watermelon to her and she rapidly throws on a measly two bands on before quickly passing it back to me.

“Say it!” I shout as I grab four more elastic bands.

“316!” She squeaks.

“320!” I shout, enthusiastically applying my processed rubber to the green ball. We press on as more and more bands are laid around the center of the doomed fruit.

“Oh my gosh, it’s starting to flatten out. Does it normally do that? 389.” It’s true. The melon has now lost its spherical shape.

“393, and yes, we’re getting close now. Any minute this thing is going to be in your hands, and then suddenly it won’t be.” I do my best to sound like I’m telling a ghost story.

“395.” She spurts out, pulling away from the melon as soon as the rubber bands are on, like it’s a bee that might sting her.

I pause for just a few heartbeats to take her in. I see in her face excitement, joy, loosely veiled as fear, and hope for what was about to happen. It was everything that had been missing from her face when I had last seen it. She mistakes my pause for hesitation, and now it’s her turn to goad me on.

“Hey, you got me into this, if I have to keep this up then so do you.” I’ve never been so happy to be taunted by a girl in my life.

“Right you are lass.” I quickly throw on five bands and shove the ticking time bomb to her.

“400.” I declare. We’re getting very near to the end of it. Any rubber band could be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. It’s like a game of hot potato now. Each of us applies our few pieces of elastic and then immediately passes the device on to the other person so they don’t get caught in the explosion.

“472.” I count off, by the time the words are out of my mouth Jennifer is already adding her own.

“474.” She spits out.

“478.”

“480.”

“484.”

“486, hey.” She says.

“490.” I cut her off.

“There’s a little juice flowing down the…” One instant the watermelon is in her hands. The next it’s not. There’s a great squelching sound, and she’s gaping at the empty air where the watermelon used to be. Half of the melon is cut quite smoothly in front of her. Like a great cook has neatly sliced it down the middle. The rest of it is in bits and pieces everywhere.

On her face, every bit of worry, every trace of fear, is gone. In that moment she has forgotten all the trauma of earlier, and is now, for just a few fleeting instances, a kid again. She’s staring at the pieces of melon that are scattered around the table and on the nearby grass. I’m just staring at her. I want to make her feel whatever she’s feeling right now for as long as possible.

I wipe a piece of juice from her forehead, and she turns to address me.

“That was awesome!” She starts bouncing up and down like a kid that’s just gotten just what they wanted for Christmas.

“Well then, let’s see if we can go for double or nothing.” I pull a six pack of diet coke from underneath the bench.

“Ever heard of Russian roulette?”

“Yes? But I mean diet coke isn’t *that* bad. I’m a Pepsi girl myself but I don’t look down on diet coke. My parents are actually big diet coke fans.” It’s so cute that she doesn’t know what’s coming next.

“Oh yeah? Big fans huh? Well do they typically take their diet coke with Mentos?” I produce an opened pack of Mentos and set them on the table.

“I see, we’re doing the diet coke and Mentos thing next. That’s cool.” Jennifer said in a relatively unexcited tone. I put a hand to my chest as if I’ve been struck.

“I’m hurt, after that fantastic display of nutritious mayhem you think I’d do something as normal as the diet coke and Mentos experiment.” I pick up the six pack and show her the bottoms of the bottles. “See how I’ve taped them up so you can’t see what’s inside? That’s because one of these bad boys has a Mentos in the bottom.” I set the pack down in front of her. “And you’ve got to figure out which one.”

“What? No they don’t. You can’t drop a Mentos in a diet coke without it exploding. There’s no way you could’ve captured one in there.” I’m happy that she’s still in the immersive bubble I’ve provided her, and happy that she’s taking a genuine interest in what I’m doing for her.

“Ordinarily, maybe you’re right, but I’ve got a trick.” I produce a pack of those mint flavored breath freshening strips that dissolve on your tongue. “I wrapped the Mentos in these little mint flavored strips and then dropped it in. That way it didn’t make contact with the diet coke right away, but the strip is dissolved now.”

“So why hasn’t it already exploded?” She asks, picking up the bottles and examining them one at a time. “I’ve seen the videos. There’s no way these bottles could contain that massive amount of expanding foam that the Mentos would produce.”

“The reaction needs air to proceed.” I told her. “So right now it’ll just sit quietly, but as soon as you pop the cork on one of those bad boys, it’s all over.”

She puts the bottle she’s holding down and thinks about it for a second. “Wait a minute, the Mentos displaced a little soda when you dropped it in. I can just pull an Archimedes and put them next to each other to measure the water level.” I’m grateful for the fact that she didn’t. It wouldn’t have worked, but her unwillingness to spoil my trick tells me she wants to play, even if she could cheat and figure out the answer.

“I thought of that. If you were to line them all up you’d find that no two have the same amount of diet coke in them. The difference is miniscule, but I took the liberty of shuffling the water levels by opening them all up, and dumping little teaspoons of diet coke from another bottle into the five that didn’t have the Mentos.”

Jennifer looks at the rubber bands still on the table, the watermelon that's been cut in half, and the little bits and pieces of the fruit that had been destroyed in the prime of its life. Then she looks at the diet coke, and the opened pack of Mentos on the table.

"Jason, you have way too much time on your hands." She declares.

"I know, so waste a little with me." I tap the bottles of diet coke. "Make your first choice."

She mulls it over, tipping the bottles up to look at the bottoms again, placing a few side by side to gauge the water level. She even shakes a few to see if she can hear the Mentos rattling around. It's all for nothing. I made sure there was no way she was going to figure this out. She bites her lip, but then a lightbulb goes off behind her eyes.

"Aha!" She declares. "I've got it." She slams down the bottle she's been examining and rounds on me. "You know which one has the Mentos don't you?" I nod.

"Yup, you caught me. Which is why you're going to pick the bottles I open as well."

"But that's the trick. All I have to do is read your expression really carefully and you're going to let me know which of these little bottles you've rigged to blow." She claps her hands excitedly. I love seeing her like this. So care free, so joyful, being with her is like watching a kid get excited for the first snow of the year. Only better because I knew that I was the one doing this for her. I was making it snow.

"You can certainly try princess, but I have to keep a poker face for a living. Do your worst." I know talking about work is a mistake as soon as the words are out of my mouth.

"Oh yeah, that reminds me. What do you do for a living?"

I knew the answer to this. I had practiced this. Me and Ryan had a cover story for just these sorts of situations. I just couldn't remember for the life of me what it was.

"I help people." I say as casually as I can. It's a lame response and I know it, so I do what worked last time. I misdirect. "And you're stalling, pick a bottle princess." She raises an eyebrow as she extends a hand out over the bottles.

She passes her hand back and forth over the soda containers, intensely studying my reaction as she does so. She's getting playful with it, pretending to go for one bottle, but then changing her mind and reaching for another. Like everything else she's done, it's adorable. It doesn't do her any good though, my poker face is phenomenal.

"You're good." She says at last, randomly pulling over a bottle.

“Point it at your face.” I tell her.

“What? That wasn’t part of the rules.” She objects.

“Clearly you’ve never played Russian roulette before. You have to point the dangerous object at yourself. If people playing real Russian roulette just fired off rounds into the air it wouldn’t have a reputation as a phenomenally unintelligent thing to do, but it does, so you will.” She puts her hand on the cap but doesn’t twist it off.

“Come on, as soon as you undo this one you’ll get to pick one out for me.” That motivates her, she quickly rips off the cap, wincing as she does so, and to her relief, nothing happens.

“Hey, you’re a lucky girl. Now pick one out for me.”

“Hold on a second.” She says, putting the now open bottle back on the table. “Now you’re the one who is stalling. I asked you what you do for a living and I’d be curious to know what kind of profession involves both having a great poker face, and also helping people.” She’s leaning into the conversation and her eyes are doing this playful dance on her forehead. It’s like she thinks they’ll hypnotize me into giving her an answer, and in a way they do.

“I work in a medical office.” I say. I think it’s true. Ryan tells me there’s a lot of medical equipment in the building so I think it’s a medical facility.

“A medical office.” She replies, not convinced. “What kind of medicine are you doing that requires you to keep a poker face?”

I try to think of a kind of medicine with a funny name or that works with embarrassing parts of the body, but my mind isn’t quick enough. “Well you know people come in with some pretty heavy issues. If somebody’s got something big they have to get off their chest then you can’t exactly break down in front of them. Personally I never get sick so I wouldn’t know, but I’ve seen others get sick, and um…” I can see the crack that suddenly appears in her otherwise perfect mood. I know she’s just been reminded of what happened earlier today and I’m kicking myself.

Part of me wants to finish what I’ve started and just tell her. She’s had a few laughs. She knows that I’m a nice guy, and this would be the perfect Segway into that conversation.

The crack in her mood widens and the silence is starting to drag on noticeably. I can’t do it. I can’t bring her down again. Not so soon after bringing her up.

“But hey, you haven’t told me what you do for a living yet.” I point out. “Why don’t you pass me a bottle and tell me about it.”

No longer caring about trying to figure me out, she just gestures to the nearest bottle. I pick it up and get ready to open it, but I pause, waiting for her to start her story.

“Now you tell me what you do and I’ll see if I can add a punctuation mark to your story.” If I had been thinking I would’ve realized I already knew what she did. If I had been thinking I would realize that she and her roommate both wanted to go into the same field, and they probably worked together. If I had been thinking I wouldn’t have had to watch her struggle with trying to put on a brave face in front of me.

She was a trooper for sure. If I didn’t work with people who struggled with grief for a living I might not have seen it. The slight droop in the lips, the decrease in eye contact, but I did work with grieverers for a living, and I knew before she spoke a word that she was thinking of Sarah.

“Well uh, I played a lot of volleyball in college.” I had to think fast. I had to snap her out of this. She was about to dig herself a deep emotional hole and I had to stop her. I want to pop the cap off the bottle and spray Mentos and coke foam everywhere, but this is the wrong bottle.

“And I just liked really being outside and doing athletic stuff.” She glances to the side, an indicator that she doesn’t want to have this conversation anymore, and I seize the opportunity to grab a Mentos from the open sleeve and hide it in my palm.

“So I figured, hey, I could do this for a living.” I rip the top off and quickly dump the Mentos inside and raise the now erupting bottle to my face.

“Om, nom, nom, nom.” I say as the sticky sweet mixture sprays a surprisingly strong stream right at my mouth and eyes. I have to close my eyes as the foaming liquid works its way up my nose, into my mouth, and some even gets in my ear canal.

It’s over quickly, and as I sputter out the dietary soda and mint candy I hear that Jennifer is laughing again.

“Hah! That’s what you get for making the watermelon explode in my hands.” I’m mentally sighing with relief that happy Jennifer is back, but outwardly I have to pretend I’m annoyed.

“I totally did not make it explode in your hands. It was chance, and besides. This is way worse. I mean look at me.” My front is so soaked a passerby might have thought I got sprayed by a hose. “I think it might’ve even got in my phone.” With genuine concern for my mobile device I pull out my phone to make sure it’s still okay.

When I hit the unlock button it mercifully comes to life, but I don’t have time to be relieved. Because I see that I have received a rather ominous text from Ryan.

Ryan- 'Tell me you're not dating a client'.

Chapter 2

I manage to keep my face from shifting, but not by a very large margin. Jennifer is laughing hard enough that she doesn't notice I've suddenly gone stuff.

"Is it damaged?" She asks, drumming her feet on the ground in mirth.

"My ego? Completely destroyed, but the phone is fine." I slip it back into my pocket and start doing mental damage control.

'She doesn't know anything. I'm fine. Ryan doesn't necessarily know anything. I mean, unless he had me followed me or something. I just need to call him back and explain everything is okay.

"What's up next skipper?" She asks, starting to settle down. "Are we going to use dry ice to shatter bananas?" It's a really good idea, but I need to wrap this date up, and wrap it up now.

"Something work related just came up actually, so as lame as it is we're going to have to pick this up." I gesture to the mess of soda, watermelon bits, and rubber bands soaked in fruit juice. Jennifer sticks out her lower lip and pretends to pout.

"Aww, but I was having fun." She says. I shrug, trying to make myself seem relaxed, and not like I might be getting fired from my job as soon as this date is over.

"Sorry, duty calls. I can pick it up myself though. It's fine. You should go home and think about how you're going to convince me to go on another date." I start putting caps on bottles as she stands up.

"Oh I'm supposed to convince you? I thought the gentlemen always pursued the lady." She's got her fists on her hips and is rocking side to side like a target blowing in the breeze.

"Most gentlemen don't have their own personal collection of weapons of mass destruction. This sort of special treatment doesn't grow on trees you know. You have to work for it. So go on home, and think about how you'll talk me into it." She slithers back down for a minute and looks at me as I try to focus on cleaning up.

"Well, I'll need your phone number first." I quickly spit it out. Then she folds her hands and loses the spunky push pull dynamic. "Then I'll just let you know that this is genuinely the most fun I have had in quite some time. I don't want to put anything on you on the first date, but I really needed this right now, and I want to at some point let you know how much this meant to

me.” That catches me off guard, and when she leans in and kisses me on the cheek it catches me even more off guard.

You would think that since I had already felt her lips on my forehead twice today the cheek wouldn’t make that much difference. I mean. It’s only a few inches away, and it’s still not really a full romantic kiss. Why would it matter? But it does. I’m not sure why. Maybe the skin is more sensitive there, or maybe not. It’s probably the vulnerability that it entailed. She was trusting me with her emotions. She was letting me know that she believed I would buoy her up, and keep buoying her up.

“I’ll call you later yeah?” She says.

“For sure.” I say. I pause my clean up to watch her walk off. She turns to wave goodbye just as she passes out of sight, and I return her wave.

Her meekness right at the end had calmed my nerves about Ryan and his text, once she’s out of sight I hurriedly shove every bit of trash into a large bag I have with me, throw it in a nearby garbage receptacle, and call Ryan. Right before I hit dial I see that his text is ninety minutes old.

“Where are you right now?” Ryan asks after picking up on the first ring.

“Out for a walk.” I say. It’s true enough. I’m walking back to my car as I tell him this. ‘He doesn’t know anything for sure’. I tell myself. ‘Play it cool and you can get out of this’.

“Sure you are, her name was Jennifer right?” I put a hand to my forehead. I think about trying to keep up with my paper thin charade, but if I’m going to be seeing her again anyway then it’s sort of pointless. If things went well enough with Jennifer people at work would find out eventually. I might as well come clean. Who knows, maybe if I just cut straight to the chase Ryan would go easier on me.

“Yeah Ryan, it was Jennifer. The last girl I saw for the day.” I hear a disappointed sigh come through the phone. It’s like that sigh your parents would give you when you handed them a report card with a low grade point average. It was the, ‘you can do better than this’, sigh.

“Look Jason, how long have we been working together?” He asks. I can tell he’s really going to give a speech. If it was going to be a short reprimand he would’ve already laid it out.

“Seven years Ryan, two in high school, four in college, one year post college.” I inform him.

“How the time does fly. I could’ve sworn it wasn’t a day over four years, but look Jason. I know you didn’t sign any kind of agreement about this sort of thing. There’s no rule that says

you can't date somebody who's come to see you, but man, it's real unprofessional. If this sort of thing happens very often at all, you could be out of a job."

"I know. I know." I say, hand still to forehead. I find a bench to sit down. This is not the kind of conversation you have while you're walking. "But I didn't know she was going to come and see me. A friend set us up before she ever came into my office. It felt weird, but things happened so fast and I just wanted to make her happy." Ryan sighs again.

"Alright Jason, I trust you, but this is not going to make things easy. Why don't you come in a little early tomorrow and we'll smooth things out okay?" I feel the conversation is moving toward a conclusion, and it doesn't sound like I'm getting fired.

"Sounds good Ryan, sure thing, first thing tomorrow morning, bright and early." I think I let a little too much happiness into my voice because Ryan sighs, for the third time during this conversation. "You sound too chipper. Did you kiss her?" He asks bluntly.

"No, no, nothing like that." It's probably the most adamantly I've ever denied kissing a girl. "Totally G rated Disney type stuff."

"Are you going to see her again?" Ryan asks.

"Uh yeah, I think so." I tell him.

"When she said goodbye it wasn't a polite formal thing. She didn't use the word 'friend' at any point." Despite the seriousness of our conversation I'm a little offended that Ryan is doubting my dating skills so much.

"No I'm pretty sure she was into me. I'm expecting a call from her later tonight." I hear the fourth sigh of the conversation. He really should work on a more original way to express his disappointment. After the third sigh it really started to lose its expressive power.

"Okay, okay, we can still make this work." Ryan says. "Just uh, just come in early tomorrow okay?"

"Will do."

"Alright Jason, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight Ryan." I move my thumb to end the call when I hear some frantic protest on the other end.

"Wait! Shoot, shoot shoot, did you tell her what you do? Does she know you're a shifter?" Ryan asked.

“No, we talked a little bit about jobs, but I kind of figured that would be a sensitive topic so I just said I worked in a medical office.” Now I was genuinely offended. I understood that this could be a big deal, but it wasn’t like I was a doctor, and I almost never had repeat patients. In fact, therapists typically came down pretty hard on anyone who went to see a shifter more than once. It could be therapeutic to say goodbye when you missed the chance, but anything else and you were just fooling yourself into thinking that the shifter was actually your loved one.

The more I think about it the more Ryan’s reaction seems out of place. He really should have given me enough credit to know I wouldn’t talk about being a shifter, and we didn’t have a doctor patient relationship. It was more like getting an MRI and getting the technician’s number. It probably wasn’t something I should make a habit out of, but it definitely wasn’t as career ending as Ryan was making it out to be.

“Okay, okay, that’s good. I think we’re good. Well, anyway, I’ll see you tomorrow Marcus.”

I have time to think ‘why did he call me Marcus? Marcus isn’t even my middle name’, before I see Jennifer is calling.

“Do you live like three feet from here or something?” I ask sarcastically.

“I’m actually in my car right now. How’s the clean up going? Did your work thing get sorted out?” She inquires. This day just won’t quit. When I get home I’m going to have a long hot shower, watch a couple reruns of some old Disney shows while eating microwave pizza, and then I’m going straight to bed.

“Uh, pretty good, I’m already done. The work thing just wrapped up and I was planning on driving home soon, but I have a manual transmission and my speaker phone is terrible so I can’t exactly talk and drive at the same time if you know what I mean.” I’m not trying to blow her off, but this is kind of weird.

“Oh I know. So how about we play a game?” I glance up at the sky.

“You know it’s going to be dark soon right?” I ask. Did I press an ‘everything is going to be unexpected and crazy’ button when I woke up?

“Sure do, I give it twenty minutes until full dark. No need to worry though. I’m nice and safe in my well lit and locked car.” It’s a good thing the crime rate is super low around here. Worst comes to worst I can always just find a piece of that watermelon to throw at anybody who tries to mug me.

“Alright, let’s play. You know this is weird right?” On the one hand this is kind of cute. On the other hand this is genuinely odd behavior that I’m not 100% sure how I feel about.

“You know what else is weird? Making someone blow up a watermelon using the elastic tension in rubber bands. Then making them open a couple bottles of coke and Mentos before whisking them away after you’ve only been talking for tops thirty minutes.” She had a point. I guess she was just returning the favor. I lean back on the park bench. It was probably unrealistic to make someone to do a bunch of extremely unorthodox stuff without expecting some sort of retaliation. Besides, being around a girl who was spunky and spontaneous did tend to make life more fun.

“Fair enough, let’s keep this pretty quick though yeah? I’ve got to be in to work early tomorrow and I still need to get home and unwind.”

“Sounds reasonable to me. I don’t want to take up too much of your time, just enough so that you feel the same fish out of water vibe that I’m feeling right now.” She was being understanding and cognizant of my time. That calmed my apprehension about making the call back so soon after the date had ended.

“So how does this game work?” I ask.

“Well, it’s pretty straight forward. I ask you a question. Then you ask me a question. You can’t repeat questions, and you have to answer honestly. We already did the fun part of the date, and almost entirely skipped the getting to know you bit. So I thought this would be a good way to wrap up the evening.” It was a very straight forward game, but it also sounded like the perfect conclusion to our date.

“Good this sounds to me. Fun it should be.” I say in a perfect Yoda impression. Being able to physically morph your vocal chords, and the rest of your respiratory tract, makes it super easy to do spot on impressions every time.

“That was so good! Where did you learn to do that?” She asks.

“Stick around, and you’ll see how deep the rabbit hole goes.” I say, this time going for Lawrence Fishbourne as Morpheus. “Does that count as your first question?”

“No, no, that was uh. We hadn’t started yet, clearly.” I’m delighted that my surprise rapid fire funny voices are having a flustering effect on her. “No, uh, no, my first question is, uh, if you had a superpower what would it be? Besides doing silly voices I mean.” The increase in pitch in her voice tells me she’s having a good time.

Going for a deep growling batman I respond. “I always thought cheesecake summoning was pretty cool.”

She’s laughing out loud on the other end. “You should totally get a job doing this. But cheesecake? Seriously? You’re not going to go for super healing or something?”

“Over rated, besides, I think I might already have that.” I say jokingly. “I never get sick or injured, but in all seriousness I’d like to go for mind reading.” I’ve decided to mix it up and use my normal voice. “I’m pretty good at reading people, but I don’t like how any empathy I feel is incomplete. I can only guess at how someone is feeling and I really just want to copy and paste their emotional state on my own so I can really understand what they’re going through.”

“That sounds more like empathy than mind reading.” She comments. “But that’s really cool. I like the spin you put on it. That’s one of the more thoughtful answers I’ve gotten to that question.”

“My turn now right?” I ask, still using my boring old regular voice.

“Yeah totally, fire away.”

“You’ve got to ask yourself one question.” I say, going for Dirty Harry. “If you had to be dropped onto a desert island with one person, who would it be?” The sound of her giggling is music to my ears.

“That’s a tough one, but I think I’d have to go with my dad.” She says. “I know like the president would be really cool, or a survivalist would be really useful, but honestly. If I’m going to be stuck somewhere and I don’t know if or when I’ll ever get out. I want my dad with me. He’s just always been there for me, and my mom is great and all, but if it’s a life and death kind of thing, there really isn’t anyone I trust more than my dad.” I mentally gave her a whole bunch of bonus points. They say you can tell a lot about a person by how they treat waiters and waitresses. I think the same is true for parents. Your mother and father are two people who basically have to put up with you no matter what. So how they feel about them can tell you a lot about how they’re going to feel about you once the honeymoon phase of the relationship is over. Deciding to take the most important man in your life on a scary vacation instead of any other guy, even when other guys were more capable than him, was a definite good thing in my mind.

“I respect that.” I say in my unaccented voice. “I think it’s important that you have strong relationships with your parents.”

“Well, they kind of raised me you know? They’ve seen me at my worst. If I’m going to be stuck somewhere desolate I want somebody who really cares for me like that.” Very cool, that was very cool of her. “So my turn, I think we will do one last question each and then I’ll let you go. I know it’s really starting to get dark and I don’t actually want you out and about without any light.”

“I appreciate that.” I don’t even have to look at the sky to tell that it’s sundown. The light’s already starting to fade, and before too much longer I was going to have to use my phone as a flashlight to find my way back to my car.

“So last question then, if you could have any kind of horse, what would it be?” That was certainly random. No more random than anything else had been this day, but still random.

I pop into a southern accent for this one. “I reckon just a regula’ old mare. Nothin’ fancy, just reliable and loyal, she just needs ta be there when I call and get me safely through the journey. Y’all talk about racing thoroughbreds or warhorses, and that’s all well and good, but for me, just a steady companion is all I need.” There’s a noise from the other side of the line, it sounds faintly like ‘awww’, but I can’t be sure.

It’s only after I answer this question that I realize I’ve heard it before. It was one of those ‘figure out your future’ kind of questions that people threw around in middle school. You asked them about how you’d climb on boxes or use ladders or something, and at the end of it they’d tell you some blurb about how you’d succeed in life. I never put much stock in them, but I remembered this question was about your future spouse. Supposedly the way you answered this question told people how you thought about your hypothetical future life mate. If you answered something outlandish like a unicorn, people knew you had unrealistic expectations. I didn’t think there was much truth to it, but I think I had just knocked it out of the park with my answer.

“Alright, now you ask me one.” She said. It’s getting dark enough to the point where you’d have trouble reading a book, so I try and make it quick. I say the first thing that pops into my mind, and unintentionally ask something that’s a little too close to home.

“How do you feel about dating coworkers?”

“Are you trying to tell me something? Lol, um, I think it’s something to be frowned on. I mean, I’ve dated classmates before and even that gets awkward. It’s fine in theory I guess, but it’s just not something that works out in real life. I see that ending badly most of the time.” Well, I made her feel bad earlier with all that talk about work. It was only fair I made myself feel bad. Some part of me was glad that she had that attitude, it would certainly serve her well in her career, but it was going to make it so much harder when I had to tell her I was the shifter she had visited earlier.

“That’s the sensible approach.” I say. “It might be something to try once, but definitely not anything to make a habit out of.” I’m trying to get her to back off her stance a little bit.

“I don’t think even once, but yeah, not something you want to mess around with.” So much for getting her to back off a bit. Talk about when you’re in a hole stop digging.

“Hey, I want to respect your time. It’s now full dark and I know you’ve got a busy day tomorrow. I’ll let you go now. Thanks for a wonderful time, and thanks for putting up with my phone call.”

“It was my pleasure. I’ll text you tomorrow with plans for our next date.”

“I look forward to it, have a good night.”

“You too princess.” And then the conversation was done.

I slipped my phone back into my pocket. Think for a moment, then take it out and turn it off. I don't care if somebody else has something they just have to tell me tonight. I'm going to bed.

Chapter 3

The next morning I trudge into work with a sense of apprehension. I know Ryan is going to say something to me, and I'm not going to like it.

My fears are magnified when I step out of the stair well and see that Ryan is talking to someone I don't recognize at his desk, and it's not a griever.

The two glance up at me when I walk in. A few whispers are exchanged, and then the strange man departs. I can't know this for certain, but my gut tells me that was some high level supervisor who somehow knew about my unprofessional foray with a patient last night.

“Hey Jason.” Ryan says. “Why don't we step into your office for a quick chat okay?”

“Sure thing Ryan.” I say, and when we're both inside I close the door behind me.

“Nice face by the way.” He says.

“What?” I ask, confused.

“Your face, normally you just wear somebody's from the office. Now you've got this new face on. Where did you get it?” I had completely forgotten that the face I was wearing was not my own. Which was somewhat of a good thing. I had internalized this new facial structure to the point where it was my new natural resting face. It was a bit like learning a new way of folding your hands, and then folding your hands that way often enough so that it became a habit.

“Internet.” I say. “But that's not why you called me in here is it?” Ryan sits down on the edge of my desk.

“No it's not. I've been thinking about it, and I'm really not comfortable with you seeing this girl. Are you sure there's going to be a second date?” He really was serious about this.

“For sure, she called me back and I’m going to be texting her about the next time we’re going on a date during my lunch break.” I began to wonder if Ryan had a bad experience with this sort of thing in the past. His concern was clearly starting to become excessive.

“That’s unfortunate. Have you thought about breaking it off man? I mean it’s not just that you’re sort of working together.” That was flat out not true. In all probability I would never work with this girl in a professional capacity again. I folded my arms and found a wall to lean against. “You’re like a therapist, or a priest or something. There’s this emotional barrier you have with them so you can give them the care they need, and you just are not supposed to break it. Have you given any thought at all to ending it?”

“No, no I haven’t. I actually kind of like her and am optimistic about how far this could go. I’m not going to break it off just because you’re a little apprehensive about this. I’m sorry man, but it’s not like I’m a therapist or a priest, and it’s definitely not like I’m a doctor. All three of those people see their patients on a regular basis. I will probably never be seeing her for in a professional capacity ever again. Also, and most importantly, none of those people are shifters. When she came in here to mourn for her roommate, she didn’t really talk to me. She talked to her friend who I happened to look very similar to at the moment. Really, the only bad thing about this is that I know some personal stuff about her that she might not otherwise be comfortable with me knowing.” Ryan drummed his fingers against the desk when I had finished my little speech.

“So you think you’re going to see this girl again?” He asked, once again, discrediting my dating skills.

“Yes, I ‘think’, I’m going to see her again.” Using air quotes around the word think.

“Well you’re going to feel differently later, so just prepare yourself.” With that he got up and went to get the first client ready for me.

You’ll feel differently later, he says. Ryan was crossing the border between being concerned and being flat out rude. What was his deal? Was this something that had happened before at this company? Was this something Ryan had done? Either way he was projecting some negative past experience onto me, and it was not called for.

I push my frustration with Ryan aside for the moment and sit down at my desk. As I bring my computer online I remind myself that I’m here to help others and not to fume over work place drama. I calm myself and try to think about the people who I’ll be seeing shortly. The clients will be in sensitive spots and I need to be focused to make sure they have the best possible experience.

An image pops up onto my screen along with a description of the deceased and a little blurb on their relation to the griever. It was time to go to work.

It's a busy day, and the time passes quickly. When you're intently present to someone you don't really notice the clock, and I don't see that it's lunch time until I get a cheesy dad joke from Jennifer.

We have fun exchanging cheesy joke after cheesy joke. We talk a little bit about how much fun yesterday was, and then we progress into discussing where we're going to go for our next date. We both agree on paintball, and then Jennifer has to go. All in all, a rather pleasant lunch break.

I'm feeling refreshed, and have almost forgotten about Ryan's little rant this morning when it was time for my first post lunch griever.

I thought something was fishy when she was the exact same age as Jennifer. She had a similar career path too, only more high profile. This new griever instead of going on to teach volleyball Post College was an Olympic track athlete who had lost her friend in a very tragic training accident.

The manner of death being included struck me as odd. That is normally a detail that's left out, and I only grow more suspicious when a photo of the griever pops up. They don't send me photos of grievors, red flag number 1, and the photo they send me of this griever looks fake, red flag number 2. It doesn't look fake because there are obvious editing marks or Photoshop artifacts, but because the photo is too good.

Normally to get me photos they have to scan in something from an official document. Something that could be accessed by law enforcement, like a driver's license. These photos all have the same characteristics. There's a plain background. The person's hair is normally skewed, and they have a fake looking smile on typically. I see a lot of photos like this and I can tell that the photo of the griever is not a driver's license photo. The background is some tropical island. She's got a smile that looks improbably white, not to mention gorgeous, and her hair has been prepared for this photo.

To say nothing of her looks. I didn't want to think about it too much with a date later, but suffice it to say meeting someone as attractive as her was statistically impossible for anyone who didn't work in the modeling or entertainment industries.

I have to remind myself again that however odd this file may be, there's a real person here with a real problem that they need to have a real solution to. I force my suspicions down, and use the mirror to adopt the face of the loved one who has passed on.

The door opens just as I finish, and I put on my professional 'supportive and understanding' face.

The girl walks in, and she looks just like her photo. Her hair has been done cut and styled in the same way. She's smiling in the same way. I think she might even be wearing the same

clothes. She waves at me as she eagerly comes and sits down in front of my desk. With a controlled delicacy I move to the chair next to my desk and wait for her to start.

“Hey, I’m Linda, nice to meet you.” She extends a hand, but I don’t take it. This is ridiculous. The smiling and bouncy behavior I get. Everyone deals with grief differently. Just this morning I had a mother who dealt with her loss by laughing about it. Some people are just like that. I don’t judge. I’m just here to help.

What I didn’t understand was why she was trying to talk to me, and not her friend. Both Ryan and whatever therapist refers them here discuss in detail how this is supposed to work. They explain very clearly that they’re not to talk directly to me, at least not until they’ve said their goodbyes to their friend. It disrupts what they’re here to do. It makes it harder on them to move on, and it makes it harder on me to do my job.

Even with the ridiculous picture, her improbably good looks, and the breach in protocol, I manage to keep a lid on my frustrations. I’m positive somebody is messing with me now, but I still maintain my supportive expression, and gesture for her to continue.

“What’s your name?” She asks. That was it. I was done. This was an insult to me, and to her friend. People came here to move on from a heavy loss in their life, not to play games.

“What’s your name?” She asks again, playfully touching my knee.

“Get out.” I say through gritted out.

“What?” She asks, pretending not to see my obvious displeasure at her behavior.

“Get. Out.” I say. Biting off each word. She’s taken aback by my strong negative reaction. I don’t know why she’s surprised. This was clearly a bad move on her part.

“The door. Is there.” I point. “Leave.” She resists, but when she sees just how tight my jawline is. She leaves.

I count to thirty to try and keep calm but this is an outrage. First there was all of Ryan’s meddling, and now this. I don’t know how she had done it. She would’ve had to fake a death certificate and a doctor’s note. Not to mention slipping through our own information gathering system. We had some really smart people on staff. It was their job to keep this sort of thing from happening.

Ryan, he should have stopped this. I hope it’s just an honest mistake, and that he didn’t let that woman through on purpose, but I’m going to find out. This was not what I was here for. I don’t wait for the end of the day, or even a break in the shift. I burst out of my office to confront Ryan here and now.

“What is your problem?” I demand. If I had been paying attention I would’ve noticed that there weren’t any patients waiting in line. The office is empty except for me and Ryan. I wasn’t paying attention.

I do notice that Ryan doesn’t react very strongly to me breaking protocol and storming out of my office. But I’m too angry to really care.

“What do you mean?” Ryan asks, trying to pretend like he didn’t just let some random girl with obviously suspicious documentation slip by.

“That girl.” I point to the door. “Did not come here to grieve. That girl came here because she wanted to take a shifter on a date. Why did you let her in?”

“That girl?” Ryan asks, mimicking my pointing motion. “So you have a problem with ‘that girl’ taking you on a date, but not Jennifer.” I ball my hand into a fist.

“Jennifer followed protocol perfectly. I told you, she has no idea that I had anything to do with her seeing a shifter. She thinks I’m just some guy her friend set her up with.” Ryan’s eyes narrow ever so slightly when I mention her friend setting us up.

“So that’s how you two met.” He says in a whisper that he doesn’t think I can hear.

“Why does it matter how we met?” I demand. I want to punch my fist into his desk, but I’m going to control myself. I start mentally reaching for some trick to calm myself down.

“It doesn’t. Say you look pretty angry Ryan, do you want to punch my desk?” Now I want to punch more than his desk, but I restrain myself.

“Yeah, I think you want to punch my desk. By the way, did you see that guy I was talking to earlier? He was from security. Because you’re talking to a patient outside of work I’m going to need to see your phone.”

“I don’t believe you. You’ve never asked for this before. How do I know you’re not just going to sabotage my phone to end things with me and Jennifer? I mean, clearly you have no problem breaking rules to mess with me. Why would I trust you now?”

“You can choose to not believe me all you want, but if you don’t want to have a meeting with security later today I’m going to need to see your phone.” I glance at the security cameras pointing at this desk. At least if he’s lying I can report this incident and have proof.

I take my phone out and set it on his desk in a less than gentle manner.

“Thank you.” He unlocks it right in front of me. He must’ve been watching through the camera in my office to get the password. I can see he’s doing something to it. “Do you feel angry right now Jason? You’ve has me poking at you all day trying to get you to break things off with this girl you clearly have a thing for. I’m letting strange women into your office. That office is your sacred space Jason, the very same space where you met this girl you have a thing for, and now you’ve got me rifling through your phone doing who knows what to it.

“How are you feeling?” He asks me again. I’m trying to keep a lid on my boiling emotions, and his prodding is not helping. I definitely should not vocalize how I’m feeling. I’m having enough trouble avoiding doing something I’d regret, giving voice to that kind of strong emotion would not be helpful.

“I can see you’re about ready to pop. That’s good.”

‘Good! He thinks white hot rage is a good thing!?’ I shout inside my own head.

“Now, you’re about ready to explode aren’t you? You need some help getting a hold of it don’t you? Well you’re in luck. Do you remember that I’m the one who taught you how to maintain that ‘supportive’ smile you’re so good at holding? I also know all the tricks to getting around inside your brain.” If I had been thinking straight this should’ve scared me. I wasn’t thinking straight. “As much as you hate me right now you’re going to have to listen to me in order to get rid of your anger.” He finishes messing with my phone and sets it down on his desk. I’m now the sole focus of his attention.

“Jason, I know you just want to do some really unfriendly things right now. You need to channel those feelings. Focus on them, think exactly why I’m making you feel this way.” I don’t want to follow his command, but I can’t afford to ignore him either. He’s offering me the only path away from this anger. I heartily obey his command and start listing off the many reasons I’m boiling over. He’s trying to break things off with this girl for me. He took my phone. He let that girl into my office. He’s got this bond supervillain relaxed way of completely shredding my peace of mind.

“Good, now see those reasons floating in front of you like little balls. Each reason is a sphere hovering before you. A white hot sphere, see them like that, white hot burning spheres.” It’s such an odd command but I can see them before me, little floating pictures wreathed in flame. “Excellent, now merge them together, everything, all of it, flow it together into a single glowing white ball. See all the little reasons tumbling around inside this white hot ball. Fantastic, you’re doing great.” I added his relaxed encouragement to the white hot ball.

“We’re getting there Jason. Let that ball burn. Let it spin, and let it burn, hotter and hotter, brighter and brighter. It’s so hot you can feel the heat.” I really can. I can almost feel the heat it’s burning so hot in my mind.

“Now comes the fun part, let it cool. Let it relax until it’s just a soft white globe. Like a ball of pudding floating in the air.” I can’t believe he thinks this is going to fix my anger. If anything it only....it only.... Wait, why was I angry again? Something about a girl and phone? I think it was bad, but I really shouldn’t get this mad at work

“Perfect, you’re calming down now. That’s great, now think about the girl. You remember the girl? Put her face in the globe. Put her number in the globe. Put your meeting in the globe, and definitely put your date in the globe. Put everything in the globe that has to do with her, every last scrap of memory that has to do with her, down to the cut of her hair when you first saw her.” I feel like I shouldn’t do what he’s telling me, but now that the globe has cooled I feel like it’s just pulling things out of me. I see every memory of Jennifer appear inside of this great white orb. Her name was Jennifer right? Wait, what was I thinking about it again?

“Almost there, just a little further. All you need to do is add your name.” I want to hold onto my name. I try and grasp onto it harder, but the orb’s magnetism is too strong. I feel my name rip free from my mind. “and now add your face.”

I smiled as Jason lets go of his face. I can tell he’s let it go because, the instant he lets it go His face reverts to that of the last girl he’s seen. We paid her good money to do her part, and she had gotten under his skin perfectly. Very good, now let the orb dissolve. Imagine it melting like a ball of snow. You see it spreading out and sinking into the carpet. It’s going....It’s going....Now it’s gone.” This new man, this freshly formed man snaps up straight as soon as the orb is done melting. He won’t even remember what he’s been doing for the last several minutes. What I’ve been doing to him for the past several minutes.

“Oh, hey Ryan, I thought I’d... I’d um.” He fumbles. “What am I doing out here?”

“You were just heading home Marcus.” I tell him.

“Marcus?” He asks. I point to his chest.

“Marcus.” I say.

“Oh right, I’m Marcus.” He face palms like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Sorry man, so I was just heading home?”

“Yup, it’s been a light day with patients, and you worked so hard yesterday that we figured we’d let you out early.” Right on cue a security guard pops out of the stairwell. “Here, you’ve been feeling a bit out of sorts so James here was going to escort you to your car.”

'Marcus' turns to see the guard. "Oh hey James. I'm Marcus." The guard nods to 'Marcus', acknowledging him, and 'Marcus' begins to walk over to him.

"Hang on a second there Marcus." I say. "You don't want to forget your phone man." He turns and I pass it to him. "Yeah, that glitch you were telling me about is annoying but I think I fixed it. You shouldn't have any more trouble with it."

"Yeah, that glitch, yeah, man that glitch was annoying wasn't it?" Jason says. I hope that guard was properly debriefed. His mind would be malleable for a few more minutes and he needed to be kept away from anyone with a strong personality.

"It sure was. Hey, one more thing buddy. You're still wearing the face of a patient. If you're having trouble remembering what your face looks like, just use mine. I don't mind, and I don't get out much so there's not much chance that anyone will recognize you." And if anyone did make the connection I would hear about it and see that the little slip up was resolved.

"Oh yeah, I probably don't want to walk around looking like a girl do I?" He jokes, smirking a bit.

"That could get awkward for you." I comment, mirroring his smirk.

"See you tomorrow Ryan." He says, waving goodbye to me.

"See you tomorrow Marcus." I wave back.

As the door closes behind the security guard and 'Marcus' I mentally pat myself on the back. Another crisis had been averted. We had spent too much time molding 'Marcus' for some girl to ruin everything now.

I congratulated myself on once again molding his mind. Our supervisors had panicked the first time I had done it to him. They thought I had also developed a superpower, and that maybe superpowers were contagious. The truth was much simpler, but just as dangerous. The truth was that anyone could theoretically do that to 'Marcus', but I was the only one who could get him mad enough.

Chapter 4

I can't believe I met such a great guy out of the blue like this. These blind date things never seemed to work out. Yet, here I was, swapping cheesy jokes with a multi-talented guy in a medical field. What more could I ask for? As soon as I left the school I worked at, I whipped out my phone. I smile when I see the picture of him soaked in diet coke that's now my background, and started texting.

Jennifer- Hey cutie, wanted to let you know I'm planning on buying a few paintball grenades. Better pray we're on the same team :).

Jason- Sounds like fun, hey, my phone recently had a glitch, remind me who this is again?

Jennifer- That stinks, deleted all your contacts huh? This is Jennifer.

Jason- I don't know any Jennifers. I think you have the wrong number, sorry :(.

Jennifer- That's funny, anyway, I know we agreed to rent markers there, but I couldn't help but give myself an advantage :).

Jason- It sounds like a lot of fun, but I really don't know any Jennifers. Enjoy the paintball!

Jennifer- This joke is starting to get a little old.

Jason- It's no joke. As much as I love paintball I really don't know any Jennifers.

Jennifer- Okay Jason's friend, you've had your laugh, now hand the phone to Jason I'd like to talk to him now.

Jason- Ah, okay, you definitely have the wrong number. This is Marcus.

Jennifer- What? No, I can see our text conversation from the rest of the day. We were just swapping cheesy jokes.

Jason- The first text I have from you is the one about paintball grenades.

Jennifer- That's not right, look, I can forward you the other texts. I promise you we've been talking all day.

Jason- That really wouldn't prove anything, and talking all day? That doesn't sound like me.

Jennifer- Jason, you're starting to worry me. Are you okay? Are you in the hospital?

Jason- I'm fine, just got back from work actually. Are you okay? You seem to have a very strong memory of something that never happened.

Had I fallen for a guy with some serious mental disorder? This had gone on far too long for it to be a joke, and Jason didn't seem the type that would play such a mean spirited trick.

Should I just end the conversation now? I don't know if I could be with somebody who just forgot everything once every few days. Clearly he doesn't remember me so if I just stop right now it's not like his feelings would get hurt.

I think about it. I think about just pressing delete on our conversation and removing him from my contacts. He asked me what my name was so it's obvious he already deleted me from his contacts.

That thought hurts, and it moves me to hit delete. If I mean so little to him that he'd just delete me from his contacts then I should do the same to him. I'm not going to be toyed with like that.

I put my thumb over the delete button.

"It was fun while it lasted Jason." I say in memory of our wonderful date.

Then, right before I erase our conversation a thought occurs to me. 'If he has a memory disorder, why would he delete me from his contacts?'

Jennifer- Jason, you said your phone had a glitch? Are any of your other contacts deleted?

Jason- No, everything else is here. Photos, contacts, conversations, listen, I really have to go.

Something else is going on. There's no way he loses all memory of me then has me, and only me, completely erased from his phone. Something very wrong is going on.

Jennifer- No, Jason, I'm sorry you don't believe me, but I think you might be in danger. I'm calling you now, please pick up, just one conversation, and if you don't believe me I'll leave you alone. Just please pick up, just this once Jason.

I give him a little time to read the text, and then I press call.

The phone rings once.

'I've got to think of something to convince him, something that most people wouldn't know about him to prove to him I know him.'

The phone rings twice.

'Would blowing up watermelons be enough? Do lots of people do that?'

The phone rings three times.

‘Maybe it’s a new fad, gotta try something else. Something more personal.’

The phone rings four times.

‘Pick it up Jason, please pick it up. Something personal, what about his superpower, empathy was it?’

The phone rings five times.

‘It’s going to go to voice mail soon. No, empathy isn’t deep enough. I’ve got to go more personal than that.’

“Hello? Is this Jennifer?” I feel lighter when he says my name, but I can’t let my emotions overpower me right now.

“You have a deep seated need to help people. It’s the driving force behind what you do. Healing, in particular you want to heal, but not the body, although that’s important. You want to heal the mind. You want to reach inside people, take the negative, and mold it into something positive. You’re a mind healer Jason.” I try and think of some old prayer from grade school to recite while I wait for his response. It was a shot in the dark, but it was all I had.

“Jennifer right?” Jason says.

“That’s right.” I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Well Jennifer, you have my attention. I don’t know how you knew me well enough to rephrase my personal motto ‘it’s what’s underneath that matters’, but I want to find out.” He tells me his address. “Meet me as soon as you can.”

“I will.” I say, as soon as he had started giving me his address I had grabbed my keys and my shoes, and was already halfway out the door. “I’m coming Jason.” I hang up the phone and sprint to my car.

It took a lot of restraint not to speed and blow through red lights, but getting pulled over wasn’t going to get me to Jason any quicker. I’m going so fast. It’s all going so fast I don’t even stop to think I’m driving to some person’s house that I’ve only met once, and now claims to have never met me. All I can think about is helping Jason.

He was waiting on his doorstep when I arrived. I was impressed that he lived in his own townhouse at his age, but I didn’t have time to admire his neat little garden or his well kept car. I had a mission.

I reflexively run to hug him, but he catches me by the shoulders and holds me at an arm's length. It's nice to feel his touch again. I can still feel a ghost of his finger where he brushed the drop of watermelon juice from my face. It's all so strong, so quick, that his wearing a mask doesn't even bother me. It's a really good mask too, if I didn't know better I'd say that was how his face looked all the time, but the mask isn't why I'm here. I'm here for what's behind it.

"I know that there's something big going on here, but this is all a little fast and I'm going to need to take this one step at a time." Jason tells me. "I don't know what to think or feel about this, and until I do we're going to have to keep this professional." I nod. It's not what I want, but if it's what he needs then I can give it to him. He gestures to the spot next to him on the porch and we both sit down.

"First things first." He says. "How did you know all that about me?"

"Because we went on a date." I say. He nods. It was pretty obvious I thought we were dating from the messages, and from me going straight for the hug. This is just confirming suspicions for him.

"When did we go on this date?" He asks.

"Last night, it started a bit before sundown, and you took a phone call halfway through, which is fine, and we finished a little after sundown. It was a very short and sweet date." It warms me up thinking about it.

"Last night? I don't have any memory of that." He says, looking out at the grass on his lawn.

"Do you have any memory at all of last night?" I ask, concerned about how deep this problem goes in him. He doesn't answer right away. There's confusion on his face. It's like he's trying to find the missing piece to the puzzle.

"I remember some old Disney shows right before I went to bed, and I remember scaring a lady at the store." That surprises me, but I try not to show it. Why on earth had he scared a lady at the store? I would have to ask him later. Maybe he spilled some of that diet coke and Mentos during the checkout. It was probably something innocent like that.

"But those two events are separated by almost two hours." Jason says. He's now confused. He can tell something is off. "Which isn't that weird, it's not like I keep a running log of my day, but I'm remembering quite a bit about buying some snacks, and I can't think of what I did with them." He stands up.

"Yes, I'm remembering buying a watermelon, a lot of rubber bands, some diet coke, and a few breath freshening strips. It's for a few games I like." He explains to me.

“I know.” I say. “Diet coke and Mentos roulette along with exploding watermelon hot potato.” He nods.

“Right, sure, for our date that I don’t remember.” He takes his keys out of his pocket. “And if we had that date then I would’ve used all the supplies, and there should be nothing left in my house.” He unlocks his door and I follow him inside. When his back turns I shake my hands in excitement. This is good. We’re making progress.

We move silently to his pantry as he opens cupboard after cupboard. There are no supplies in any of them. He checks the basement, his office, the living room. He walks through every room in his house, and finds nothing.

After completing his search he sits down on the couch in his living room and stares unblinkingly at the coffee table. I sit quietly next to him. I want to put a hand on his shoulder or something to help him through this, but I know it would only confuse him.

“Assuming we have been dating, how long has it been going on?” He asks.

“We were going to have our second date this weekend. It was going to be paintball.” I say. This also surprises him.

“I blew up watermelons with you on the first date? You must be special.” I hide a smile. I can tell he still doesn’t completely believe me. The facts are there, but the totally absent memory is something that’s hard for him to justify. It’s hard for me to justify too, but we’ll figure out why it’s missing later. Right now all I want is for him to remember what we had shared the previous evening. What I wanted to share with him again this coming weekend.

He’s still staring at the table. He needs something else. He’s on the tipping point, but there’s still something missing from the puzzle. I wanted to give him whatever it was, but I was out of ideas. I had nothing else to remind him of what happened. Jason was going to have to meet me halfway.

“Did we kiss?” He asks.

“No, well not really, but it wasn’t that I didn’t like you. It’s just that I don’t kiss on the first date. I know it’s kind of old fashioned but it’s helped me avoid getting attached to a lot of guys that I shouldn’t get attached to. Not that you’re a guy I’d avoid getting attached to. It’s just it’s hard to know after the first date you know? I totally would’ve kissed you if I had known this was going to happen.” The last part slips out without me thinking about it and I clap a hand over my mouth. My face feels warm as it begins turning the color of the inside of a watermelon.

I can't believe I said that. Right when he needs facts and unbiased information I blurt out this monologue about how I don't kiss on the first date and end it by admitting I wanted to kiss him. I couldn't believe myself.

Jason, still staring at the coffee table, rubs his hand on his chin, considering what I've just told him.

"This may sound a bit weird, but I'm going to need you to kiss me on the cheek."

My heart skips a beat. I hadn't mentioned that I kissed him on the cheek.

"Of course." I say, wishing to kiss more than his cheek.

He's still staring at the table, trying to pull in the memory of yesterday. It makes it awkward, him not even trying to look at me while I lean in, but I don't really have much choice in the matter. I can't ask him to make it romantic if he's not even sure we're an item. I'm not used to giving kisses as a memory aid, but I do it anyway.

Just like last night I lean in and gently brush my lips against his cheekbone, making sure to place them in the same spot I did last night, and slowly kiss his cheek.

He reels back like I've just shocked him. He's looking at me like I'm some lion that's escaped and might decide to eat him at any moment. It hurts to have him look at me like that, but I stay calm for him.

He reaches out with his right hand. I watch it draw nearer, fearful of what he might do, but I don't move. He brings his fingers right up to my face, and he caresses the side of it, in the same spot where he caressed it last night.

"The watermelon blew up while you were holding it didn't it?" He asked.

I bounce on the couch with excitement. "You remember!" I shout.

"Not much." He says. "It's still very blocky. I can only remember small scenes, almost like screen shots, but it's something."

"What do you remember?" I ask.

"I remember blasting myself with the bottle of diet coke. I remember the watermelon exploding. And the way you were getting so scared about putting on more rubber bands." He smiles again when he talks about the rubber bands. It's the first time I've seen him smile today and it sort of makes this whole ordeal worthwhile. The way he's pulling at my heart strings, the

worry that something was, or is, happening to him, the rushed drive over here. Even sitting on this couch right now, unsure of what's going to happen next, it's all worth it to see him smile.

“Man you squealed when we started going over 400.” He touches his cheek now, and he's still smiling, but it's different somehow. I like his smile right now better than I did before. I'm not sure why I like it more, but I do. “And your kiss.” He says, speaking the words quietly, like they're a secret. That's why I like it more, because the smile was about me. I was making him smile.

“And what else?” I prod him. Now the smile fades.

“That's all.” He glances back at the coffee table, like it could give him the answers he was looking for. “I don't remember how it ends, so there must be more to that memory, but that's all I have.”

“You don't remember anything about the phone call?” I ask. “You don't remember anything about what you asked me or what I asked you? And you don't remember anything from today about organizing our second date?” He looks guilty, like a chastised child.

“I'm sorry. Like I said, I know there's more, but I just can't remember it.” My stomach drops, now I really am out of ideas. Well, not completely, there is one more thing I can try.

“Do you trust me?” I ask him, knowing that what I'm about to do might cause more harm than good.

He finally turns and looks me up and down, considering my question. His eyes move to the spot on my face he'd been caressing just moments before, and his hand moves to the spot on his cheek where I had kissed him.

“Yes.” He says. “Yes I do.”

I move quickly so my courage doesn't fade. I lunge across the couch and knock him down, positioning myself above him, and before he can protest I slam my lips into his.

This is not something I've ever done. I've never initiated the first kiss. I want to know the guy likes me and is willing to take initiative. It also makes me feel more valued. The princess in the castle wants to know her prince is willing to climb up to meet her. If she comes down to meet him it doesn't meet much. But this isn't even really about the kiss. It's about fixing him, healing him, helping him to remember. If that means bending a personal rule, then so be it.

When my lips finally meet his, and I wrap my arms around, leaning into him as I firmly press my lips into his. My breath catches and I inhale sharply as he returns my embrace. He

Reaches up with one hand to place his hand on the back of my head at the spot just above the neck, and wraps his other arm around me to complete the embrace.

It all goes so quickly and before I know it I'm pulling back, breathing faster than before, and looking him up and down to make sure he's okay.

I should say that I tried to pull back, he stills has his hands on me and he stops me from pulling away more than a few inches. His hand on my head caresses my cheek again and he says.

"My loyal mare, you came back." He pulls me back down for a second kiss.

"Yes." I say between our squished lips. "But don't call me a horse again."

"K." He replies, and it's a discrete period before either of us says anything else.

When we disconnect from each other there's a significant lag while both of our brains speed back up from romantic slow motion time, to real life time. My brain speeds up first, which is understandable. He's just had a rush of memory that no doubt added to the experience.

The first thing I notice is that of all expressions he could be wearing, the one he has chosen to wear is concern. He doesn't look joyful, or overwhelmed with emotion. He just looks concerned. Like he's just heard some bad news.

"Are you okay?" I ask. He must've realized the expression his face had taken, and quickly flipped back to happiness.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, and I remember so much. It's just a lot you know?"

"So you remember everything?" I ask.

"Almost." He says.

"Well that'll have to do, because I want to know why your face looks precisely like some another man's face that I met yesterday. Do you two know each other? His name is Ryan I think." Jason looks at me with concern again.

"The resemblance is remarkable." I continue. "I couldn't feel any prosthetics or anything while I was having my up-close experience of your face so I figured you must have some super high tech next generation facial modeling kit or something. Can you take it off? I didn't want to bring it up while you were having memory issues, but it's pretty weird kissing someone who looks like someone else. I mean if your voice wasn't the same I would've thought you were him."

We both sit up on the couch. “Uh yeah, I know the guy, his name is Ryan. We work together. He saw me having a little trouble remembering my face so he let me borrow his.” This guy sure was taking this costume thing seriously.

“So does he have your face now? Did you guys swap? And how do you take that thing off. I don’t see any seam or anything.” I looked around his jawline to see if there was some transition from his own skin to the prosthetic mask, but if it was there I couldn’t tell.

“Uh no.” Ryan looks sheepish all of the sudden. “See, I can do... This.” He waved his hand over his face, and when his hand passed by his face suddenly changed from Ryan’s, to mine.

I back peddled off the couch. I had been lying to myself about what was going on, and it all came crashing down. I had been blocking out how weird it was to be talking to somebody wearing his friend’s face. I had been blocking out how abnormal it was to be this attached to somebody this quickly. It had gone completely over my head how irrational, teenage girl, first crush type behavior it was to go after a guy so hard when he clearly just wanted to forget you.

“Wait Jennifer, it’s not that bad. Look, I have a license.” He was reaching for his wallet but I didn’t want to hear it. Weird mental disorders that spontaneously went away when you kissed somebody? What had I been thinking? I stumbled into the kitchen, trying to find my way to the door.

“Jennifer please, I remember now.” Oh now he remembers everything. After he had reeled me in with the ridiculous ‘poor pathetic’ me act, made me do this whole ‘help me remember’ routine. Now he remembered. Florence nightingale syndrome, that’s what this was. Just a sick guy who I happened to fall for, and sick was right. This was sick.

He’s run around in front of me now. He’s blocking the door.

“Out of the way Jason.” I order him.

“No, Jennifer I can’t let you go just yet. You’ve helped me figure something out.” This was rich. Now that he had dropped the ‘hey I’m something cooked up in a lab by a mad scientist’ line, now he had it all figured out. Just what had he done to his face anyway?

“Helped you figure out what? Kissing girls magically heals your fake poorly defined memory disorder? Let me go Jason. I just really need to go.” He started edging away from the door. In a second there would be enough room for me to get by.

“You’ve always wanted to go to Ireland and Cacti don’t need to be water almost at all.” How had he known that?

“How did you know that?” I demand. He’s slipped away from the door enough to let me go through, but I have to hear how he’s discovered this about me.

“Because there’s something else you don’t know, but before you leave I have to tell you what I’ve figured out.” I fold my arms. I have a way of escape now, so if this isn’t really convincing I can run for it.

I don’t say anything, but he takes my silence for permission, and starts to speak.

“It’s not kissing that triggers my memory loss or gain. It’s strong emotion. My face slips when I feel it, and I didn’t realize that my mind did too.” He demonstrates his face ‘slipping’, and my stomach turns. “I know that I got really angry earlier today and somehow that made me forget all about you. Just now on the couch I felt other things really powerfully and it made me remember things.” I’d be curious to hear what these other things are that he felt at a later date. “But I don’t remember everything. I don’t remember what my real face is, and I don’t remember how this happened. I need you to help me unlock those last memories so I can figure out what made me forget you.” I looked to the door.

“If you’re about to suggest I kiss you again.”

“Absolutely not, I wouldn’t dream of it. I perfectly understand why you’re freaking out. Most people are a little unnerved the first time they see a shifter. I thought you wouldn’t because you’ve obviously heard of us.” That catches me off guard.

“Why would I have heard of you?” He was hiding something else. “And why did you say us?”

He purposefully ignores the first question. “Because there are a lot of us. Well, at least a few anyway. We’re sort of a new thing in human development I guess.”

“I don’t believe you.” I say. “Why haven’t I heard of you? A baby gets born with four arms and it makes international news. Why would someone with an ability to change their appearance, and their mind if what you’re telling me is right, not be on the front page of every news outlet everywhere?”

He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. He opens and closes it again, but again nothing. He scratches his head, looks back at the coffee table in the living room, but still doesn’t say anything.

“Should I go talk to one of these other shifters and they could tell me why something as important as you is being kept a secret?” I ask him.

“Well you could, but I’ve never actually seen one.” Jason says. This is too perfect. If I hadn’t seen his face do the impossible twice, and with my very own eyes, I would’ve already stormed out. I would think I had been drugged, but I hadn’t eaten or drunk anything in the last few hours.

“You’ve never seen one? So really you’re just assuming that they exist.” Jason doesn’t know how to take that. He looks like that thought has never occurred to him.

“They absolutely exist. I’ve talked to plenty of other who have met them.” He says, but he’s starting to look like he doesn’t believe what he’s saying.

“Who?” I ask. Again, he can’t think of a response. It’s amazing how many assumptions this man makes. It’s like his whole world is based on lies, and he doesn’t even seem to know it.

“It’s common knowledge isn’t it?” He finally manages to scrounge up. “Like the diet coke and Mentos thing. Or the JFK assassination, it’s just something you know isn’t it?”

I shake my head. “No Jason, it’s not. Jason, I’ve had about a million conversations with other girls about how to make my face look the best. There wasn’t a single one where somebody else mentioned ‘oh by the way, there are these people who can just change their faces at will’. I work in education. I follow new developments in science because I think they are cool. Trust me, something as important as you, I would know about. Everyone would know about you if they could. Have you not noticed that other people tend to react badly when you show them that?” I point to his face. It’s probably rude, but now is not the time to make an effort to be polite. “Were you not just telling me people tend to react poorly? And while we’re talking about showing people, You’ve shown this to other people before right?”

He nods. He’s starting to look like a man standing on a sinking ship. “Why haven’t any of these other people who you’ve shown this to told other people? Things like that get around. I would call every one of my friends right now if I could, and I guarantee you that all of them would tell all of their friends. Eventually someone in the media would find out. Yet you’ve never once spoken to a reporter, or a radio DJ have you?” He shakes his head. “I bet you haven’t so much as spoken to a high school student who wants to do a piece on your for his school newspaper have you?” He’s got his back to a wall now and he’s slowly sinking to the floor. Now he’s the one whose shell shocked. Now he’s the one whose world has just been shaken up and kicked around.

My voice had slowly gotten louder and louder, and I had picked up more and more steam as I had talked it out. I had poured every bit of my pent up confusion and anger into that tirade, and now that it was out I saw what it had done to him. He was crumpled against the floor, a defeated man who had just had the rug pulled out from under him, and I realized I was looking at myself.

I uncrossed my arms and slumped against the wall next to him. I had my best friend torn from me, and he now knew that someone had been robbing him of his identity, had made him forget who he was and what he did. I had my world shaken by discovering people who could change their appearance on a whim. He had his world shaken by discovering that he was the only one. We were in the same situation, he and I. “You know there’s no one else who’s going to understand what we’re going through.” I tell him. “I don’t know how I feel about all of this, but I know that you’re the only one who can work through it with me.” He looks over at me.

“Yeah I know. Sorry for freaking you out earlier.” I shake my head.

“It wasn’t your fault. You couldn’t have known that was how that was going to go.” I chuckled at the irony. “I guess this means you’re a nice guy after all.”

He chuckles back. “You know what they say about nice guys right?”

“That they’re wonderful and amazing and always get the girl in the end?” I ask. He cocks his head considering this.

“Yup, that is absolutely what they say about nice guys.” I give him a quick peck on the cheek.

“Any new memories?” I joke. His face of defeat comes back and I kick myself. That was not the most appropriate thing to have said just then.

“No, but you did remind me of what I was going to ask before you went on your little speech. I know how to get those last memories back. I know how to figure out who or what is making me forget everything, whose been keeping me a secret all this time.” I pucker up. “I wish, no, it’s going to have to be an even stronger experience. What we have is a fresh affection. It’s new. It’s novel. While it feels strong to us it can’t compare to the bond that two people who have spent years of their lives together can experience, and what it feels like when that bond is broken. That’s why I need your help.” Now he’s lost me. “I’m going to need to tap into an emotional experience of yours.”

“What emotional experience? What are you talking about?” He moves to the wall opposite me and sits back down so we’re facing each other across the hall.

“You asked me to trust you earlier. Now I’m asking you to return the favor. Jennifer, do you trust me?” I consider how absolutely insane the last 24 hours have been. How it’s been serious, silly, world shattering, dynamic bending, craziness, I’ve experienced more firsts, more highs, and more lows with Jason in our brief time together than I’ve experienced in relationships that lasted whole months. It’s mind boggling, surprising, depressing, and thrilling all at the same time.

“I promise this is the last surprise, at least from me.” He says. I look at him. I really take a second to take him in. Is this a man I can trust? Well, one way or the other I was about find out. It was time for one more leap of faith.

“Yes Jason, one more time, I trust you.” He nods, and takes his hand up to his face. When he pulls his hands away, he’s wearing Sarah’s face.

Chapter 5

If I wasn’t sitting down I would’ve collapsed. I clap my hand to my mouth and hear myself breathe in sharply.

“I can’t believe it.” I say. “They told me they found a look-a-like. They had this whole speech about how they found people who looked just like past loved ones, hired professional make-up artists and prosthetic specialists to perfect the resemblance. He even had this demonstration with voice modulators that could replicate anybody’s speech from only a few sound bites.” He’s wearing the same supportive expression as he did that other day. It really was him.

“It was you. I can’t believe it was you.” I bury my face in my hands. I need a moment. Then I remember why he’s doing this. He needs me to access that strong emotion that connected me and Sarah. He needs me to go back to that place where I was yesterday. I need it too. We’re both in this together now, and if we’re going to get out of this I can’t hide from what this is going to make me feel.

I look up, and there Sarah is, just like the day I said goodbye to her before she left for work and never came back.

“You know, I haven’t thought about you since the last meeting. Prince charming here has been sweeping me off my feet so much that I haven’t had time to really think about it.” I feel drained. It’s been a roller coaster of emotions since lunch time. “Which I guess was the point, but I forgot how much I missed you. I would kill to talk to you right now. This is exactly the thing we used to talk about all the time.” Jason is really good at this. His supportive gaze is flawless. There’s no sign of what he’s going through behind that mask he’s wearing.

“Well, not exactly this, we never had some crazy conspiracy theory involving some miraculous new development in human anatomy and medicine. Although there was that one guy who tried to beat the world record for holding your breath underwater on the first date. Thank goodness that lifeguard was paying attention. You know they still won’t let him into that swimming pool?” I really do wish she was here. It’s so difficult doing this without her.

“We laughed so hard about that I skipped my ab workout for the next three days.” I run my hand through my hair. My eyes are starting to sting.

“Yeah, this is exactly the sort of thing I’d like to talk to you about. You know my family doesn’t really help out with this stuff and the two of us always kind of relied on each other to figure out who to trust and who to go to when we needed help. We must’ve bailed each other out of bad dates and shifty situations a dozen times each. You were always the first person on my speed dial.” Now the tears start to come. “You’re still the first person on my speed dial. I don’t know why. I’ve had your number memorized for years, even with contacts and caller ID, I still have your number memorized in case I need to call you.” My voice is cracking, and Sarah, well actually Jason, is still holding that gaze. He’s doing this thing where whenever I say something particularly heavy he reacts a little bit. A softening of the eyes, a twitch of the mouth, a slight inclining of the head, he makes sure I know he’s receiving every word I’m giving.

“There’s still so much of my life that’s tied to you. I think we’re still married on Facebook. I haven’t deleted any of our text messages. I probably never will, I guess because I need that. I don’t want to forget you Sarah. I know this hurts now because you’re gone, but I know that the pain is going to slowly fade with time, and when it heals I’ll still be left with all the good times, the laughs, and the love. I want to still hold onto that Sarah. So I guess for now we’re still going to be married, and I’m going to hold onto as much of you as I can. I know it’s cliché, but I feel like as long as I don’t let you go, you’re still here.” I pause to wipe my face, and get the strands of hair out of my face that have somehow stuck themselves to my nose.

“I said it last time, and I’ll say it again. I’ll remember you Sarah.” I hope that’s all Jason needs, because I don’t have anymore. I’ve reached my emotional limit. I return my face to the sanctuary of my hands and let loose.

Jason comes back over and puts an arm around my shoulder, not saying a word, just pulling me in so that I don’t have to be alone in this. He lets me have my moment, my time to mourn, and doesn’t rush my in anyway.

I’m not sure how much time has passed when I finish, but when I look up the shadows on the walls have lengthened considerably.

“Thank you.” I say, grateful that when I finally look up he’s wearing his own face, the face that I decapitated fruit with. “Not just for right now, but for yesterday too. You let me say goodbye to her, and you knew how rough that was on me. So you prepared the best first date I’ve ever been on to help heal the wounds. Thank you for that.” He kisses me on the forehead and gives me a squeeze.

“You’re welcome Jennifer.” I take a cleansing breath and give myself a shake.

“So do you have something equally as awesome planned for our second date?” He nods his head.

“You gave me what I needed. I remember everything now. I know who did this, and I know what I’m going to do about it. I’m not sure if I’d call it a date, but I’ve found that taking

action can be equally as cleansing as laughing your guts out.” He wears a new expression now, a determined expression. “You want to help me bring some scum bags to justice?” I nod my head.

“Good, because we’ve got work to do, I’ve got a list of supplies you need to buy, and I’ve got some research to do. I’ve remembered some things that they really wanted me to forget. You remember how I said I’ve never gotten sick?” I nod. “There was a lot more to that than meets the eyes. I have a... unique application for shifting.” We’ve got to move quickly. I go to work tomorrow, and it’s going to be a memorable day.”

I’m sitting at my desk, waiting for Marcus to show up for work, when he walks through the door. “Good morning Marcus.” I call to him as he comes through the doors. He waves to me, quickly making his way to his office door.

“Good morning Ryan, I had a late night, so please excuse me while I slip into my office.”

“Like your new coat.” I call to him. He waves again as he slips inside and prepares himself for the day. It looks to be a fairly light day. We don’t have any clients coming in for several hours.

This is a good thing, because a female of interest just popped into view. From the security cam in the elevator I could see Jennifer, the girl who had almost ruined our little operation, pressing the button for our floor.

“Security come to floor 6 immediately.” I call into the radio. “We’ve got Jennifer coming up.” We had sent a team to her apartment last night, but she wasn’t there, and her car was gone. This morning we had sent a team to the school she worked at, but she wasn’t there either, and her supervisors had no idea where she was.

Apparently she needed some resolution from Jason. We would give her some resolution, but not the kind she wanted. I checked the feeds to Marcus’s office to make sure he wasn’t going anywhere. He had a hat pulled down over his face and appeared to be taking a nap. It was unprofessional of him, so it was a good thing this wasn’t a real job.

The bell for the elevator sounded, and our security was right in place. As soon as she stepped out two large men pinned her to the ground, and two more gagged and bound her.

“Interrogation room.” I said. “Make it quick, and get somebody down here to cover for me in case Jason comes out. The interrogation room was right next to Marcus’ room. We put the same soundproofing on it as we did his room. You could set off a hand grenade inside and no one would hear a thing.

They forced her inside and pushed her into a chair. I closed the door tightly to insure nobody who walked in would hear a thing, and rounded on the girl who had almost cost us billions.

“You just had to come back and see him again didn’t you?” I ask, rolling up my sleeves. “You couldn’t let prince charming go. You had to come back one last time to say goodbye.” I un-holster my sidearm and set it down on the table beside her, just inside her peripheral vision. The gun is a small thing that I keep hidden for special occasions.

“Now, here’s how this is going to work. You’re going to tell us everything you know about Marcus. The man you knew as Jason, and then you’re going to tell us everyone else who knows about him. And if you’re really good, we’ll let you live.” Her death wasn’t strictly speaking necessary. The memory serum we had concocted from Marcus’s blood would wipe her memory without killing her. She was an asset we could control, but we needed to know how far things went. I might dispose of her anyway, just because of all the trouble she caused, but I would decide that once this was over. Covering up a disappeared person was difficult, but for the right occasion, it could be arranged.

We were going to have to cut down on Marcus’ social life. This was the second person we had to interrogate this week. The grocery store had been a slip up we could’ve easily avoided too. Perhaps we could tell Marcus that the company now had a plan to provide grocery delivery. Maybe a grateful client could offer this service at a discount. We would think of something, but we had to minimize that kid’s social time.

“What are you guys talking about? Why are you doing this?” She asks, looking around terrified at all the guns in the room. Security had brought out the large assault rifles to make an impression.

“Don’t play innocent, you really expect me to fall for that? You honestly think I would believe Marcus didn’t show you his trick to impress you on your little date?” I for one couldn’t believe that such a useful talent would not be utilized to impress any potential women in his life.

“What special talent? Are you talking about his accents? I know he’s really good at that.” She’s eyeing the pistol sitting next to her head. “Who are you guys? Are you with the government? Why are you doing this to me?” She was good, and if she hadn’t been missing from work completely unannounced I might believe her, but her story had an odor to it.

“Why weren’t you at your house yesterday? Why didn’t you show up to work this morning? Were you trying to contact Marcus?”

“What, whose Marcus?” Now she had slipped up. I had told her earlier in this conversation who Marcus was. She knew something, and she wasn’t letting on.

“Look me in the eye Jennifer.” I lean in close so I can see if her pupil’s dilate. “If you really have nothing to hide than you won’t have any difficulty with what I’m about to do.”

I pick up the gun and point it at her right hand, the little finger of her right hand.

“If I get even the slightest sense that you’re lying to me, you’ll be out of a finger. The people I work for have a lot of money, and something of an expertise in biology. We will have no trouble covering up any spontaneous acts of violence that might be about to ensue.” I chamber a bullet in the gun. “We’ve spent years doing research on Marcus and we have learned quite a bit. Now then, have you ever heard of shifters?” Jennifer’s expression suddenly turns from terror to smug confidence.

“So that’s it.” She says. “You work for some big corporation that’s doing research on Marcus. You’re trying to keep it quiet so nobody else can compete with you.” She had just earned her right to be one of those lucky few worthy of becoming a missing person. I pointed the gun at her head and fired twice.

Her head cocked back backwards over the chair and I started to think about what method of disposal would be the best, when Jennifer’s head tilted forwards again. The two bullets are sticking out of her head like horns. They’ve barely penetrated the skin.

“Haven’t I always told you it’s not the face that matters. It’s what’s underneath that counts.”

“Shoot him!” Ryan called out. All four guards were happy to oblige, opening up with their thirty round magazines and on full auto, and not letting up until every round had been fired. I weathered the hail of bullets without flinching, staring directly at Ryan as he also emptied the remaining six bullets in his clip.

When they were finished, and it didn’t take long, I stood. I grew six inches taller, my hair shortened, and my face morphed into Jason’s.

They couldn’t do anything but watch. None of them had thought to bring spare ammunition. They hadn’t even known they were going to shoot me.

I shook myself and 128 bullets fell to the ground. Most of the bullets don’t even have blood on them.

“You never seemed to be a fast learner Ryan.” I said. One of his henchmen took some initiative. He drew a knife and tried to stab me in the arm. It stuck in less than a centimeter. I looked at his knife, and then at him.

“That’s adorable.” I say, before grabbing his wrist, twisting it ninety degrees to slam him into the table, and then breaking the knife off at the hilt. It’s amazing what a little pressure applied the right way could do.

“You seem to underestimate me a lot too.” He was doing it right now. If the man had any sense he would’ve started running the second he realized I had survived a double tap to the head.

“Rush him!” Ryan shouted, stepping back to let the three remaining guards jump at me. It’s a pathetic attempt. I throw the hilt of the broken off knife at one of the guards, knocking him out, morphing my wrist allows me to put an inhuman amount of spin on the blade. As the second of four guards falls, I apply a chokehold to the third, and stare down the fourth as he tries to dislodge his friend from my grasp.

When the guards slumps unconscious in my arms I just stare at this friend. He tries punching me out a few times, but succeeds only in damaging his fist.

Once he’s hurt his hand to the point where he can’t throw any more punches I point to a chair.

“Sit.” I command, and the guard doesn’t even look to Ryan for confirmation before sitting down.

“Now then.” I say, turning to address Ryan, who has still defied all reason by not fleeing for his life. “Your guards are disabled. This room is soundproof so you can’t call for help. If you try to use your radio I’ll break it, and I’m sure by now you’ve figured out if you try to leave this room I won’t let you. So, what options do you have left?” Ryan checks his radio and glances at the door. I’m somewhat disappointed he doesn’t at least try to see if I can stop him, but I guess he just lacks either the courage or the initiative.

“You know we have a lot of money.” He says.

“Bribery, that’s quaint. I’m honestly insulted that you think a little cash is going to prevent any of this from getting out. Did you forget you tried to shoot me a few seconds ago?”

“I wasn’t trying to shoot you. I was trying to shoot Jennifer.” I almost laugh at how absurd his defense is.

“And you think that makes it better?” I ask.

“How much have I done wrong to you Jason?” Ryan asks. “You’ve started to remember a lot clearly, how far back does it go?” He can’t leave the room so he walks over to the table, and picks up the broken blade of the knife.

“Do you remember what we used to do with these?” He looks at the blade, watching the sunlight glint off of it. “Do you remember how we used to take bets on how much force you could take before we could break your skin? I’m impressed you remembered how to do it.” I don’t have to hold back. I could just take him out right here, right now. I do remember what he’s talking about. It’s a memory that I’d erase if I could.

“I remember when we first discovered that you could harden your skin like that. Of course that was after we learned to modify your memory, or else I wouldn’t have dreamed of disciplining you that hard, but thankfully you didn’t remember. You didn’t even have any scars on your smiling face when you came into work that day.” My anger is boiling again. I can feel myself begin to reflexively imagine those floating spheres. Those spheres he had used to channel my anger into my memory and forget.

“We found that you were not so resilient to fire. Which was unfortunate, we’ve been having such luck manufacturing isolates from your skin as body armor. We had hoped to sell other isolates as fire retardants, but alas, it was not meant to be. I still kept the photos though. The burn patterns were most intriguing.” I can see the spheres now. Like a beaten dog I’m forced into the pattern I’ve been through so many times.

“You’re starting to feel yourself fade aren’t you Jason. And the beauty of it is you can’t help it. You have been our slave for so long that you don’t know how to be free, and it’s your own anger that’s to blame. If you just kept it under lock and key we wouldn’t have been able to do any of this to you.”

“Good thing there are emotions stronger than hate.” Jennifer says. Ryan spins on his heel. He was so focused on me he didn’t notice Jennifer enter the room. His mouth drops open in shock, and Jennifer shoves a gas grenade in it and pulls the trigger. She pins his arms behind his back as the thing goes off, and he faints.

“Coward, didn’t even have enough guts to get knocked out by the gas.” She says through her gas mask. “Don’t go anywhere.” She orders the remaining soldier. “We wouldn’t want to insult you by leaving you conscious.” I give the soldier a nod, and we step out.

“Freeze!” A guard shouted as soon as we stepped out of the room. I threw myself between the six guards who had appeared, and Jennifer. I grabbed her gas mask off her head and threw it at the nearest guard. That was enough to provoke them.

Again, I felt the sting of over a hundred rifle rounds striking me, and then falling to the floor. Again I shook myself while the guards checked their weapons to insure they were working. One burned his finger when he touched his barrel to see if it was warm.

“Boo.” I said, and the guards scattered like flies. Some ran upstairs. Some fled down, Some just dashed into whatever room was nearby.

“Anymore coming?” I asked Jennifer. She had run through the security camera feeds before she had stepped inside.

“No, that was the last of them. I already placed a call into 911 as well. The police should be here shortly.” She said.

“So that’s it then.” I surmise, sliding into Ryan’s former seat. Jennifer perched herself on the desk.

“Yeah, looks like. You aren’t worried about the police at all? I’m sure there’s a decent amount of what we’re doing that’s illegal.” I shrug.

“Maybe, but I know I’ve got a pretty clear case of self-defense.” I point to my chest and forehead. “They did shoot me quite a bit.”

“I think I’ve got a good case for self-defense too.” Jennifer says. “When the guy who was sitting at Ryan’s desk got spooked by all the commotion you were causing, he came into your office with a gun. It wasn’t a problem since I had already set off the first knockout gas grenade and was hiding behind your desk so he couldn’t shoot me, but yeah, I think it’s pretty clearly self-defense. I’m slightly worried about what I did to Ryan, but when they review the tapes I think they’ll come down on my side.”

“Did you get a chance to look at the archived tapes?” I ask.

“Yes, I didn’t get a chance to check very thoroughly, but there are records that stretch back for years. These guys weren’t terribly worried about getting caught it seems. And if I could get access to them I’m sure the cops will.”

She kicks her legs absently against the desk while we wait for the police to show up. We had considered trying to purge the record of what we had done here. Maybe steal some kind of evidence and try to take down the corporation from the outside, but we had to be real. Neither of us had any kind of experience in that sort of thing. If we hadn’t used my morphing skills to aerosolize an anesthetic capable of rapidly knocking out grown adults then we would’ve been in real trouble.

Even with my abilities this would probably only work once. There were ways around toughened skin and improvised chemical agents.

No, we had decided it would be best to let the authorities handle this. Besides, neither of us was confident we could erase any record of our involvement, especially with all of the witnesses.

“You mind taking this thing off?” Jennifer asked.

“Right, sorry.” I say, reaching over and touching Jennifer’s leg. When I make contact all of the skin that had disguised her as me slid back onto my body. It was trick we had picked up when I had kissed her good night. With some high heels and bulky clothes I could lend others a cloak of sorts for a time. It wasn’t nearly as good as what I could do to myself, but as long as people didn’t look too close, it would do.

We can now hear sirens. The police are getting close.

“We’re both crazy. You know that right?” Jennifer asks.

I nod. “Undeniably, this was hair brained and poorly executed from the start. We only guessed at my being able to stop bullets because you couldn’t remember if they tested that. We weren’t sure about the videos providing enough evidence to convict these guys of what they’ve done to me, and we definitely didn’t know what they had in store for security. We’re lucky it was just assault rifles and knives. I wasn’t sure if I could take anything stronger.”

“I don’t mean that.” Jennifer said. “Although that’s certainly true, I mean us. There’s no way you should’ve put all that effort into me. It’s amazing how much you could put yourself aside and be there for me.”

“And it’s almost frightening how hard you fought to bring back my memory.” I add. “Some people go their whole lives not knowing if someone would be able to be with them through a time like that, and you did it after only one date.”

“So we’re in agreement. We’re both crazy.” Jennifer says.

“But as long as we’re crazy together. I think we’ll be alright.” I say.

Jennifer laughs. “I don’t think you have to worry about us being separated any time soon. I’m dating a guy who can stare down an assault rifle, and also happens to be the biggest discovery in modern medicine since penicillin.”

“And I’m dating an implausibly loyal girl who stood by me when she literally thought I was crazy.” I stand up and sit next to her on the desk. “By the way, there was something I wanted to show you. You know that face I wore on our first date? The one I’m wearing now?” Jessica nods. “It’s not my real face. I finally remembered what I’m supposed to look like.” I waved my hand in front of my face to transition into my real face.

“Well, what do you think?” I ask. Jennifer is staring open mouthed at me. “Come on now, I don’t know what girls like in terms of faces. Do you like it?” She’s not saying anything. “I can change back if you want. I’m not super emotionally attached to it.” For an answer, Jennifer leans forward, as if hypnotized, and kisses me.

“Don’t change a thing.” She whispers.

We hear boots coming up the stairs. Jennifer snaps out of her trance and hops off the desk. We both lay down on the ground with our hands behind our heads.

“You ready for this?” I ask.

“Please.” Jennifer says. “You’re not getting out of our next date that easy.” Right as the SWAT team bursts down the door, she gives me another peck on the cheek. In the same spot she always does.

Epilogue

It was a rough ride, at least at first. It’s not easy being in a relationship with a medical miracle. He would get called away all the time on every kind of strange operation or mission you could imagine.

Some missions were medical. His cells had remarkable qualities and he could use them to fight some otherwise incurable diseases. The CDC would call him if there was some outbreak of a new and deadly disease they wanted quelled. And periodically he would go to a local children’s hospital and cure everyone in the oncology ward. It wasn’t something he could do very often. He explained to me that an expenditure of that kind of energy needed time to recharge, but he still managed to make it down there at least once a month.

Other missions were political. Various government agencies would consult with him and get him to provide perfect disguises for their operatives on special highly sensitive missions. He would always demand a full debriefing of what was going on and why. There were more than a few missions where he walked because he didn’t agree with what was going on, but he was still a part of bringing to justice six of the world’s top ten criminals.

Lastly, some missions were purely sentimental. After the corporation that tried to hide him was taken down he started up a new one that did exactly what the old one claimed to do. Brought people in who needed to say goodbye, and gave them a chance to make their peace.

He had a lot of demands on his time, but he said he couldn’t do half of it without me. I’ve read through thousands of classified documents while he was off at children’s hospitals, so he could go straight to a black op from work.

I debriefed him on the intricate biochemistry of novel viruses so he could better target his treatments. Not that I knew biochemistry, but I learned.

To this day I still sit up with him and hear all the stories about the people he's helped heal, both the good and the bad. If you ask him, he will say that it's his favorite thing that I do for him.

But my favorite thing that he's done for me was at our wedding when he became Sarah one last time, so she could give an embarrassing speech.