

SHADOWS OF THE PAST

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Chapter 1

“You really should have told us about her sooner. You can’t meet with her now we need to get you to the airport. You’re not safe yet,” Jan didn’t bother to look at him. Didn’t bother to slow, “Not anywhere near it, and my job is to keep you safe. I’ll call and have a team sent out to get her,” she had a very bad feeling about this.

“I got plans, don’t think I was so stupid as to leave my future up to all of you,” he grabbed the wheel and forced her down the access road.

“And isn’t there something else you should have told us?” He had no idea that Jan could read minds and she was definitely getting bad vibes from the building as well as him. Jan pulled up to the building. As she got out he was already out and on his way into the building.

“Try to stop me from going in,” he made it into the factory before she could stop him. She had been right on his heels, and had forgotten to grab her purse from the car. It had been a stupid move, a rookie move. She had her knives, but somehow she knew it wouldn’t be enough.

It didn’t take long for the nightmare to begin. Once she entered the building she had just seconds before she noticed a pipe coming toward her. She fell to the ground rolling away with the hit. Kevin was not as lucky. He took the full force against his head. Jan heard the connection as well as felt it in her mind. The sound of bones breaking, the sickening sound of the thud of the pipe as it connected with Kevin’s head, and the lifeless pile that had been left after the attack as she felt the life drain from him. Jan felt herself receive another blow from a faceless figure behind her. It wasn’t the same person that had attacked the man that now lay lifeless on the floor, so there were at least three people there.

One of them laughed and a chill ran through Jan. There was something way too familiar about one of her attackers. Paralyzed for a moment at the reality of who this man was she received another blow from behind. As she lay helpless on the floor the man, who should have been just bones rattling around in the ground by now, spoke in a low, threatening voice his eyes seeming to burn straight through her.

“You’re almost worth saving, but right now I have my orders,” and instinctively she knew that the saving would not be any type of rescue at all as his hands moved over her body.

It was then that it seemed as if he reached into her mind with his, and within a wink of an eye all thoughts and memories were gone. Memories she thought were there forever, who she was, friends, and the name of her attacker. It felt as if her brain was being sifted through, and painfully shredded. She fought back as best she could; but how could he do this?

“Never told you about this did he?” and she thought she heard him laugh, “I will take it all from you and that will take everything from him. I win.”

Two weeks later

All she could hear was the relentless beeping in her ears and damn it hurt. It was her first realization of being alive, full awareness was still far from her grasp. Something had gone horribly wrong and now she was paying the price of being stupid. She was still struggling to figure out what had happened from the murky darkness that was once her mind. Slowly and carefully she took in a breath and felt a welcome jab of pain. From the pain she felt she knew some of her ribs were broken, but knowing that information did nothing to make the pain in her chest easier as she breathed. Somewhere in her past she remembered having broken ribs before but that was where it stopped. She thought the pain in her head had been bad until that breath. Now she chose to focus on the beeping sound to take her mind off the pain in her ribs. Next time she would try a shallower breath, hoping there was a next time. With no memory of what had happened it was hard to know if there would be another minute in her life. The beeping continued, it seemed to be never ending. Not knowing what else to do she listened closer to the beeping. It seemed as if it was some kind of warning. Slowly she sucked in a shallow breath of air. This time the breath she took hurt just as much as the first one that she remembered taking, but she was ready for the pain. Focusing on the sounds around her she was able to push aside the pain to take in shallow breaths as she began to realize that there was pain in almost every part of her body. 'Oh great!' she thought as the beeping sound never failed to remind her she wasn't anyplace she could remember. That worried her. Even thinking was causing her pain as if her mind had been assaulted as well. Just when she thought she could grasp a bit of what had happened the screeching siren erupted, keeping any memories she may have had at bay.

She had now fought her way back to a dizzy awareness of her surroundings. Without moving the rest of her body, she waited for her eyes to open not wanting to make the situation any worse than it was. The question pounded her mind again. 'What had happened?' the next breath cleared all her thoughts and brought back the pain that lingered in her chest, arms, legs and head.

Heavy and swollen from what she could tell, she slowly tried forcing her eyes to open just enough to let in the barest glimpse of light or clue. Her eyelids seemed glued into place, and for a moment, she actually hoped that wasn't the case. 'Now wouldn't that be just the icing on the cake,' she thought. Slowly and with an effort she knew was far more than it should be she opened one eye just a little. 'Nothing, nothing to see at this angle,' she thought as she lay helpless on what she could only assume was cold concrete, and the sound seemed to continue its warning that she could not heed. Nothing else seemed to be working well but her ears. And they only picked up on the tormenting sound of the beeping. Searching her mind she tried to figure out what it was trying to tell her? Her nose caught a faint familiar smell; smoke. She was sure she could smell smoke. 'Could it get any worse?' she asked no one in particular.

The automatic call came through from the fire alarm at the factory. The dispatcher looked at the address without feeling and emotion and chose the closest station to respond. The factory in question had been closed for a year and a half and falling apart for two before that. The owners had put at least three hundred people out of work when they had decided to move their business overseas for cheaper labor cost. Her brother-in-law had been laid off. He had not taken the news well and it hadn't been long until he had left her sister and her two children to disappear to who knew where. Secretly the dispatcher was glad that the factory was finally coming to a fitting end. At least it wouldn't be there anymore to torment her sister with all

the 'what might have beens'.

Her brain seemed vacant and empty as the smoke began to fill her lungs. Everything and nothing told her she had to move, to get out of here. 'But why?' It was the urge; the need and desire to escape that were overwhelmingly powerful. Trying to move, though, was another story. Nothing seemed to be working. If the eyelids seemed impossible to open, the arms and legs were more than impossible for her to lift. Steel beams would have been easier for her to move. Nothing she did could encourage them to work with her fuzzy brain. Ignoring the increasing amount of sweat trickling down her face and dropping to the concrete floor as she worked to move anything, she searched her mind for any answers. She looked for any reason that she could think of that would have caused this paralysis, pain, or her yearning to flee. For that matter, an identity to the incessant beeping that threatened to make her head explode at any minute. But it was like looking into empty rooms of a house you never knew. As she tried to move her arms again she could feel her heart start to beat a little faster and then faster as the need to flee fed the realization of the impossibility of the action. She couldn't let panic set in.

Another wave of fear hit her. She didn't even know who she was. The question, 'Who am I?' rang through her brain only briefly as she came to the conclusion that this might be, should be, and would be better answered later. Funny thing was that she couldn't remember much that had gone on in the last week, month, and maybe even the year through the haze of pain she felt numbing her brain. Panic took hold of her. 'Was it getting hotter?' not a great time for amnesia she chastised herself. The thumping of her heart filled her chest, overflowing into her ears, competing with the annoying beeping, and making it nearly impossible to think. The rhythm of her beating heart began to resound louder in her ears, louder and louder until, with panic, it drowned out the incessant beeping she had first heard. Then she heard something or someone move near her. As she once again tried with every amount of strength she had left to move, she discovered that it was just as fruitless as the first time she had tried it. With every ounce of strength she tried to scream and only mustered a voice barely audible to her ears. The voice that did emerge from her lips was a flat, feeling-less voice she barely recognized, 'At least I can recognize the sound of my own voice.' The thought drifted quickly through her mind as the allure of unconsciousness toyed with her brain through the overwhelming pain she felt and that did very little to calm her nerves. A small hopeful thought drifted through her mind as she waited for the stranger to say something. She wanted them to know, 'I'm alive.'

"She's awake." a voice, not one she knew, but one that filled her with anger and fear.

"Let the fire finish her off. I won't do it. I owe a friend at least that much. I've gotten all the useful information I could from her," somewhere in her mind she knew this speaker, but it was the calming thought she thought it might be, "She's just like him. Did you find what we needed in the car?" She never heard the answer from the other voice. Although her mind tried to tell her just who was standing near her, logic kept arguing that it couldn't be him. She felt him focus on her again and her head began to feel as if it would explode. All hope seemed to leave as the blackness finally claimed her. It was a blissful release from her current world of pain and agony, floating in a black nothingness, weightless, wantless. Thoughts were not a part of this world she had entered, and neither was anything else.

"Jan ... Jan, can you hear me?" the voice came from nowhere, and from no particular direction that she could tell as it floated to her ears. First things first, she sniffed the air. All she knew was that she couldn't smell smoke anymore, it wasn't hot anymore, and she was laying comfortably on her back in a soft bed. She began to feel a little safer, whether or not she really was didn't seem to matter.

It seemed to have been years since Jan had heard any voice, but especially this voice.

That voice was familiar. The clouds that still lurked in her mind threatened to hide all that surrounded her and drag her back into the abyss she had just left as she tried to think. They must have her on some kind of drugs because the pain, although there, didn't seem half as important now. Even though she was thankful for them she knew for some reason that she needed to be off of them as soon as possible.

Something from her past told her that it was a friendly voice and she fought to stay in the present and conscious. 'Jan, yes this was her name,' the thought drifted through. The panic had long subsided, and became only a distant memory. She tried to speak, and found that it still took great effort.

"Who's there?" she barely recognized her own voice. It sounded fragile, strained, flat, and only a fraction of the volume that she had expected for the amount of effort it took. Once again, panic began to eat away at the corners of her memories as she tried to move, to open stubborn eyes, to look at the person who owned the voice her ears had faintly recognized but her eyes had yet to see. Her eyes still seemed to fight her, refusing her every effort to open them this time. Jan tried to move her hands to her face. This time her arms were less like steel beams, more like granite rocks, but still refusing to move without tremendous effort that she didn't feel like exerting. Giving up, she realized that it had not been years since she had heard a voice, but the correct amount of time had escaped her. At least breathing seemed easier than what she had remembered from before, and the beeping in her ears was somewhat different.

"Jan, it's Rob, Rob Brown, do you remember me?" without even waiting on the reply he continued, "Do you remember anything?" His voice held a touch of concern, or was it panic. There was another beep in the room. Now just for a split second, Jan was able to recognize the beep as an institutional sound of some kind.

"Maybe," it was all Jan could get out. So many questions pressed through Jan's mind. It was impossible to determine which one to ask first, and this seemed to be adding to the cloud that already existed, and making it grow into a full-blown storm. Something in the back of her mind wasn't sure yet if she should ask or answer any questions, some memories were beginning to play at the corners of her mind taunting her, not clear, yet not fuzzy, but certainly not where she could access them. None of the pieces she wanted to share with only a faceless voice she seemed to have some recognition of from a past of which she had no memory. And it seemed as if it was a distant faceless voice from her memory at that.

Without being taken aback by the answer, in fact, it seemed that he had not really expected any answer just yet, Rob went on, "Jan, you have had a small accident. You are in the hospital, and have been here for about two weeks. Your condition seems to be stable now, but you have had some injuries to your eye area, among other problems. That is why you can't see anything right now. The doctors still have your eyes bandaged as a precaution, so don't try to open them yet. Your attackers thought you were dead, and left you that way. It happened about two hours after the trial. Kevin was killed, no one has yet been charged, identified, or found. You are the only witness." He took a small breath before beginning again, "We haven't got much time. They said you could only have a visitor for a couple of minutes. Do you remember anything?" a small bit of urgency crept into his voice. He didn't have time to tell her that he was glad she was still alive or that he had notified a friend. Business was first; humanity was sometimes second in their line of work.

The clouds in her head that had been threatening to storm now began to build again. The pain returning to Jan's head was now worse than before. The little information she had darted between the lightning bolts and mixed with the ominous darkness that spun, and threatened to turn into a tornado. The more that Jan tried to remember the less she could focus on anything. The smell of antiseptic was now registering in her nostrils and with that nauseating her it nearly initiated a fit of coughing. She tried to clear her mind, push away the

storm for just a minute, 'Who was Kevin?' 'Was she some how responsible for his death?' she had no memory of him at all. The beeping started again pushing out all thought, but this time it was clear to her that it was a hospital beep. Obviously, it was no small accident if she had no memory of the last two weeks or any part of her life that had existed before now. Some one had died during this time. Some one was dead whom she was supposed to know. Nothing made sense. 'If only I could see' rang through her growing storm cloud, 'maybe then I could fit some of the pieces together.' It all sounded so official, a trial, being charged. Jan began to question who she was and just what she had done in her life before this moment. She wondered if she was the one on trial, the jailor, the juror, or just who she could be.

Jan could hear the door scrape on the floor as it opened. The dark storm cloud churned with every thought as Rob began his questioning again. Jan, not knowing any more than she did, and not wanting any more information to increase the size of what now could be now classified as a full blown hurricane managed to force out a word, "Stop", before it could swallow up what she could just manage to sort out. Plain and simple, she needed to know more about herself first. Then maybe the rest would somehow become important. The trauma had been significant, the present, past, and even the future, was unknown. Now, more than ever, she began to realize that she needed to remember who she was, all the details, and not rely on others that she didn't remember as of yet, 'Why is that so important to me? Why can't I trust this voice? I somehow recognize from somewhere in my past?' Too many questions, not enough answers, and from somewhere deep inside her she decided that she could not trust anyone just yet. Footsteps echoed throughout the room on the tile floor. They were lighter footsteps and it was clear to Jan when the voice spoke.

"Time to leave, she needs rest," it was a woman, a nurse probably; considering she had been told she was in a hospital.

"I have already waited two weeks to get some answers. I won't leave yet," Rob directed the comments toward the footsteps that had entered the room, and away from Jan. His voice was quiet, yet impatient, demanding.

"I'm sorry, I have my orders that the visit was to be short no more than five minutes. It is clear that the patient is agitated and needs to rest. If" the nurse's calm, clear, but firm voice was interrupted by Rob's agitated one, and Jan could only imagine what the conflict looked like.

"Then just get new orders," there was restraint in his voice, "I need to find out who did ..." this time it was Jan who interrupted.

"Leave," in a voice she could hardly call her own, she again spoke the words on her mind, "I need time to think."

"Just tell me this, do you know who you are?" It wasn't a demand, yet it was, and she could feel his presence nearer to her almost wishing the information out of her. There had been something else in his voice as well, concern she thought.

The question couldn't have more poignant, or well timed. Yes, she now knew her name and could even remember small bits of trivial information. But it was only trivial. What was still needed hovered only on the outskirts of her mind just out of her reach and taunted her with what she so wanted to know. She knew that it wasn't as important to know that her hair was brown, and that her favorite color was orange. It was a start though and something to build on. Even more things were becoming clear, but not as fast as she needed, or wanted. The things that still escaped her were the biggies. She wanted to know what she did, how did she live, where did she live, did she have friends, family, a lover, or a pet? The questions began to fire from all directions in her brain and the hurricane began to swallow her up.

"Go away!" she shouted at no one in particular, and this time she meant it. She needed time, more time than this Rob wanted to give her right now. The effort of the conversation, and the raging storm in her head, were all making her tired. The idea of the dreamless

unconsciousness she had just escaped was teasing and tempting her. Its darkness waited again to claim her, rescue her from this existence, and take her back to a world filled with no thoughts, no memories, and no worries. She could hear the nurse, if that was who she was, pulling Rob out under protest as she drifted back into that wanted peace unconsciousness had once been.

As peaceful as the unconsciousness had been before, it was now just as terrifying. Her dreams were haunted with explosions and with visions of death, and dying. Not hers, but others. Most of the images were just that, images, unknown faces. The dreams were relentless. First she was on a plane, next being shot, then jumping out of a different plane, next meeting with faces at places she knew but names she could not retrieve, and then finally she could see steel pipes swinging at her again and again. She was part of the dream, and yet she was also an observer and commentator. She could feel the pain all over again. She wondered about the reality of it all, 'Had she really experienced this once?' She noticed another pipe coming toward her in the dream, or was it. She fell to the ground rolling away from the next hit. The other person was not as lucky. He took the full force against his head. Jan remembered, 'Yes, it was a memory, real, but now just a memory,' the sound of bones breaking, the sickening sound of the thud of the pipe as it connected with the other person's head, and the lifeless pile that had been left after the attack. Dream mixed with reality, and Jan had a sickening feeling that she now knew the name that belonged to the victim in her dream as her thoughts interrupted trying to clarify what she was seeing. Jan felt herself receive another blow from a faceless figure behind her. It wasn't the same person that had attacked the man that now lay lifeless on the floor, so there were at least three people there, 'That could be Kevin, or was it Keith, that now lay lifeless on the floor.' There was something about her attacker, but in the dream Jan didn't get a chance to get a good look at him. In the dream though, she just caught a glimpse of the other man that now approached her. He seemed familiar, but no name came to mind. The dream took over again and she felt another blow and then another from behind. As she lay helpless on the floor the man facing her spoke in a low and threatening voice his eyes seeming to burn straight through her, "You're almost worth saving, but I have my orders," and instinctively she knew that the saving would not be any type of rescue at all.

In that one moment, and only for a moment, she knew who her attacker was. Not only did it surprise her, she wasn't so sure that she hadn't seen a ghost. It seemed as if he reached into her mind with his, and within a wink of an eye all thoughts and memories were gone. Memories she thought were there forever, who she was, friends, and the name of her attacker. It felt as if her brain was being sifted through, and shredded. She fought back as best she could, who could do this? The pain in the dream, though not real, began to increase to the point at which she awoke stifling a small scream in the process. Jan could feel the sweat on her brow slowly dripping off to the side of her head and into the bandages around her eyes. The pillow and her hair were already soaked with sweat she noticed as she gasped for air. It seemed the closer she got to knowing who she was, and who hurt her, the farther away the memories traveled. She wondered why, how, and who had locked the memories so far away from her conscious thought.

Jan listened to the noises in the room, waiting, and hoping that no one was near. She could hear the beep of the machine that she had heard earlier, but the rest of the room was silent. The beeping was faster; it seemed to match the beating of her heart. 'Logical,' she thought. She listened for breathing, not just hers, but of anyone that might have been left to watch her. If they were hoping she could tell them about the attack, which she could now clearly remember more of, pain and all, would they have left someone in the room, or just outside of it? Most likely just outside the room from the woman's earlier reaction. The hurricane that had once been her thoughts and dreams now started to clear again. The woman that

spoke earlier was right, rest was what she had needed, but somehow she didn't think it was the right type of rest that she had gotten. Her dreams also led her to believe that she needed the answers they were looking for and she wanted them sooner, not later. Somehow she didn't think that patience was her strong point. She was sure that here in the hospital if they were not the good guys, at least they were not the bad guys that had those large poles. That or their tactics had drastically changed. What did Rob, or was it Bob, say, 'two weeks had gone by'. That was a lot of time to be unaware of where, who, or even what she was. That was now beginning to change. Thoughts, memories, and even feelings were returning, this time in a coherent form, one she could organize into a picture, she hoped, of who and what she was, or had been. There were still many holes, too many, but with time that would soon be solved. 'Bob,' Jan wondered where that name had come from, was it someone she had known. Her head began to hurt again as she tried to focus on the name. She began to wonder what the extents of the injuries were that she had received from the beating.

They had told her that her injuries to her head and face were, or had been extensive. That was what Jan had attributed to the cause of the memory loss. What they hadn't told her was if she could see or not. Slowly she thought back to the dream and the attack to try and remember, even though her mind fought her efforts, the moment she first regained consciousness, 'Yes, there had been light, even some color.' The damage must not have affected her sight too much, or at least that was the premise she was going to work on.

Next, she started wiggling just her fingers and toes. Stiff, sore, and in general twice as heavy as she remembered, but they still seemed to work and respond to her orders, or at least she thought they were. Now, she decided, for a damage report on her hands. Rotating the hands slowly at the wrist she winced. It seemed that in the right hand there must be an IV and on the left hand there was a definite restriction, it must be a cast. But there was pain so she was sure that the information she was getting from her body was reliable. Slowly, and conserving movement where she could, she got a greater understanding of the extent of her injuries. There was definite tenderness to the trunk of her body, probably had been internal injuries, hopefully most of which were healed, or healing by now. She concentrated hard, she could remember the pain taking a deep breath had caused and this reminded her that the possibility still existed of broken ribs. Her hand responded slowly, but respond it did, to feel for the tape that Jan knew would be around the trunk of her body. The left and right ankles and up the legs were also in casts, or restraints, a problem for getting out of here in any hurry, and her neck was in a brace. All in all, the outlook didn't seem good, but she was still alive, and now she could remember a bit more in an organized fashion. This could be important.

Now it was time to discover what was left of her sight. She was almost sure that patience was not her strong point by now. Moving both the right and left arms with a slow and steady effort, she touched her face. At first she didn't seem to recognize it as a face. It was swollen and tender in most places that her hands could touch, and bandaged the rest of the places. Nothing seemed to be broken, and from what she could remember that could only have been a miracle. She let her fingers investigate the bandages over her eyes. Simple, yet effective to keep the light out, as well as keeping her from knowing where she was. Rob, yes it was Rob, had told her where she was, but she couldn't be sure that was the complete truth. She was also pretty sure that they didn't want her knowing everything yet. Jan's fingers had now become used to moving again and a little more nimble. It seemed that only the cast caused any restriction. Jan noticed that her fingers were also a bit swollen but not enough to keep her from starting to undo the bandages that kept her from seeing her surroundings. She stretched out the gauze around the eye pads so that she could easily slide it up and down. Carefully she slid it onto what she would call her nose, swollen and sore, but probably not broken.

Fear gripped her again. It was not like before. It was a new unknowing fear, one that

she had never felt before, 'What if I can't see? What then?' Throwing caution to the wind, and knowing that whether it was now or later, the truth would still be the same, she took a breath and carefully removed the one pad from the right eye. The eye responded by opening only halfway. Light streamed into her eye. Light, the blinding, beautiful light of the rays of the sun assaulted her eye. The florescent light in the room only added to the pain. There were more lights and colors from where ever else it might be coming from in the room. Her right eye shut just as quickly as it had opened, but now Jan knew one thing, she could see. This time, more slowly, she opened up her eye and was greeted with a welcome barrage of light and colors, mostly white. She took off the pad from her left eye and with the same care slowly opened it. With a sigh of relief, she greeted the light and color seen painfully by the left eye, with a smile. She blinked and took the next step, focusing. As her eyes watered and she blinked away the tears the first thing she could focus on was the institutional like ceiling of sound absorbing squares. With a slight smile she began to move her head as much as the brace around her neck would allow her to survey her surroundings.

The room was small, just enough room for a bed, desk or table, and a chair, which to her relief was empty. Monitors stood beside the bed and even though she could not move her head enough to see what they were reading; she knew that someone outside the room was monitoring her vital signs. A dramatic change in Jan's condition would bring someone to the room and that was the last thing she wanted. Jan took another relaxing breath. The door was located out of sight at the foot of the bed. A small but adequate mirror was on the wall opposite the monitors along with what might be a small table or desk, unknown as she could not move her head to determine which it was.

Jan was all of sudden interested in what she looked like. It was vain, yes, but more of a curiosity. She let her hands feel for the bed's controls and, finding them with her left hand. She slowly tried the buttons until she worked the bed to an upright position to better assess her condition as well as see what was left of the room in the mirror. Pain had figured into the equation, but Jan fought off the initial reaction, breathing in a relaxed manner she didn't feel, and continued. Figuring that she might have drawn attention to herself by now, she quickly visually checked what she was able to see of her body. Sighing, and realizing that her first assessment had been correct she then turned and looked at the mirror just before the door opened. She gasped as she looked at what was once a fairly familiar face. It was now swollen to three times its size and with a number of butterfly bandages and bruises that made it nearly unrecognizable as a face. She turned carefully to see the face of a woman enter the room, the nurse.

"I think that is quite enough of a sneak peak for now," it was the same female voice she had heard before, but now she could place not only a face but also a job to it. Yes, she was the nurse. She went over to the mirror and removed it placing it face down on the desk. "I will need to get the doctor now that you have decided to remove your own bandages. You have been very naughty," the nurse turned back to look at her, "Are you seeing all right?"

The concern was real, and deserved a considerate response, "My eyes seem to be working fine," but not ready to volunteer any more information Jan decided to feign tiredness, "I do think I may have done too much though. Could I rest before the doctor comes in? I promise to close my eyes and be good." The voice sounded better than before and it was only partially a lie about the tiredness. The nurse settled Jan back to a resting position and then left the room agreeing not to send the doctor in just yet. Jan's eyes closed and bits of memory started to flash through her mind again.

Moments later, Jan was aware of someone on the other side of the door. It was only the gentle sound of the door opening that disturbed her thoughts. The person that entered, Jan assumed was the doctor, but when there was barely any sound as he moved through the room

she knew it wasn't. Jan left her eyes closed as terror gripped her heart. She took one calming breath pushing away the fear that filled her and waited. It seemed to be a conditioned response. Help was only seconds away, yet it really didn't feel to her as if she needed the help. The waiting seemed like forever. The feelings she had didn't seem to be hers. Instead they were feelings of compassion, hurt, caring, love, and fear. The last one was unclear as to where that feeling was coming from. It wasn't until the voice spoke, so soft and low, gentle and warm by her ear that she released the air from her lungs. She felt a reassuring hand on her head, smoothing her hair gently away from her face as the voice whispered in her ear.

"Ahh Babs, what did you get yourself into this time?"

"Didn't get much," Rob paused, "She had just gained consciousness for the first time when I went in there and she didn't seem to remember much of anything," Rob leaned his five foot ten inch frame against the wall as he talked into the phone with his back to Jan's room. He was well proportioned, and very fit for his age. "Doctors say the trauma was pretty severe. They can't be sure if she will even remember what happened," in his mind he wondered why she would want to remember any of it. It might only get her killed the next time. There was a silence while he listened to the person on the other end of the phone, and he pushed the fingers of his other hand back through his short black hair. The warmth of the cell phone on his ear matched the heated words he was hearing, and he didn't like the tone of it at all. He had known what they had thought, but to hear the implications spoken out loud unnerved him. Rob was sure that all the allegations were unfounded, or at least the ones that left her on the wrong side of the law. He had also been sure of it with another coworker a while back, and who had left this line of work, in what some would say was on unfavorable terms. "The nurse assured me that I would be able to see her again after the doctor's been in, and Okayed it. I'll report back after that or tomorrow, whichever comes first," he rang off quickly without any formalities.

He went back to watching the door to the room. His windbreaker was old with the logo of the sports team unreadable, and his shirt standard white-collar, button up. As he sat in the waiting room on the dirty orange chairs with the attached Formica table, his cold coffee sitting next to him on the chair, he mused over the past ten years. He had known Jan for all those years. They had worked together and had been friends most of the time, good friends. He was ten years older than her, and had taken her as a partner about two years after the department was officially formed. Over those years he had become protective of her, as a father would be to a daughter, even in her life outside of the job. That was part of his job anyway, to make sure that there was no life outside her job, nothing to pull her away from the team, and in that he knew he had failed. Once he had become her friend, he had allowed her more freedom. It was that freedom that now threatened to incarcerate her forever, guilty or not.

When he found her after the attack, he had half-expected Jan to be dead, although he knew if there were any way to have escaped it, she would have. He heard the call go out on the scanner in his old Camry. It was reported as a factory fire out on First Avenue and Highway A-1. It was a deserted, disintegrating area at best. The years had left the area abandoned and neglected after the factory had closed. It was now the type of area for drug dealers, drops and a place where the netherworld inhabited. It hadn't been the first time he had been to that warehouse on this assignment, and when he heard the call go out he immediately turned in that direction fearing the worst.

Rob and Jan had known that this attack might happen, that was why they had chosen to relocate Kevin, but didn't think it would be right after the trial. Jan was good at her job, and the only thing left in his mind, at the time he had heard the call, was that Jan had been removed from the picture permanently. How had they missed the warning signs? He wondered how she had, knowing just what she could do. He had not known nor could he understand it, and that

still remained the mystery, and looked to stay that way for a while. When he got there the firefighters had just removed the two bodies and had been surprised to find anyone in the building. They were also surprised to find that one of them was still alive. So had Rob.

Kevin hadn't had a chance, his head was no longer round, and only a gross approximation of a head was left. They had just kidded themselves that they might be able to offer him some protection from that group, but now that the worst had happened there were even more pieces to be put together. Kevin had been threatened that if he testified he would be killed, but this was truly more than that. Kevin wasn't even recognizable, but when he had seen who the other body was, he had his fears confirmed. It had been Jan, but somehow she was still breathing and alive. It surprised him that she had made it through such an ordeal. Then again, Jan didn't give up easily. It must have been some fight, and Rob wondered if Jan had even gotten a good look at them. Most likely she had, and that would be the problem. Even if Jan never remembered, Rob wasn't sure if that would matter to her attackers. It would be easier to hide her and keep her safe if she had no knowledge of her past. On the other hand, Jan would also have no memory of how to deal with things as they came up, and could he protect her forever? The bosses might frown on that one. No one devoted his life to protecting another agent, not in this race. At best she was damaged goods, at worst a liability.

Rob flipped through an old magazine, glancing back and forth at the door. For right now he felt pretty sure that Jan was safe. The newspapers had reported two deaths at the factory. This was important for the time being. In fact, it may have been the truth for all Rob had known; it was touch and go for a couple of days. She had been registered under the name of Casandra Hughs. A name she had used from time to time when needed, but was truly unknown to most people. Only one other person knew this name, and he wasn't too worried about him just yet. This gave the department time. Since she had regained consciousness it was now becoming apparent that something would need to be done.

Rob dropped the magazine on the table and walked toward the door. The nurse was just leaving the room, and as he approached her she held up a warning finger. "Just checking to see if I could go in yet?"

"I'm afraid Miss Hughs has tired herself out, and will be asleep for a while yet," and the nurse, putting her hands on her hips, gave Rob one last look as if to say just try and get past me. He decided he'd rather take on the entire Marine Corp than this nurse.

"Guess I should get a fresh cup of coffee then," as he turned he felt that Jan would be safe with 'Sergeant Major Nurse' on duty for the moment. The next morning, once he was relieved of door watching duty for a while, he would have to pick up the surveillance equipment and wire her room. He had won the argument on video equipment at least, and it would only be sound. The thought of the conversation with the director he had just had angered him. Rob was unsure that this was the best way to protect her. He didn't want any unexpected visitors in Jan's room, but the department seemed to think this plan may smoke out those involved if they let out the information that she was alive, or worse yet, prove that she was implicated. And it was that part that scared him, that and the thought of drinking more hospital coffee.

An orderly was standing off to the side of the nurses' station and looking through the charts at hand. He stood about six-foot although it was hard to tell the way he slumped over the charts. The hospital cap hid all but the ends of his hair, and the tan on his well-defined arms drew no attention to him as Rob walked past. Once Rob had turned the corner, the orderly counted the seconds it would take for him to reach the elevator. Once the time was up, he looked around for the nurses. It was at that moment that the orderly, Ward, slipped the charts into the bin and moved quickly to the door of Jan's room entering silently. Taking in all aspects of the room with a single glance, he knew that there was nothing here yet to let them know that he had shown up. Good. He then dared a look at Jan. 'Shit.' She had been in rough spots

before, but never this bad. He stared for just a moment, noticing that the breathing had tensed up. He smiled knowing she must be aware of someone in the room. That was a good sign. She was at least conscious. He walked over to her slowly, not wanting to scare her. He bent over and moved his hand gently across her head, "Ahh Babs, what did you get yourself into this time?" He rested his hand gently on her forehead.

The voice was not so much familiar as the feelings it evoked. Jan had a sense of true warmth and caring from the touch and the intonations in his voice. The hand resting on her head only added to the pleasure, yet she wasn't sure she could place any of it, or why she felt that way. At best she could only remember snippets of her life right now, and somehow this person didn't seem to be a part of those snippets. It seemed that she had only lived in the shadows, and somehow either gotten into or out of trouble most of the time. Jan could remember vague silhouettes of people that she worked with or helped, but mostly their faces and names remained somewhere out of reach. This person was different. He seemed to fit into both categories, but there was something else. There was something about him that touched her memory. And if he was a person she worked with, then why be so sly about coming into her hospital room, he had barely made any noise. It seemed to her as if she could feel his feelings of worry, and that took her off guard, how did she know what his feelings might be, did she know him that well, or was it all just guessing from the tone of his voice? One thing still bothered her, why did he feel the need to sneak in. Her head began to ache again with all the thoughts going through it.

"Don't honestly know yet. Who are you?" was all the reply she gave and then opened her eyes slowly. Best at this time to keep everyone guessing, even herself. He didn't remove his hand, he only moved closer. To most people this might have made them uncomfortable, to Jan, she only felt reassurance. She could see him clearly now. In fact, he had made a point to move into her line of sight so that she could. Jan could only guess that his height was around six foot, and weight, well it didn't look as if he had a problem with that, as she got a clear view of well toned muscle down the front of a very baggy hospital shirt. His face, although hard and chiseled with experience, was not threatening, and in fact she could see worry lines at the corners of his dark green eyes. Not a bad face to look at, and one Jan knew had featured in her dreams recently. She only wished she was unable to make a direct connection to any specific dream, name, or lifetime.

"Shh. I really didn't expect you to respond. You've been through a lot of nasty stuff. The doctor will be here for rounds in about ten minutes so I'll have to be fast," he gently took his hand from Jan's head. "Name's Ward and we have," there was a slight pause, "worked together at times. Right now, all you need to know is that whatever you remember, which I'm guessing is very little at this point, it is important to keep it to yourself until you can get your wits about you, and remember who is who." This time he stood up, "This may be the hard part, trust no one, not even me Babs until you remember them," at this he smiled and touched her hand. The name Babs rang a bell way off in the distance and the touch brought back emotions of love and warmth. Jan tried to smile, and Ward caught a glimpse of it. With his mind's eye, he also saw something else. "Do you trust me?" Jan just stared at him, unsure, "Close your eyes, and look with your heart," never once moving his hand, Jan felt safe and closed her eyes. All at once the pain in her head cleared and a thought drifted through her mind. It was his face, and his hand in hers, and they were together. The thought was hazy, and the why even hazier, but she was sure it was the two of them. Jan wondered how this man fit into the picture she was getting, and just why he was able to help her clear the storm long enough to get a clear thought of the past through it. Many things began to tumble through her mind and all she heard was a quiet, "Shh... all in good time." Jan opened her eyes to his smile, "one thing always to remember, you have to know who your friends and enemies are, and I think you still might be trying to remember who

you really are. Rob's a good guy, but he is still just following orders," letting go of her hand, he moved toward the door. After looking through a little crack as he opened the door, he continued, "I'll be back soon, but by that time they'll have your room bugged and humming. It'll be harder to talk then, but I'll find a way to answer any questions you have." The door opened wider, "Take care Babs, I'll see you again soon, I promise," and he was gone. There was something unspoken, something she could not put a finger on, only a feeling, and that scared her in a very different way than the events prior to today have.

One thing was true; she was still trying to put all the pieces together. But this person, Ward, had asked her for nothing, and said he'd be willing to answer her questions when he could. He also seemed to be the only one concerned about how she was doing, besides the doctors, not wanting to know what she could remember. Only one thing bothered her about Ward, his desire not to be seen by Rob, or by anyone else by the look of things. This brought up some very interesting thoughts. His voice and mannerisms seemed to evoke only good feelings in her, whereas Rob's presence had done neither. Nor did his presence bring a sense of fear or of mistrust, she seemed to trust Rob but she didn't know why. The cloud was beginning to grow again, swirling relentlessly in her head. The fact that it seemed to have quieted while he was in the room and allowed her to see a bit of what he was feeling made this Ward character more interesting. Had she just imagined that? How many times had he been in here? Maybe she had just imagined it all, and was dreaming again, hoping so much for a normal life beyond this room that Ward had appeared as a part of her subconscious. She still had no real sense of self, or of any reality. She made a mental note to ask for as much reading material as possible to catch up on current events, learn about her surroundings, and to figure out her life.

If it was true and she was in a hospital, she still didn't know where the hospital was, or even where she lived. At the present time, even if she felt the need to, she could not escape. Except for the nurse, everyone she had seen, at the grand total of two now, she had somehow known, and neither person had elicited a fear response from her. That was a good sign. Kevin, the mystery man in all of this, was dead. Jan also knew she looked and felt like the inside of a sausage, and that the throbbing in her head had started again and was about to claim her sanity. She looked to the door expecting someone to open it just as the doctor walked in and started what was soon to become a regular routine to check on her progress.